

The Menorah Journal (1915-1962)

By Bennett Muraskin

The founding of YIVO, the Jewish Research Institute, in Vilna in 1925 is justly viewed as a landmark event in the development of Yiddish scholarship and literary creativity. A similar event in the U.S., ten years earlier, was never appreciated by the secular Jewish movement of that time, probably because the movement then was mainly immigrant based and Yiddish-speaking. With less justification, it continues to be overlooked by all streams within secular/humanistic Judaism. This event was the founding of the *Menorah Journal*, an explicitly Jewish humanist publication, whose very first issue announced its dedication to “the fostering of the Jewish ‘humanities’ as a spur to human service.”

The *Menorah Journal* had its roots in the Menorah Society, founded by sixteen Jewish students at Harvard University in 1906. Inspired by the humanist philosophers William James and George Santayana and offended by anti-Semitic prejudice, these students banded together to explore the humanistic values in Judaism and promote the growth of a secular Jewish culture in English. Interest at other campuses led to the formation of the Intercollegiate Menorah Association in 1913. The Menorah Association, as it came to be known, was the first Jewish student organization of its kind. At its peak during the 1920s, chapters existed at eighty colleges and universities in the U.S. and Canada. It was eventually superseded by the Hillel movement in the 1930s, but not before it published educational material, ran summer school programs to train student leaders and sponsored professional conferences and programs for adult education.

The leading figures behind the *Menorah Journal* were Henry Hurwitz (1886-1961), who served as editor

for most of its existence, Harry Wolfson (1887-1974), an historian and philosopher who wrote studies of Spinoza and Philo, and Horace Kallen (1882-1972).

Hurwitz espoused a “Humanist Judaism” (anticipating Sherwin Wine’s “Humanistic Judaism”), which he described as “the Judaism of the modern enlightened Jew who ... gladly accepts himself as a Jew, but

with the intellectual honesty and moral integrity of scientific man.” Dedicated to Jewish education in the broadest sense of the term, he was among the first to urge universities to offer courses in Jewish studies, and was among the founders of the above-mentioned Harvard Menorah Society, and head of the Menorah Association.

Kallen is the best known of these three figures for his advocacy of “cultural pluralism” in opposition to the concept of the “melting pot.” He has been recognized as an important voice in the development of secular humanistic Judaism in America by Saul Goodman in *The Faith of Secular Jews* (KTAV, 1976) and in *Judaism in a Secular Age: An Anthology of Secular Humanistic Jewish Thought* (Renee Kogel and Zev Katz, eds., Ktav, 1995), but neither mentions his association with the *Menorah Journal*, nor the journal’s distinctive role as an exponent of culturally-based secular Jewish identity.

The *Journal* appealed primarily to young, Jewish, college-educated second-generation immigrants who wished to establish a

Jewish cultural identity in the English language, while participating fully in American intellectual life. Its contributors were a virtual Who’s Who of American Jewish writers, poets and scholars, with a smattering of Europeans, reflecting a kaleidoscope of opinions and interests.

In its very first year, Louis Brandeis wrote of his appreciation of his Jewish heritage in “Our Richest Inheritance.” Mordecai Kaplan, a frequent contributor, appeared in 1920, with “A Program for the Reconstruction of Judaism” two years before putting his radical ideas in practice by forming the Society for the Advancement of Judaism. According to Jewish historian Seth Korelitz, “Kaplan first explored most of the major ideas in *Judaism as a Civilization* in the debates on culture in the *Menorah*.”

German Jewish philosopher Fritz Mauthner wrote “In Defense of Skepticism,” in 1924, while in the fol-

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A magazine of more than ordinary interest and one that contains some sound literature is the Menorah Journal. In the current issue of this periodical may be found an article by Maxwell Bodenheimer on “Jewish Writers in America,” in which he attacks American contemporary writing, using the critics, Paul Rosenfeld, Waldo Frank and Louis Untermeyer, for his examples. Mr. Bodenheimer, who is the stormy petrel of contemporary letters in this country, is nothing if not dynamic and assured in his convictions, and he has no hesitation of setting down his opinions, being quite regardless of whose toes he steps on. An excellent poem by Babbette Deutsch is also to be found in this number, its title being “Maariv.” Other articles include “The Masquerader,” “Toward a Truer Patriotism,” by Herbert A. Miller, etc.

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lowing year, Morris R. Cohen, a prominent philosopher and outstanding City College of New York professor, wrote "The Intellectual Love of God," espousing his Spinozian belief in a God as a force of nature. Other prominent Jewish intellectuals who wrote for the *Menorah Journal* included writers Lionel Trilling and Ludwig Lewinsohn, and British historian Cecil Roth.

The *Menorah Journal* did not shy away from controversy. Elliot Cohen's 1925 article, "The Age of Brass," accused the American Jewish establishment of turning its back on the kind of rigorous scholarship and culture that would enrich the lives of American Jews. In 1930 the appearance of the first chapter of Communist writer Mike Gold's classic autobiography, *Jews Without Money*, shocked readers with its graphic depiction of poverty and vice in the Jewish ghetto of the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

Salo Baron, one of the greatest Jewish historians in the U.S., had a special relationship with the *Menorah Journal* and its editor, Henry Hurwitz. In 1928, he wrote "Ghetto and Emancipation," where for the first time he espoused his seminal critique of the "lachrymose view of Jewish history" which depicted Jews as victims and minimized periods of well-being. Baron became a frequent contributor and Hurwitz relied upon him for editorial advice and promotion. In 1944, Hurwitz invited Baron to speak at the *Journal's* 30th anniversary dinner. Baron delivered an address, later transformed into an article, "At the Turning Point," in which he argued that Jewish identity must be much more than a defensive reaction to anti-Semitism. The best way to deal with anti-Semitism, according to Baron, was to create a proud, educated and culturally literate Jewish community. This was also Hurwitz's conviction, and an underlying theme of the *Menorah Journal*.

Although the *Menorah Journal* did not focus on Yiddish culture, it did not neglect it. An article in one of its early issues dealt with the plays of Sholem Asch, a prominent Yiddish writer. Maurice Samuel, an authority on Yiddish literature and the author of *The World of Sholem Aleichem* (1943) was a frequent contributor. An article in 1928 on "The Fate of Yiddish in America" claimed it was in decline, but the *Journal* nevertheless published descriptions of life on the Jewish Lower East Side of Manhattan, where Yiddish was widely spoken. Translations of stories by I.L. Peretz (1937) and Isaac Bashevis Singer (1962), and Yiddish poetry by Yehoash, Zalman Schneour and Itzik Manger, among others, appeared in its pages. Historian Lucy Dawidowicz's stirring account, "The Epic of the Warsaw Ghetto" appeared in 1950.

The *Menorah Journal* also recognized the renaissance of Hebrew, featuring an article by Chaim Nachman Bialik in 1930, as well as translations of his poetry and that of Saul Tchernichowsky. Canadian Jews will be pleased to know that their greatest poet, A.M. Klein, who wrote in English, but often dealt with Zionist themes, was also a contributor.

In keeping with its ecumenical outlook, the *Journal* published articles by non-Jewish intellectuals. Randolph Bourne's "Toward a Transnational America" (1916) called for the preservation of minority cultures in America. Lewis Mumford's "A Search for True Community" (1922) warned that ethnocentrism posed a

threat to the survival of Jewish culture in the Diaspora. Bourne and Mumford were two of the leading social critics of their day.

The Great Depression of the 1930s dealt the *Menorah Journal* a blow from which it never fully recovered. Financial problems forced it to scale back from a monthly to a quarterly, but the real problem was political. Jewish intellectuals moved sharply to the left, leaving the *Menorah Journal* with a diminished constituency. With the economy in shambles and unemployment and hunger affecting millions of Americans, the *Menorah Journal* appeared too staid and bourgeois. Its preoccupation with Jewish culture and the role of Jews in American society could not compete with the attraction of labour struggles and revolutionary politics.

Between 1929 and 1931, a core of key editors and writers, including Elliot Cohen, Herbert Solow and Felix Morrow, were forced out over political differences. Cohen, Solow and Morrow joined the Communist Party and began writing for its literary journal, *New Masses*. Although these ex-*Menorah* writers eventually abandoned the Party in 1934 over its sectarian politics and intolerance, they moved further left, into the Trotskyist camp. As pure internationalists, they no longer concerned themselves with questions of Jewish identity. The one exception was Elliot Cohen, who became editor of *Commentary*, established by the American Jewish Committee in 1945 as a voice of liberal Jewish opinion. By the late 1960s, it had moved in a conservative direction.

After World War II, Zionism began to replace socialism as the great pole of attraction for Jewish intellectuals, but Hurwitz, who continued as editor of the *Menorah Journal*, had no use for either. He became more religious, aligning the *Journal* with the American Council for Judaism, an offshoot of Reform Judaism. It considered Jews to be exclusively a religious group and therefore aggressively opposed all manifestations of Jewish peoplehood or nationalism, especially Zionism. Hurwitz proposed the creation of a Menorah College for Jewish Culture and Social Science to counter the influence of Zionism and sought to invest it with a "religious cultural interpretation" of Jewish life. This project never got off the ground. However, in keeping with this perspective, Hurwitz criticized Jewish secularism and gave religious scholars, including Jacob Agus and Emanuel Rackman, a forum.

Although once sympathetic to Ahad Ha'am's cultural Zionism, Hurwitz now advocated what he called "Zakkaian Judaism," after Yohanan ben Zakkai, the rabbi who opposed resistance against Rome, escaped the besieged city of Jerusalem in 72 C.E., and convinced the Roman emperor to allow him to establish an academy. This event has been credited with insuring Jewish survival without national sovereignty. Hurwitz was clearly out of step with the postwar momentum toward founding Israel as a Jewish state, but he raised a critical issue regarding the role of Zionism in warping the priorities of the American Jewish community, at the expense of its own internal vitality. Despite his dogmatic anti-Zionism, Hurwitz was correct in affirming that Jewish life had flourished in past Diasporas (Babylonia, Alexandria, Spain, Poland, etc.) and

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the system of vulnerability and protection in this universe.

The narrative is of course set in a sacred universe: for those with the noses to smell it, each hour carries a different scent from the Garden of Eden. The dead can be compelled to appear before the living to stand trial and tell their stories. Dreams are a direct link to the upper world, but heaven also sends direct signs of its concern or displeasure: "But this Yom Kippur the crimson letters did not turn white [as they should], for heaven had leveled a great accusation against the Jews." In another tale a torah is dropped on the floor and the rabbi knows that this was not a "gratuitous event." The world is steeped in the magic of letters and words, kabbalistic lore.

But all in all, the Rosenberg golem is a pretty tepid superhero and monster, and as I've said, the creature only comes alive later when he becomes a monster fully, acting against the will of his master and the mandate laid on him, running amok, like his British counterpart, the Frankenstein

monster. In a 1921 Yiddish play by H. Leivick, we are told that the "light will go out in every eye that looks on him and a blight will grow wherever he steps." This is the thrust of most nineteenth and twentieth-century treatments, although there are hints of it in earlier versions. For example, the Rabbi Elias of Chelm made a golem so tall that, when it came time to end his life, the rabbi couldn't reach up high enough to erase from his forehead the letter "e" from the word "emet" [truth], the ritual formula for killing a golem. So the rabbi commanded the golem to take off his boots, thinking that when he bent down, he would then erase the letter. And so he did. But the weight of the mud crushed the rabbi to death.

In addition to presenting a tepid golem, I'm afraid, Rosenberg's work is also very primitive story-telling. It consists of over 20 interlocking tales involving a constant set of characters—the rabbi, his assistants, a villainous, fiercely anti-Semitic priest, a kindly cardinal, a beneficent king, and

the golem, and there is a strong sense of repetition throughout. The book was originally written in both Yiddish and Hebrew.

In the twentieth century the golem was turned to feminist ends by Marge Piercy and Cynthia Ozick, while a plot to protect the sleeping golem (who lies in the attic of the Old Synagogue in Prague) from the Gestapo is featured in Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*. The golem is also a recurrent character in Marvel comics—in 1972 Superman battled the "Galactic Golem." (Mordecai Richler, however, calls him "the Jewish Batman".) He is also a powerful monster in the Pokémon video games.

Rosenberg came to Canada in his mid-fifties and held rabbinic posts in Toronto and Montreal. Here is a word picture of Rosenberg the year he moved from Warsaw to Lodz, the year of this book: *Reb Yudel, my rebbe, I see you in Lodz, In the dark room on Polnocna Street, Lit only by a five-watt bulb.* ♦

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could do so in North America.

In this vein, Hurwitz devoted many articles of the postwar *Menorah Journal* to questioning Zionism and the need for a Jewish state. In 1945, Hannah Arendt wrote "Zionism Reconsidered," in which she criticized the Zionist movement for accepting anti-Semitism as inevitable and exploiting it to increase Jewish immigration to Palestine. She predicted that the establishment of a Jewish state would provoke Arab enmity and force Israel to depend on U.S. support for its survival. Articles of this type cost the journal financial support and subscribers, but Hurwitz was not one to back down. Hans Kohn's 1958 contribution, "Zionism and the Jewish National Idea," treated Zionism as a manifestation of ethnic nationalism that violated the universal ideals of Judaism and

even endangered Jewish survival by devaluing the Jewish experience in the Diaspora.

The *Menorah Journal* folded soon after Hurwitz's death in 1961 and met an ignominious end. In one of its last issues, Hurwitz disgraced himself by refusing to take a stand against Jim Crow and in favour of the civil rights movement, on the grounds that these were not "Jewish" issues. However, the *Menorah Journal's* true legacy is its pluralistic view of Judaism and its commitment to universal democratic values. The following comment from Marvin Lowenthal, an historian with close ties to the *Journal*, best captures its spirit. It originally appeared in his 1925 essay aptly titled, "On Jewish Humanism."

"For a Jew, absorption in the Jewish experience as a means of acquiring a humanistic attitude offers peculiar advantages. Because it is the experience of his own people, because he himself,

no matter how far he may think he is from being a Jew, has relived fragments of it and shared it as a living thing, not a matter of books, records and monuments. Because of all this, he can more quickly and sympathetically enter into the Jewish experience of the past...

"The cry for justice, the search for social adjustment, the sense and hope of an international unit to be ultimately set over petty patriotisms, and side by side with these, a burning loyalty to a group—these are, even if imperfectly, shared in every Jew's individual life. When he encounters these humanizing elements in Jewish culture, they are not something foreign to be digested as best one can, but something native that will simply bring to flower what is already living within him."

For further reading, see Leo Schwarz, ed., *The Menorah Treasury: Harvest of Half a Century*, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1964. ♦