

By Bennett Muraskin

**Saul Goodman  
(1901-1999)**

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

**A**lthough Jewish secularism, as a movement and a philosophy, came into existence about a century ago, it was not until 1976 that the writings of its leading thinkers appeared in book form in *The Faith of Secular Jews*. The editor was Saul Goodman, leader of a small but active secular Jewish organization, the Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute in New York. The Workmen's Circle, the Jewish People's Fraternal Order, and the Farband were all much larger, but may have been too ideological to conceive of Jewish secularism in a broad non-partisan spirit.

Goodman was born in Poland in 1901, where he received a traditional and secular education. He emigrated to the U.S. in 1921. He graduated from the Jewish Teachers Seminary and also earned an undergraduate degree in social science and a Masters in philosophy, and took postgraduate courses at Harvard and Columbia. His intellectual mentor was Horace Kallen, the philosopher and advocate of cultural pluralism as opposed to the prevailing

concept of the "melting pot." Goodman dedicated much of his life to educating secular Jews to find alternatives to assimilation.

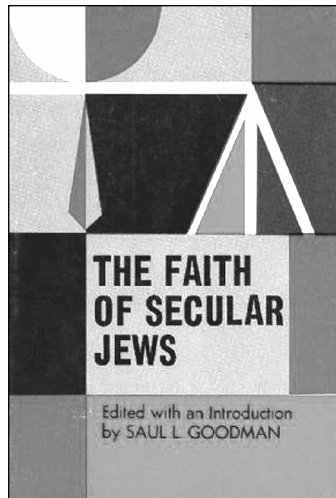
He began his career in Jewish education as a teacher in Workmen's Circle Yiddish schools (*folkshuln*) in the 1920s, but found a home in the Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute, where he served as its executive director for 24 years. He prepared the curriculum, established and supervised *folkshuln*, and edited a bilingual magazine for teachers. He also edited *Our First Fifty Years*, a history of this movement.

In 1950, Goodman became a professor of Jewish Thought and Yiddish Literature at the Jewish Teachers Seminary in New York, where he remained through the 1970s, educating thousands of students. One of them, Yiddish scholar Sheva Zucker, remarked, "He was constantly reading and learning, engaging with the world and particularly with the world of ideas. His ideas never got fossilized but were constantly evolving. He was really the best that secular Judaism has to offer, one of its profoundest thinkers and philosophers."

Abraham Arnold also paid tribute to Saul Goodman in his *Judaism: Myth, Legend, History and Custom, from the Religious to the Secular* (1995), citing Goodman's belief that secular Jews should be "linked with the Jewish tradition but not shackled by it."

Goodman wrote a number of books including *Traditsie un Banayung* (Tradition and Renewal), and *Di Andershkayt fun Amerikaner Yidntum* (The Distinctiveness of American Jewry). He lectured throughout North America expounding a philosophy of Jewishness based on Enlightenment principles and Jewish cultural values, and wrote for a number of periodicals.

In *The Faith of Secular Jews*, Goodman included essays from Chaim Zhitlovsky, I.L. Peretz, Simon Dubnow and Ahad Ha'am, generally recognized as the founding fathers of secular Jewishness, as well as others whose formative years were spent in Europe. Albert Einstein makes a welcome appearance. There are a few contributions from writers rooted in the American scene, such as Horace Kallen and Morris Raphael Cohen, two important Jewish philosophers, but by 1976 there should have been more. Conspicuous by their absence



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## HUMANISTS...

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are any voices from the communists or *linke yidn*, in particular Itche Goldberg, who wrote extensively on the future of Jewish secularism in North America. Perhaps Goodman was not quite as non-partisan as he claimed.

Goodman's own introduction is indispensable. Covering such topics as "The Origins of Secular Jewishness," "The Transplantation of Secular Jewishness to America," "Jewishness in a Religious Framework" and "The Social and Spiritual Climate of the Sixties," it is a crash course

well worth taking. He demonstrates that Jewish secularism is an integral product of Jewish tradition, a lineal descendant of the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment), but with deep roots in the Jewish experience. "Our secularism," he concludes, "selects from the rich Jewish spiritual heritage everything that is valuable, meaningful and relevant; and there is much that is perennially relevant for modern Jews in all the currents of Jewish history: in the Bible, in the Talmud, in the Kabala, in Hasidism, surely in the Haskalah, and in our modern Yiddish and Hebrew literatures—the crowning achieve-

ments of secular Jews."

Before Sherwin Wine, Goodman understood that in North America, where Jews had equal rights, just appealing for Jewish survival was not enough to maintain a group identity. Jewish secularism itself has to evolve. "Our urgent concern should be the *meaning* of Jewish survival; the spiritual content and quality of Jewish life...Secular Jews should therefore devote their efforts to evolving a way of life, a philosophy and ritual for the non-observant Jew."

Goodman pointed the way, but there is still much work that needs to be done. ♦

## PETO...

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Jewish dissent can be viewed as a boundary maintenance mechanism helping to define who can be included in, and who excluded from, Jewish communal membership—political allegiance to Israel serving as a litmus test for determining who may claim to be authentically Jewish. As former head of the American Jewish Congress and outspoken critic of Israel, Henry Siegman remarked in a 2002 *New York Times* interview: "if you do not support the government of Israel then your Jewishness, not your political judgment, is in question." The thesis controversy has brought a Jewish critique of the Zionist narrative/imperative to the attention of a much wider public. While the Peto affair has been infuriating and has demonstrated that some in the mainstream Jewish community have no regard for the principles of academic freedom, it has nevertheless provided an opportunity to once again express opposition to what the late cultural critic Susan Sontag called "the wisdom that values the lives of members of the tribe above all others." ♦

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