



## **Jewish-American, American-Jew: The Complexities and Joys of Living a Hyphenated Identity**

***Dr. Arnold Eisen***

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As chancellor, Professor Eisen placed significant emphasis on strengthening Jewish learning in our communities, creating programs that extend the reach of JTS's scholarship and resources beyond the campus to Jewish learners around the world. Professor Eisen's initiatives also included the Block / Kolker Center for Spiritual Arts; the interfaith Center for Pastoral Education; the Hendel Center for Ethics and Justice; and the Milstein Center for Interreligious Dialogue.

Before coming to JTS, Professor Eisen served on the faculties of Stanford, Tel Aviv, and Columbia universities. He has contributed regularly to print and online media, including the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Jewish Week*, *Huffington Post*, *Tablet*, and *Fortune*, and he discussed Jewish education, philosophy, and values on his blog, *On My Mind: Arnie Eisen*. He is a lifelong and devoted Conservative Jew.

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# Jewish American Literature

## A NORTON ANTHOLOGY

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## General Introduction

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At the outset, the editors wrestled with the question of what to call this anthology. Similar collections have been about equally divided in using “Jewish American” or “American Jewish” in their titles, with no rationale given one way or the other. But the choice matters; each pair of words emphasizes something different.

The term “Jewish” in “Jewish American literature” matters because it distinguishes this literature from all other American literatures. Yet “Jewish,” because it is an adjective, is also subordinate to—merely modifies—“American literature.” And “Jewish American”—like “Irish American,” “Polish American,” and so forth—evokes that early period when immigrants were viewed askance. By the same token, “Jewish American literature” sounds nicely congruent with “African American literature,” “Mexican American literature,” “Asian American literature,” and “Native American literature,” filling a multiethnic and multicultural paradigm for what America has come to be.

Is that congruence accurate? After all, “African,” “Mexican,” “Asian,” and (in a sense) “Native” denote place and nationhood. But Jews have not often been a nation dwelling in one place. Nor are they bound only by religion. They are a people, over many centuries and over all the globe.

During World War II and thereafter, synagogue Sunday schools used a textbook called *When the Jewish People Was Young*. It didn’t take much precocity to hear something peculiar in that singular verb because *people* are plural, especially Jewish people. To assert the oneness of the Jews, their unity over time and place, counted vitally then and may still. But a somewhat discrepant idea has equal urgency: Doesn’t Jewish identity center in Israel rather than in the Diaspora? There are good reasons to say yes; but, at the same time many American Jews, Zionists included, refuse to think of themselves as being tangential, contingent on Israel. America is the “land of our destiny,” they say, that destiny being no less definitive than Israel’s.

In Nazi-occupied Europe, one’s Jewishness, however defined by Jews or their oppressors, determined one’s fate; in the United States, being a Jew is a factor in one’s life, but the degree of its significance varies considerably. In no other country in the world, from the beginning of its national existence, have Jews enjoyed such freedom of religion, movement, and the ordinary rights of citizenship in a republic—to be educated, to be part of the political and social life, to own property, to pursue liberty and happiness. Which is not to say that this freedom and these rights have not had to be fought for and defended against bigotry, prejudice, and intolerance almost continually. Nevertheless, the strongest arguments can be made for the uniqueness of the Jewish experience in the United States and the embrace by Jews, in the main and over time, of America as the golden land, the promised land. If those terms have sometimes been treated ironically—there was no gold in

the streets for the hapless immigrants, nor was America's promise of meaningful work and equality always fulfilled—it was precisely because the originating and hopeful ideals of America were so strongly believed in. Much of the writing by Jews about their American existence reveals a prophet's urge to make the country live up to its best self. In that sense, the "Americanness" of Jewish Americans is paramount, and the title of this anthology is more than justified.

The other formulation—"American Jewish literature"—might also sound primarily American and secondarily Jewish. Or does that term point up a distinctively Jewish writing in its American incarnation? Can we discern an "American Jew" at the root of the phrase, someone as deeply akin to Russian or Argentine or Israeli Jews as to other Americans? Yes and no, depending on time and circumstance. On September 16, 1919, smarting from the Versailles Treaty's "stab in the back" to German nationalism, Adolf Hitler complained in a letter: "It's the Jew who never calls himself a Jewish German, Jewish Pole, or Jewish American, but always a German, Polish, or American Jew." Thus, what outraged Hitler ought to suit ourselves. To be an American Jew might mean (de)nominating oneself *nourwise*, while making one's national bond incidental. Again, a charged concept.

And how would we identify that common denominator, a Jewish kindredness? Not something racial, presumably, some geno-literary litmus test. Maybe something historical, religious, ethical, temperamental? Of course, if "all men are Jews" in suffering (Bernard Malamud) or "all poets are Yids" in alienation (Paul Celan), then Jewish distinctiveness gets either universalized or effaced, depending on your vantage point: the more Jewish, the more human and/or vice versa. Yet arrogance, even a pariah's arrogance, arrogating radical humanness primarily to Jews, will not do. It was Franz Kafka, after all, who wrote in his diary in 1914: "What have I in common with Jews? I have scarcely anything in common with myself." Was he then being quintessentially Jewish or merely, starkly, human? Kafka also wrote this in his notebook one day: "Writing as a form of prayer." But surely the People of the Book, as Jews have been called, are not alone in practicing that sort of prayer.

On balance, both potential titles for this anthology are questionable—which is to say, multifold and open, expansive. "Jewish American" risks a kind of literary assimilation, and yet behold the strong implantation of Jews in the United States—Nobel literature prizes, a poet laureate—and the richness of their American English. "American Jewish" implies a particularism, a genius and/or plight endemic to Jews everywhere, and yet witness the strength shared by Robert Pinsky with other poets, not Jews, such as Carolyn Forché and Robert Hass.

So both terms seem richly problematic. An idiosyncratic joke comes to mind. Two people bring a dispute to the rabbi. The first tells one side of the story, to which the rabbi replies, "You're right." The second tells the other side, and the rabbi says, "You're right." Then the rabbi's wife speaks up: "But, Rabbi, they can't both be right." Whereupon the rabbi says, "You know, *you're* right, too!"

From the earliest known Jewish American author, Abraham de Lucena, writing in 1656 to Governor Stuyvesant to claim basic rights, Jews have been expressing their distinct experience of America. But the questions persist:

Do these Jews writing in America make up a literary tradition, even without being particularly aware of their forebears? And, if so, what defines that tradition? As ever, it depends on who's doing the defining.

Scholar Leslie Fiedler sees an ethnic literature in which cultural and social traits form a distinctive voice, often ironic. Writer Cynthia Ozick speaks for a covenantal literature that is constantly reviewing the sacred texts of Judaic inheritance. Poet Jacob Glatstein believed that a poem on Buddha or a Hindu god was Jewish as long as it was composed in Yiddish—in effect, that Jewish literature is Jewish by virtue of its language. Some commentators have argued that Jewish literature evinces certain moral qualities, though this is slippery ground. Scholar Harold Bloom holds to the commitment of living in and through texts, wrestling to regain tradition. Finally, Jewish American literature may simply or strictly derive from the author's identity as a Jew. But this most reductive definition again begs the essential question—that of identity.

This anthology means to expand the question of identity to encompass all its turns and folds. "Jewish American literature" signifies an American literature that is Jewish: fiction, poetry, drama, memoir and autobiography, commentary, letters, speeches, monologues, song lyrics, humor, translations, and visual narratives created by authors who admit, address, embrace, and contest their Jewish identity, whether religious, historical, ethnic, psychological, political, cultural, textual, or linguistic.

It may be that in the past, Jewish civilizations survived by cleaving to the righteousness and difference inscribed in sacred texts. Some would hold that this spiritual tenacity is still necessary and sufficient. Possibly so. But with it come wit and self-deprecation, moral dilemma, verbal ingenuity, aspiration, tragedy and joy, families aplenty, nostalgia, satire—a full slice of human life at its most vocal.

Who are the Jews, and, more specifically, who were and are the Jews who settled in this country in greater numbers than they ever have in any other land, including Israel?

## A LONG HISTORY BRIEFLY CONVEYED

Any consideration of Jewish American literature requires some knowledge of the history of the Jews. Jewish existence originated in the Middle East at least four thousand years ago. According to the Hebrew calendar, which is based on a lunar month, the year 2000 on our Gregorian calendar is 5760/61. Recorded Jewish history and literature as reflected in the Hebrew Bible—the Tanakh, or Torah, Prophets, Writings—begins more than three thousand years ago; as such, it has been one of the great underpinnings of the Christian and Muslim civilizations as well as of the Jewish people. The long and varied history of the Jews includes centuries of sovereignty over their own kingdoms during biblical times as well as a large presence in classical antiquity. It has been estimated that the Jews comprised 8 percent to 10 percent of the population of the Roman Empire (perhaps 4.5 to 7.0 million Jews) by the end of the first half of the first century. There were also long periods of subjugation and several exiles by foreign imperiums—Egyptian, Assyrian, Persian, Greek, Roman.

**Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (1934) pp. 178 & 215-16**

*...the task now before the Jew is to save the otherness of Jewish life; the element of unlikeness will take care of itself.*

Put more specifically, this means that apart from the life which, as a citizen, the Jew shares with the non-Jews, his life should consist of certain social relationships, to maintain, cultural interests to foster, activities to engage in, organizations to belong to, amenities to conform to, moral and social standards to live up to as a Jew. All this constitutes the element of otherness. *Judaism as otherness is thus something far more comprehensive than Jewish religion. It includes that nexus of a history, literature, language, social organization, folk sanctions, standards of conduct, social and spiritual ideals, esthetic values, which in their totality form a civilization.*

Judged by its capacity to live Judaism as a civilization, Jewry will have to be divided into three zones:

1. The first zone of Jewish life is Palestine, where the Jews are to be given an opportunity to develop their own civilization on the same terms as any other nation. In Palestine only will it be possible for the Jew, if he so chooses, to live entirely within his people's civilization. There the Jew will be able to lead a normal life, as a member of a community which functions as an integrated entity, and evolves the institutions and the arts organically related to its needs. Whatever he may want to acquire of the cultural life of other peoples will naturally increase his social vision and adaptability, but it is not indispensable. A Jewish National Home means therefore a place where it will be possible to live Judaism as a primary civilization.
2. The second zone of Jewish life will extend over those countries where they are granted the rights of a culturally autonomous minority people. There it ought to be possible to live Judaism to the same degree that one lives the civilization of the majority. It is understood, of course, that the development of Jewish civic and educational institutions will not be such as to crowd out the life and institutions which the Jews must share with the majority. Survival of Judaism in those countries must therefore mean survival of the civilization of the Jew on a basis co-ordinate with the native civilization.
3. The third zone of Jewish life would include countries like France and America, where the only civic status recognized by the state is that of individual citizens, and where Judaism can survive only as a subordinate civilization. Since the civilization that can satisfy the primary interests of the Jews must necessarily be the civilization of the country he lives in, the Jew in America will be first and foremost an American, and only secondarily a Jew. That he cannot avoid whether he will live his Judaism as a civilization or as a

religion. But the difference between the two modes of life is like that between the substance and its shadow.

The Jew who is satisfied to live in two civilizations, in his own and in that of the country of his adoption, but wants the two civilizations to play an equal part in his life, would have to live in a country where Jews are granted minority rights. If he wants to live as a Jew only, and to be free of the need of reckoning with the civilizations of any other people, he will have to go to Palestine.

**Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Individual Jew and His Obligations" (1957)**

We are all committed to the idea of the modern Jew. By modern Jew I mean a person who lives within the language and culture of a twentieth-century nation, is exposed to its challenge, its doubts and its allurements, and at the same time insists upon the preservation of Jewish authenticity in religious and even cultural terms. But let us not forget that the modern Jew is but an experiment, and who can be sure that the experiment will succeed?

The avenues of communication between Judaism and the Jew, the channels of thought and understanding, are obstructed. There is no intellectual contract between them.