

*In this series we are featuring profiles of leading secular and humanistic Jews from various countries and eras. These profiles are written by Bennett Muraskin, a regular contributor to Outlook, Humanistic Judaism and Jewish Currents. Many of these profiles appear in Bennett's book Let Justice Well Up Like Water: Humanistic Jews from Hillel to Helen Suzman, published by the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations (CSJO) and the Center for Cultural Judaism.*

**Bernard Lazare**  
(1865-1903)



**B**ernard Lazare was at various times in his brief life a Jewish assimilationist, a Zionist and a diasporist. He was also more consistently an anarchist, a symbolist poet, a journalist and a writer. He is best known, however, for his role as a defender of Alfred Dreyfus, the French military officer falsely accused and imprisoned for treason in 1894.

Lazare was born into a wealthy Jewish family of Sephardic origin. His original name was Lazare Bernard. As Jews from Eastern Europe began to immigrate to France in large numbers, Lazare and other bourgeois Jews reacted in horror. According to a young Lazare, native French Jews were refined, civilized “Israelites” but the new arrivals were dirty money-grubbing “Jews.” In 1894 he published a two-volume study of anti-Semitism in which he blamed Jews for provoking anti-Semitism by their arrogance, clannishness, greed and rejection of Christianity. He claimed, however, that Judaism had a progressive kernel that motivated a minority of Jews to become revolutionaries dedicated to the prophetic ideals of liberty and justice. Nevertheless, he concluded, it would be best for Jews to assimilate. His book won praise from Edouard Drumont, France’s leading anti-Semite and author of the notorious pamphlet *La France Juive*—“Jewish France.”

The anti-Semitism unleashed by the Dreyfus Affair overthrew these convictions. Lazare now sided with the “Jews” against the “Israelites” and the anti-Semites. Formerly on excellent terms with Drumont, Lazare now challenged him to a duel. In an 1896 pamphlet, *Against Anti-Semitism*, he now argued that anti-Semitism was a reactionary force in the hands of the capitalists and the Catholic Church that threatened the entire French Enlightenment tradition and, if unchecked, would be a prelude to attacks on democrats, socialists and other dissidents.

In 1896 Lazare also published a ground-breaking article demolishing the official version of Dreyfus’s guilt. Much to the consternation of the French Jewish elite, he defended Dreyfus from the standpoint of “a Jew who knew to what an out-cast, disinherited, ill-starred people he belonged.” Through Dreyfus, Lazare saw “Jews languishing in Russian prisons...Rumanian Jews who are refused the rights of man...Algerian Jews beaten and pillaged.”

The timid reaction of the wealthy French Jews to the persecution of Dreyfus led Lazare to conclude that assimilation was a curse because it disarmed Jewish resistance to anti-Semitism. He called on poor working-class Jews to assert leadership of the Jewish community and to find common ground with their oppressed brothers and sisters in East Europe.

Lazare now turned to Zionism as the key to Jewish survival, because of its emphasis on Jewish peoplehood. He attended the first Zionist Congress organized by Theodor Herzl in Basle, Switzerland in 1897, but was always more of a cultural than a political Zionist. He saw Jewish settlement in Palestine as essential to rejuvenating Jewish communities in the Diaspora, but was not wedded to the idea of a Jewish state. In 1899, he broke with Herzl for his courtship of imperial powers in order to secure a Jewish foothold in Palestine, in particular Herzl’s negotiations with the Turkish Sultan at the same time that the Sultan was responsible for massacring Armenian Christians in the Ottoman Empire. He then visited Jewish communities in Eastern Europe to advocate Jewish liberation in the form of cultural autonomy and other minority rights within multi-national states. Upon his return, he wrote articles exposing Romanian anti-Semitism.

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**From Yesterday for Today: Yiddish Proverb**  
Selected by Al Stein

*zay mir nit kayn feter un ney mir nit kayn shtivl*

~  
*For you and me, the best way is far away.*

*(Literally: Don't try to be my uncle and don't sew me any boots.)*

## LAZARE...

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Lazare asserted that “for internationalism to take root, it is necessary that human groups should previously have won their autonomy; it is necessary for them to express themselves freely, it is necessary for them to be aware of what they are.” “A Jew who today may declare ‘I am a nationalist’ will be saying...I want to have a right to human dignity. I want to escape oppression.’ At certain moments in history, nationalism is for human groups the manifestation of the spirit of freedom.”

In his last work, *Job’s Dungheap*, published posthumously, Lazare moved closer to the Jewish Labour Bund, stressing class divisions within Jewish society and the need for social revolution across religious and ethnic boundaries. The modern Job, he declared, are the poor, persecuted Jews who are victims of both the Jewish bourgeois and Christian

anti-Semites. The true heirs to the Biblical principle of social justice were secular Jewish revolutionaries. Lazare, however, was more of an anarchist than a socialist. He distrusted central authority, proposing instead the establishment of a network of self-governing communes, similar perhaps to the early *kibbutzim* in Palestine that he did not live to see.

In his earlier years, Lazare dabbled in pagan and Catholic mysticism. His romantic streak also led to a fascination with messianic figures such as Shabbetai Tsvi, the most famous of all the Jewish “false messiahs.” Even in his anti-Jewish phase, he discerned a “revolutionary spirit of Judaism” deriving from the prophetic tradition and the historical status of Jews as pariahs that predisposed Jews to challenge the status quo, citing the examples of Heinrich Heine, Moses Hess, Karl Marx

and Ferdinand Lassalle. Once he sided with “Jews” against the Israelites,” his trajectory was clear. Lazare strove for Jewish rights in Palestine, but when he saw his vision thwarted by Herzl’s top-down approach, he placed his hope in the Jewish working class concentrated in Eastern Europe.

Lazare was a lifelong atheist, a freethinker and a conscious Jew alienated from the organized community of French Jews, but in solidarity with secular Jewish intellectuals like I.L. Peretz and Simon Dubnow, contemporaries he never met. They all believed that cultural affirmation was an essential component of true internationalism.

Lazare died of cancer at age 38. Fellow poet and Dreyfusard, the Catholic Charles Peguy, eulogized him as “one of the greatest among the prophets of Israel.” ♦



Are you a Jew who cares about human rights for all?

Have you had questions about Israel you were afraid to ask?

Looking for a place to bring these queries?

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Join Independent Jewish Voices.**

Check us out at [www.ijvcanada.org](http://www.ijvcanada.org) or contact us at [info@ijvcanada.org](mailto:info@ijvcanada.org).

**Together we can make a difference.**

## Jottings by Sylvia Friedman

\* It seems to me that the appropriate time to thank someone for their special contribution to the magazine is when the idea finally hits your thick skull, and that idea is NOW. We take so much for granted, and unfortunately the days go on into weeks and eventually into months, when we don't recognize the very important work being accomplished by our very talented Web Meyven—DONNA BECKER! Cautiously and quietly Donna works on our website and does such an outstanding job. And equally cautiously and quietly, Carl and I just accept her work as a given—not to mention the fantastic photos she takes at our events. Just take a look at page 35 and see what we mean. Thank you—a *sheynem dank*, Donna!

\* And while I'm at it—I should tell you a bit about our Annual Outlook Supper. Our guest speaker was Micheal Vonn, Policy Director of the BC Civil Liberties Association. Her topic was Civil Liberties and Free Speech, and while you might think this could be somewhat dry, it was anything but. It was most informative, lucid and enjoyable! The food was delicious and served by our wonderful Berson Family Ensemble to whom we owe a very special Thank You. And to wind up the evening, we had Stephen Aberle perform, in his inimitable fashion, *At the Anarchists' Convention*—it was such a hoot! All in all, it was a great evening.

\* Unfortunately, I must close on a more sober note. A very old friend of mine, BERT PERLMUTTER of Winnipeg, passed away recently. Bert was a loyal reader and supporter of *Outlook*. He was the last of The Troyke—three progressive, inseparable friends, who knew each other from kindergarten days on—Davie Cramer, my brother Soli Jackson, and Bert—all gone. But some wonderful memories!

Until next time,  
Sylvia