

JEWISH CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA AND WEIMAR GERMANY: PARALLELS AND DIFFERENCES

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To speak about American Jewish culture, as one of its most elaborate critics, Harold Bloom, once remarked, is as problematic as to talk about the Holy Roman Empire. Just as the latter was neither Holy nor Roman nor an Empire, much of what is today considered American Jewish Culture is neither American nor Jewish nor Culture. Culture, according to Bloom, is a secular concept that began as Roman and continued as European but has not yet become American, and certainly not Jewish.¹ From the very different perspective of fin-de-siècle Germany, Thomas Mann had made a somewhat similar remark, when he reported to his brother Heinrich after a visit to his future Jewish father-in-law that '[o]ne is not at all reminded of Judaism among those people; one feels nothing but culture'.² This clear-cut division between Judaism and Western culture was confirmed in her own pointed and perhaps exaggerated way by Hannah Arendt: 'Jews who wanted "culture" left Judaism at once, and completely, even though most of them remained conscious of their Jewish origin. Secularization and even secular learning became identified exclusively with secular culture', says Arendt, 'so that it never occurred to these Jews that they could have started a process of secularization with regard to their own heritage'.³

Arendt's remarks were meant to describe the acculturation of German Jews during the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, German and other Jews did indeed start a process of secularisation with regard to their own heritage. Hannah Arendt was part of it, just as Harold Bloom is not merely a critic, but also part of a similar process that has been visible in the United States for many decades. Whether we call the fruits of this process 'culture' or reject this term as un-Jewish is not our major concern here. Another question posed by Harold Bloom seems more relevant in our context: 'Which of the great Diaspora Jewries does American Jewry resemble, in its cultural modes and aims?'⁴ Bloom himself pointed to Hellenistic Jewry as the most appropriate model for comparison. From a distance of two millennia, however, such a comparison must remain quite vague, at least for the historian, who has to turn to contemporary models instead. There are basically only two such major models in our century: Eastern Europe and Germany. Bloom himself vigorously rejected any analogies between German and American Jewry, using Gershom Scholem as his chief witness. I wonder, however, how much such a view is shaped by stereotypes developed in the aftermath of the Holocaust about Weimar Germany in general and German Jewry in particular. Just as in the political context Weimar is used synonymously with the decline of democracy, modern German Jewry

is often regarded as the epitome of craven assimilation. Thus, German Jews are indirectly blamed for their own fate. They did not want to be Jews, and therefore – the saying goes – they were punished for their self-negation.

In contrast to the image of a self-destructive German Jewry, East European Jewry has had a much better press, and is usually portrayed as a vital and productive Jewish community. American Jews in search of their ethnic roots turned to the apparently ‘authentic’ Jewish culture of the shtetl rather than to modern Western models. Thus, the success of popular shows and movies, from *Fiddler on the Roof* to *Yentl*; thus, the enthusiastic reception of Irving Howe’s cultural history of East European Jewish immigrants *The World of Our Fathers*; and thus, the spread of Yiddish classes on American university campuses.

It is my contention that, while when it comes to family roots and fiction topics there certainly are deep connections between East European Jewry and American Jewish tradition, their modes of cultural expression hardly bear any resemblance. Instead, despite all its differences, the Jewish culture of pre-Nazi Germany provides a better model for the analysis of contemporary American Jewish culture. While the ‘contributions’ of German Jews to Weimar culture have been the topic of numerous studies, it has hardly been noticed that the Jews of Weimar Germany also developed their own particular Jewish culture. The nineteenth-century definition of Judaism as a religious denomination no longer reflected the way many Jews of Weimar Germany came to define their Jewishness – that is, increasingly in ethnic and cultural rather than exclusively religious terms. While many German Jews were eager to rediscover their lost Jewish heritage, very few were ready to retreat from German or European culture. The result was the invention of a new tradition of German Jewish culture, in the realms of Jewish scholarship, education, literature, music, and fine art.

The search for community, which provided a powerful motivation during the development of modern German Jewish culture, has been visible in the United States since the late 1960s in many different ways, such as the Havurah movement in religious worship, or the strong emphasis on various Jewish ‘causes’, from Israel to Soviet Jewry, and culminating in the collective commemoration of the Holocaust. The re-appropriation of knowledge, again a prominent feature of Weimar Germany’s Jewish culture, was most visible in the rapid spread of Jewish Studies programmes on American university campuses. Finally, the search for authentic forms of Judaism can be observed both in a return to religious practice by Jews of non-Orthodox background and by American Jewish literature turning inward, as represented, among many others, in the writings of Cynthia Ozick and her quest for a ‘New Yiddish’.

Before analysing those aspects in more detail, let me begin with the most obvious parallels in the areas of language and social integration. East European Jewish culture was – almost exclusively –

produced in its own language, or to be more precise, own languages: Yiddish and Hebrew. While a small number of Polish or Russian Jewish writers composed their works in the language of their surrounding cultures, the vast majority of East European Jews created a culture that was clearly set apart from the non-Jewish population, which was unable to read or understand it. A Polish or Russian intellectual needed a translation in order to read Sholem Aleichem or to follow the performance of a play by Ansky. In this respect, those authors were as foreign to their immediate non-Jewish environment as were Italian or French poets and playwrights.

Obviously, this was not the case for German Jewish writers. A novel by Lion Feuchtwanger or Joseph Roth, a short story by Kafka, and a play by Arnold Zweig could well have contained a specific message to its Jewish audience, an expression here or there that was not comprehensible to a reader unfamiliar with Jewish traditions. But any German could read those works of literature, and in fact all of those authors were widely read by a non-Jewish audience. The same holds true for present American Jewish literature. It is definitely not a closed literature, incomprehensible to the non-Jewish public. Novels by Philip Roth and Saul Bellow may have their special appeal to a Jewish audience, but they are read by a considerable number of non-Jewish Americans. If there is a wall separating authors from their non-Jewish colleagues, it is an invisible one, in contrast to the clearly visible distinction that set East European Jewish writers apart from the non-Jewish audience.

The difference in language, of course, is only the reflection of more general differences setting one population group apart from the other. East European Jews in the early twentieth century were integrating into their majority societies, but at a much slower pace than German Jews had done. As long as the tsarist empire existed, its Jewish subjects were still far removed from the legal equality and social integration of German Jews. During the Soviet era, Russian Jews were forced to give up their own traditions, while at the same time being branded as ethnic Jews in their documents. In Poland, even those who left tradition behind very often did so in distinctive Jewish organisations, such as the socialist Bund.

The process of acculturation had begun in Germany much earlier. What we witness in the Weimar period was a return of those fallen Jews, who came from rather assimilated houses, where the removal from Jewish traditions had started three or four generations earlier. Their fathers and grandfathers had already integrated – or acculturated – as individuals, as adherents of the German Social Democratic Party or as Liberals, as part of the urban middle class, as members of sports and cultural associations. Their children and grandchildren now founded specific Jewish sports and literary associations and a Jewish youth movement. In other words, the Jewish culture of Weimar Germany was to a large degree a culture of ‘post-assimilated’ Jews, those Jews whose families had undergone a process of assimilation

and whose descendants felt now the need of a reversal of this process.

Again, the parallels with American Jewry are striking. Only a few American Jews today are part of a continuously existing Jewish cultural tradition, while most are post-assimilationist Jews, whose grandparents or great-grandparents left the *tallith* and *teffilin* on the ship that brought them to the *Goldene Medine*, or sold them after they arrived. If they themselves still adhered to the old religious traditions, the next generation usually gave them up. Like German Jews at an earlier stage, American Jews today are three or four generations removed from the ghetto. For most of the twentieth century, America was a real melting pot, and definitely not a place where immigrants would cherish their ethnic background. Only in the atmosphere of ethnic revival, in the mood of a general search for roots, did Jews rediscover their cultural traditions. And rediscovering always means reinventing.

Both in pre-Nazi Germany and in contemporary America there was a perception of a revival of Jewish culture. One of the most distinguished observers of contemporary American Jewish life, Leonard Fein, opens his much-acclaimed book, *Where Are We?* (1988) with the following sentences:

Just a generation or so ago, it was generally assumed that American Jewry was rapidly approaching its end. Not that there would soon be no more Jews, but that the vast majority of us would fade away, whether through active assimilation or, more likely, through indifference and apathy, leaving behind only a small band of cultists. By now, however, it is apparent that though all may not be well with America's Jews, we are hardly at death's door. The Jews endure – and more: beyond the unpredicted persistence of Jewish commitment, there has been a dramatic resurgence of interest in matters – ideas, interests, ways – Jewish.⁵

Compare this statement for example with the exclamation of Rosalie Perles, the widow of the rabbi in then German Koenigsberg and one of the most active women in German Jewish culture on the eve of WWI. While rabbis and Jewish community officials had complained for decades about the decline of Jewish knowledge and culture, Ms. Perles expressed the new tone that was discernible in public statements of German Jewish representatives during the first third of the twentieth century:

Let us imagine that our grandfathers – especially those who had . . . feared a gradual assimilation into the non-Jewish surroundings – would return to life and step in front of us. How amazed they would be by the thorough changes that their descendants underwent! How astonished they would be that the assimilation, which they had feared so much, did not occur, that instead exactly the opposite happened! . . . What would our grandfathers see today? The [Jews of] today proudly display their Judaism, no matter to which class or occupation they belong. . . . Our grandfathers would not have had to worry so much, had they seen this future while they were still alive.⁶

There were, of course, more pessimistic voices in pre-Nazi Germany, predicting the demise of German Jewry, as there are similar voices in contemporary America. But in both cases, they have become exceptions rather than the rule, in what constitutes a significant reversal of only a generation before. As in Weimar Germany, the construction – or better – the reconstruction of the feeling of community constitutes the very basis for any expression of Jewish culture in America. Weimar Germany was conceived as an anonymous society in which the construction of small and protected social niches became ever more important. There is no question that the mostly urban Jewish population of America has developed a similar self-perception since the late 1960s. Until then, one's Jewishness was officially defined as a purely religious matter, and as such it was a concern of individual belief or unbelief.

In the melting pot of the first half of the twentieth century there was no room for Jewish ethnicity. Some of the most prominent Jewish intellectuals even called for the total assimilation of minorities in general. Thus, as late as 1963 the then editor of the American Jewish journal *Commentary*, Norman Podhoretz, wrote in his widely acclaimed article entitled 'My Negro Problem – and Ours':

I think I know why the Jews once wished to survive (though I am less certain as to why we still do): they not only believed that God had given them no choice, but they were tied to a memory of past glory and a dream of imminent redemption. What does the American Negro have that might correspond to this? His past is a stigma, his color is a stigma, and his vision of the future is hope of erasing the stigma by making the color irrelevant. I share this hope, but I cannot see how it will ever be realized unless color does in fact disappear: and that means not integration, it means assimilation, it means – let the brutal word come out – miscegenation.⁷

To make one's particularity irrelevant was still the dream for most American Jews in the early 1960s. Just like German Jews in the nineteenth century, American Jews until this period defined themselves usually in terms of religion. They were affiliated with a synagogue, just as their Protestant or Catholic neighbours in their by now mainly suburban homes were affiliated with a church. Not so much from religious need, but rather because this was part of the expected American suburban behaviour. This held true not only for the suburban neighbours' views, but also for the character of the nation at large. While ethnic diversity was hardly approved in the 1950s, religious diversity was. Moreover, by being Jews qua religion, they were accepted as full partners, next to Protestants and Catholics within the Western 'Judeo-Christian tradition' that formed the mainstream of American culture. And nothing seemed dearer to the hearts of American Jews in the 1950s than being accepted as part of the mainstream American middle class.

Two or three decades later the picture has been reversed. Now, American Jews are proud of their ethnicity. They wear *Magen Davids*, some of them study Yiddish, others call their children Shayne and

Ezra, instead of Sheila and Elliot, they want to be recognised as Jews, because in a society that stresses ethnic roots they find it unsatisfactory to be just Americans of the Mosaic persuasion. It has almost become more important to display one's Jewishness to the outside world than to practice it at home. As Edward Shapiro reminds us, once American Jews, like most European Jews in the nineteenth century, were Jews at home and human beings in the street – now they are human beings at home and Jews in the street.⁸

In Weimar Germany, there had been a quite different – but then also similar – call for the reformation of an ethnic community, expressed in the – often *volkisch* – language of German Neo-Romantics. Volkish ideologues and politicians propagated a *Volksgemeinschaft*; Protestant theologians and Catholic social reformers spoke of a new religious community; philosophers discussed a *Philosophie der Gemeinschaft* and an artificial *Gesellschaft*; and the youth movement gathered around the ideal of a genuine *Gemeinschaft*. Opponents of such an idealised sense of *Gemeinschaft*, such as the philosopher Helmuth Plessner, seemed like lonely prophets who had to admit that the quest for community had become 'the idol of our time'.⁹

While Liberal Jews rejected the concept of a Jewish nation, they too employed ethnic terms, such as *Abstammungsgemeinschaft* [community of common descent], to express their belonging to a Jewish *Gemeinschaft*. This definition of *Gemeinschaft* included every offspring of Jewish parents, regardless of what he believed or how he acted. When acculturated German Jews, such as Walther Rathenau, spoke of a Jewish *Stamm* [descent] (and compared it to the Bavarians or the Saxonians!) in order to emphasise their Germanness, this marked a clear departure from the common nineteenth-century Jewish self-definition in mainly religious terms.

Nowhere was the change of self-definition from a religious to an ethnic basis more evident than in the very heart of the leading liberal German Jewish organisation, the *Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens* (CV). Already on the eve of the First World War its leader, Eugen Fuchs, had introduced a new element into the self-definition of liberal German Jews when he emphasised that they were not only bound by common religion, but by the consciousness of common descent (*Stammesbewußtsein*). Fuchs came to the conclusion that the term *Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens* was in fact outdated: 'If I could create a new formula today, I would say, "We are a Centralverein of Jewish Germans."' ¹⁰ What was still cautiously mentioned by Fuchs in 1913 was openly adopted by a generation of younger CV leaders in the 1920s. A decisive step in this direction was the speech delivered by the CV's syndic Ludwig Holländer in February 1928. Holländer rejected the definition of German Jewry in terms of merely religious denomination. He was not reluctant to express bluntly that it was partly an *Un glaubensgemeinschaft* rather than a

Glaubensgemeinschaft. Holländer left no doubt that not religion but common descent united German Jews.¹¹

The Jewish youth movement was the most visible expression of this new search for community in the younger generation of German Jews. In the 1920s around one-third of young German Jews belonged to one of a broad variety of Jewish youth organisations, ranging from socialist Zionists to right-wing German nationalists. For all of them, Jewish issues played a significant role. Largely excluded from the German youth movement, young Jews became increasingly bound to Jewishness as the unifying element, even if they adopted the language and customs of their non-Jewish counterparts. Most of them witnessed shallow forms of Judaism practised at home, and they rejected this shallowness as part of the ‘bourgeois spirit’ of their parents. Some (non-Orthodox) youth organisations consumed only kosher food during their hiking tours and integrated ‘Jewish’ elements into their games. Other youth groups performed plays they conceived as Jewish. In many groups the interest in Jewish matters went deeper. Jewish youth began to study Hebrew, or organise reading sessions of the new Buber–Rosenzweig Bible edition, which was the favourite reading among the Jewish youth.

Certainly, there is no equivalent to this kind of youth culture in the American context. But the drive for the renewal of community has been very much present among American Jews, both in the changing ideology of old-established organisations and in the formation of new organisational forms. Take, for example, the Havurah movement that came into existence in 1968, during the high tide of the student rebellion. Like the youth movement and the adult education movement in Germany it was born in a period characterised by a deep generational conflict, a revolt of the son against the father – this time not in the wake of the First World War and the *gemuetlich* middle-class shallowness of their parents, but of the Vietnam War and an ever more materialistic and media-oriented mass-culture. Reading accounts of the formation of the Havurah movement is strongly reminiscent of similar accounts of the German Jewish youth movement.

Like the Jewish youth movement in Weimar Germany, the Havurah movement regarded itself as the product of a long Jewish tradition (reaching back to the Qumran community of the Essenes), but was actually either inspired or paralleled by contemporary non-Jewish models. When Rabbi Harold Schulweis established the pioneering Havurah in Encino, California, in 1968, about 100 miles away the Reverend John A. Crane, minister of the Unitarian Church in Santa Barbara, introduced a similar programme of extended families in his church. Like the members of the German Jewish movements, the typical Havurah members were dissatisfied with the established Jewish institutions. Their major goal was to ‘provide an alternative institutional framework for its members to pursue their evolving Jewish lifestyles’.¹²

While the driving forces behind the establishment of the Havurah

movement – generational conflict, yearning for community, and quest for spirituality and engagement – are reminiscent of the Weimar context, the actual materialisation of new modes of community was characterised by the needs and circumstances of American Jews alone. At least, one would think so. As Michael Meyer has pointed out recently, the first Havurah was actually born in a small Berlin synagogue in the late 1920s. Many of the forms of Havurah life – its small size and intimacy, the active role of all its members in the service, and even the stronger participation of women – can be found in the Liberale Synagoge Norden, founded in 1923 in Berlin's Schönhauser Allee.¹³

In the 1950s Jewish knowledge was rapidly declining, and it seemed that only professional Jews, such as rabbis and teachers of religion, would keep Jewish knowledge alive outside the Orthodox community. Since the 1960s, however, a reverse process has begun. If Weimar Germany witnessed a revival of Jewish school education, the beginnings of systematic Jewish adult education programmes, and a modest first step in terms of Jewish Studies courses at German universities, all those developments find their – much stronger – counterparts in the contemporary American Jewish community. The Jewish school system, which seemed to be waning in the 1950s, has experienced an enormous revival in the last couple of decades. This holds true especially for Orthodox day schools. By the 1980s, there were over 100,000 students enrolled in over 500 Orthodox Jewish day schools across the country, and every city with more than 5,000 Jews has its own day school. There has also been a revival of Jewish adult education programs similar to those initiated in Germany by Franz Rosenzweig, some even called '*Lehrhaus*' after the German model.

But more impressive than any other revival of learning is the spread of Jewish Studies programmes at American universities. As late as the 1950s, there had been only two chairs in Jewish Studies: one in Jewish history at Columbia University held by Salo Baron, and one in Jewish philosophy at Harvard University, held by Harry Wolfson. If one wanted to enter the field of Jewish Studies outside those institutions, one had to attend the courses of the rabbinical seminaries: the Hebrew Union College for Reform Jews, the Jewish Theological Seminary for Conservative Jews, and Yeshiva University for the Orthodox. Since 1948 there has also been a Jewish-sponsored academic institution with Brandeis University.

The scene changed rapidly so that by 1966 there were already over 60 full-time positions in Jewish Studies at American universities. Yet, with less than 1,000 majors in Jewish Studies and about 10,000 students enrolled in all of those courses, the field was still a modest one, concentrating mainly on the classic areas of rabbinics, Hebrew language, and Bible Studies. In 1969, the Association of Jewish Studies was set up to co-ordinate the rapidly growing academic field. When the Association recently celebrated its 25th anniversary at its annual Boston conference, there were a few hundred Jewish Studies

professors representing over 300 Jewish Studies programmes.

There are not only more teachers and students of Jewish Studies today than a generation ago, they are also of a quite different type, as Professor Robert Alter determined:

The typical earlier pattern among Jewish scholars was an Orthodox upbringing, including talmudic training in a traditional yeshiva, which the scholar then carried with him into the Western world of PhDs and footnoted publications . . . There are still occasional instances of this pattern among the post-war generation of American Jewish scholars, but it is far more common to find people who were raised in homes whose Jewish character ranged from inconsistent to dilute or vestigial, and who at some early point made a conscious decision to express their Jewishness in a different way from that of their parents, intently studying Jewish tradition, mastering its languages, perhaps adopting a personal observance of it in one fashion or another. Many of these scholars represent, in other words, a new kind of Jew, distinctly made in America.¹⁴

Very often, the connection between Jewish Studies and Jewish identity is openly revealed. Irving Greenberg, a Jewish historian at Yeshiva University once made the remark: 'It has been said that the British Empire was lost and won on the playing fields of Eton. The crown of Judaism and Jewishness will be won or lost on the campuses of America.'¹⁵ It is this hope that Jewish education for college kids will help to keep Judaism alive which has led Jewish philanthropists to establish chairs, lecture series, and libraries in the field of Jewish Studies all over the country. Of course, this development has its critics, who believe that the role of Jewish Studies as a reviving force of Jewish life will endanger its academic and scholarly purity. They also argue that not all students of Jewish Studies are Jewish, in fact in some colleges in the Midwest or Southwest very few are. For those non-Jewish students, any attempt to implement a positive Jewish identity by taking university courses must seem awkward at least, and in many cases even offensive.

The establishment of Jewish Studies chairs and programmes was followed by a dramatic increase in the quantity of Jewish academic literature. While in the 1950s or 1960s, the Jewish Publication Society would be the typical place to publish a scholarly work on Jewish history or literature, in the 1990s an author would rather turn to the rich Jewish Studies series of Harvard, Yale, or Stanford University Press. In the last generation, a flood of Jewish Studies journals, such as *Modern Judaism* and *Prooftext, Jewish Thought* and the revived *Jewish Social Studies* have been established and serve as forums in the ever more specialised sub-fields of Jewish Studies. Outside the purely academic sphere, the journal *Tikkun* constituted a more self-consciously Jewish response to traditional Jewish magazines, such as *Commentary* and *Midstream*.

Let me mention one last example of the growing importance of what we called earlier the re-appropriation of Jewish knowledge. In Weimar Germany, Jewish intellectuals and scholars translated the

most important Jewish sources, the Bible and the Talmud, into German, and made them available to the German public in appealing editions. Lazarus Goldschmidt, a Lithuanian-born Jew who had moved to Germany at an early age, translated the Talmud in a gold-bound edition published by the Jüdischer Verlag, the Zionist-owned Jewish publishing house in Berlin. In the 1980s, an even more appealing and much better-selling Talmud translation came on the American market. The volumes of the Steinsaltz Talmud translation are not only beautiful and expensive books that garnish one's library – they are also intended for real study, and used for this purpose.

Community, knowledge, and authenticity: those were the three levels of Weimar's Jewish culture, and all of them are part of America's Jewish culture as well. The search for authenticity was already present in the cultural modes I have introduced so far. One may mention more specific expressions of this phenomenon, and I will limit myself to two examples only: the move inward in American Jewish literature and the spread of Jewish museums.

It is no coincidence that in the 1980s a whole array of novels appeared portraying and discussing the Orthodox Jewish milieu. In contrast to earlier literature of this kind, this time it is the older generation which is being portrayed as assimilationist, while the younger ones lead a rebellion against their parents in order to stress their traditionalist outlook. The popularity of plots in an Orthodox milieu is just one among many motives in a development of American Jewish fiction over the last two decades that sociologist Sylvia Fishman has termed a turn inward. American Jewish writers today are less concerned with the portrayal of Jews as exotic outsiders or relatively recent insiders in American society than with Jewish questions per se: Jewish spirituality in a post-Holocaust world; the relationship between the diaspora and Israel; and the notion of Israel as a chosen people.¹⁶ The interest in intensely Jewish subject matter is not restricted to relatively little-known authors, but can also be observed in the return to internal Jewish discussions by the more famous authors who had once abandoned this style of writing. Thus, Philip Roth responded to the new affirmation of ethnicity by producing two novels that explore in detail various different lifestyles and diaspora–Israel relations: *Counterlife* (1987) and *Operation Shylock* (1993).

Cynthia Ozick is probably the best example to describe the turn inward among American Jewish writers. She herself has called this new wave of American Jewish literature 'liturgical in nature' and 'centrally Jewish in its concerns'.¹⁷ Ozick's novels and stories are inspired by classical Jewish sources, and she herself was once a student at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Ozick not only chooses distinct Jewish sources and topics, she also demands that American Jewish literature must be distinctive in its linguistic aspects. Such an American Jewish language is, in her own words, a 'New Yiddish'. In 'Envy; or Yiddish in America' she tells the story of two Yiddish

writers; envy here refers to the misgivings of a talented but little recognised Yiddish poet toward a popular Yiddish novelist, based on the image of Isaac Bashevis Singer. Envy may also be understood, however, as the personal problem and tragedy of the author. In 'Envy', as in other stories, Ozick describes the dilemma of a modern Jewish writer who wants to be part of an old Jewish tradition, but in fact helps to create a new tradition. Thus, 'Envy' also marks the envy of a writer who has to publish in English and is no longer able to write in Yiddish, not to speak about Hebrew. Therefore, the call for a 'New Yiddish' is not much more than a desperate cry for a safe identity. It is, if we return to our first major issue, the basic difference between East European and German Jewish literature – the one written in Yiddish and thus kept away from its surroundings, the other written in the very language of its surroundings. As much as Ozick, reflecting the new ethnicity of many American Jews, wants to write in a different language and thereby be part of the East European tradition, her 'New Yiddish' is just another version of American English and thus resembles earlier searches for authenticity among German Jewish writers.

Take for example Else Lasker-Schüler, the most notable and most eccentric female German Expressionist poet, who received the coveted Kleist Prize in 1932, less than a year before her writings were burnt by German students and she herself was forced into exile. Her admiration for the biblical 'Jewish Jews' – in contrast to what she conceived as assimilated contemporary German Jews – led to her direct identification with oriental characters. Projecting herself back into biblical times, Else Lasker-Schüler associated with the figure of Joseph, to whom she dedicated two poems in her collection *Hebrew Ballads*. She signed her letters as 'Prince Jussuf of Thebes', painted herself in oriental clothes, and constructed her own biography as an oriental.

Lasker-Schüler's identification with the characters of the Hebrew Bible culminated in her conviction that her language was actually Hebrew, and not German. When the Hebrew poet Uri Zvi Greenberg offered to translate some of Lasker-Schüler's poems into Hebrew, she replied angrily: 'What? But I am writing in Hebrew.' Greenberg, who lived in Berlin in 1922 and 1923 remained an admirer of 'the black swan of Israel', as the poet Peter Hille called her. When Greenberg acclaimed the poet 'of Judean blood' (Peter Hille) in the Hebrew newspaper *Davar* in 1925, he seemed convinced of her statement. 'The non-Hebrew reader', Greenberg wrote about one of her poems, 'will find original Hebrew in her poem. Living Hebrew of the twentieth century'.¹⁸

A final example of the analogies between German and American Jewish culture is the spread of Jewish museums. In 1950, there were only two major Jewish museums in the United States; in the early 1990s the Council of American Jewish Museums (established in 1977) counted 35 members and associates, and at least a dozen more Jewish

museums not included in this number. The notion of a 'Jewish museum' is a modern one, possible only in a highly secularised Jewish society. In traditional Jewish societies there was little interest in the display of ceremonial objects: instead, those objects were first and foremost to be used in the synagogue or at home. In case they could no longer be used, their place was the *Geniza*, the storage room for old books and ritual objects in the synagogue. Although a certain aesthetic value has always been attached to those ceremonial objects, it would never have occurred to Jews in more traditional societies to create ceremonial objects for the exclusive purpose of public display.

Formerly restricted to their ceremonial uses, the objects on display now obtain an autonomous function. They are transformed into non-functional objects whose worth is determined by their aesthetic attractiveness rather than their ritual value. In search of their distinct group identity, the visitors to these museums are especially attracted to everything that seems authentically Jewish – not despite, but because of the fact that they feel they no longer live authentically. The objects displayed in the museum become for them the bearers of a vicarious authenticity, while they themselves believe they could attain a modicum of this authenticity by associating with them in a public space, or by placing them in the personal space of their homes.

The emphasis on the aesthetic value of Jewish ceremonial objects does not necessarily contradict the notion of a revitalisation of Jewish culture, however. Jewish society in a secular framework longed for new approaches to guarantee its survival. The public display of ceremonial objects was one of the answers to the dilemma of modern Judaism, torn between the cultural ideals of the larger society, and the determination to express its cultural distinctiveness. In the words of A. J. Heschel, perhaps the leading American Jewish philosopher in the post-war period, the main task of the Jewish museum was to seek 'ways of teaching Jewish values in a visual manner'.¹⁹ The Jewish museum does not have a passive role of art display, it is no longer dedicated mainly to the preservation of material artefacts. Its major goals are more practical: to educate, and in addition, to provide a forum for contemporary Jewish artists, and thus guarantee future artistic Jewish creativity. New York's Jewish Museum, the most important such institution, certainly tried to fulfil this role. Recent exhibitions by the Jewish Museum concentrated on a much broader spectrum than only Jewish art. Among the most successful exhibitions in recent years were one on Sephardi Jewry and another on the Golem. In both of them, education in Jewish culture and tradition was much more strongly emphasised than the display of significant works of art. A very recent trend in smaller Jewish museums across the United States is the emphasis on American Jewish art and history. Many of those Jewish museums are centres for the local Jewish communities to learn about their history and provide seminars for prospective Jewish artists in order to keep Jewish art alive.

Again, allow me a glance back to pre-Nazi Germany. Until the

last years of the nineteenth century, associations dedicated to the collection of Jewish artefacts or Jewish museums were practically non-existent. It was in 1895 when the first such association came into existence in Vienna; in Germany, Jewish art associations and collections followed in a number of cities, such as Hamburg (1898/1900), Frankfurt am Main (1901), Kassel (1927), Breslau (1928), and Munich (1931). Permanent contact between those institutions was established during the Weimar years by annual conventions of the various Jewish Museum Associations in Germany.

The most important Jewish museum was initiated in Berlin in the 1920s, although it officially opened only one week before Hitler came to power, in January 1933. Its entrance hall was itself a programmatic statement. Two busts of prominent German Jews, Moses Mendelssohn and Abraham Geiger, reminded visitors of their specific German Jewish heritage, while the four remaining works displayed the renewed Jewish cultural activity among German Jews. They all depicted biblical motifs through the eyes of contemporary German Jewish artists: a sculpture of David by Arnold Zadikow, Lesser Ury's famous depictions of Jeremiah and Moses, and Jakob Steinhardt's painting of the 'Prophet' of 1912, which had established his fame as a leading Expressionist artist. The emphasis on contemporary Jewish painting and sculpture constituted a distinct contrast to the contents of the original Berlin Jewish art collection, which consisted mainly of antiquities, coins, old ceremonial objects, portraits, and prints.²⁰ The contrast was well intended by the museum's director, Karl Schwarz, who did not regard a Jewish museum as an end in itself, but as a means to revitalise Jewish artistic creativity. Thus, when a museum guide appeared at the museum's opening, Schwarz stressed his conviction that the aim of such a place was the depiction of Jewish art and culture as *living* history.²¹

Needless to say, the analogies between German and American Jewish cultures must be seen against the background of obvious differences; the United States is a very different society from Weimar Germany: more pluralistic, more open, and more democratic. The Jews in Weimar Germany were practically the only religious and ethnic minority and, unlike in America, ethnic revival was not an issue among minorities, but among the German majority, thus obtaining a distinctly different character. Antisemitism and exclusion, so typical of Weimar Jews' daily experience and the most important reason for their turn inward, is hardly present in modern-day American society. Finally, the numbers are important: the six million or so American Jews constitute ten times the number of Weimar's Jewish community. Within the borough of Brooklyn alone, there are almost as many Jews as in the whole of Germany in 1933. All this notwithstanding, Weimar Germany's Jewry was the first major Jewish community that set out to deepen and culminate the development of a distinct Jewish subculture in a relatively open and voluntaristic setting. Their endeavour constituted a particular response to the challenge of expressing Jewish

distinctiveness, while at the same time participating in a modern secular society. While the answers German Jews provided were restricted to the particular conditions of their place and time, the questions they asked were very similar to those posed by American Jews two generations later.

However, the mere comparison between Jewish culture in Weimar Germany and contemporary America still seems shocking to most observers. Thus, Harold Bloom praised Gershom Scholem for never having ‘made the mistake of analogizing German and American Jewry’, and instead drew parallels to the Hellenistic world. In a similar vein, Cynthia Ozick declared that ‘We are not like Germany; we are a good deal like an incipient Spain’.²² What causes the vehement resistance to such a comparison is, of course, the unavoidable question arising from the ultimate fate of German Jewry: ‘If there are parallels in life, will there be also parallels in death?’ The pessimistic observers of American Jewry point to high intermarriage rates and low synagogue attendance. They claim that American Jews feel too comfortable. While many German Jews became aware of their Judaism in the face of growing hostility, many American Jews loosen their ties to Judaism because of their acceptance by the mainstream society. If it was the explosion of hostility that brutally destroyed German and European Jewry, they ask, will it be total integration that ultimately brings Jewish particularity in the United States to an end? As in Germany, one part of the answer must be seen in the broader context of the non-Jewish society. If American society continues to be characterised by the concept of ethnic diversity rather than by that of the melting pot, Jews may find their place within a multicultural society, as well.

The second part of the answer is up to American Jewry itself. In Weimar Germany, Franz Rosenzweig was in a way successful when he spoke, half jokingly, half seriously, of ‘smuggling’ Judaism into the general education so dear to the Jew. While this did not imply that the younger generation of Jews in Weimar Germany had more than a superficial knowledge of Jewish texts and the Hebrew language, it meant that they, in contrast to their parents and grandparents who were often ashamed of their remnants of traditional Judaism, now felt rather ashamed of knowing so little. It remains to be seen if the somewhat similar process of re-appropriation and reinvention of Jewish knowledge and traditions in the American Jewish society marks only a temporary curiosity with respect to their cultural heritage or a first step towards a more profound immersion within Jewish culture. While the fifteen years of Weimar Germany were too brief a period to permit any definite evaluation of the Jewish culture that developed during that time, American Jews have the unique chance to prove that Jews can survive as Jews even in a sympathetic and comfortable environment, and therefore ultimately disclaim Jean-Paul Sartre’s famous assertion that it is antisemitism which enables the survival of the Jews as Jews.

- ¹. Harold Bloom, 'The Pragmatics of Contemporary Jewish Culture', in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, ed. John Rajchman and Cornel West (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 108.
- ². Thomas Mann to Heinrich Mann, 27 February 1904, in *Briefwechsel, 1900–1949* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1968), p. 27. For more details on the Weimar developments described here, see my book *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).
- ³. Hannah Arendt, 'Creating a Cultural Atmosphere', in *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age* (New York: Grove Press, 1978), p. 92.
- ⁴. Harold Bloom, 'Free and Broken Tablets: The Cultural Prospects of American Jewry', in *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revision* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 322.
- ⁵. Leonard Fein, *Where Are We? The Inner Life of America's Jews* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 3.
- ⁶. Rosalie Perles, 'Unsere Großväter', *Jahrbuch für Jüdische Geschichte und Literatur* 22 (1919), pp. 129–31.
- ⁷. Fein, *Where Are We?*, p. 20.
- ⁸. Edward S. Shapiro, *A Time for Healing: American Jewry since World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 200.
- ⁹. Helmuth Plessner, *Die Grenzen der Gemeinschaft: Eine Kritik des sozialen Radikalismus* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, reprint 1972), p. 26.
- ¹⁰. Eugen Fuchs, 'Referat über die Stellung des Centralvereins zum Zionismus in der Delegierten-Versammlung vom 30. März 1913', in *Um Deutschtum und Judentum* (Frankfurt am Main: Kauffmann, 1919), p. 242.
- ¹¹. Ludwig Holländer, *Deutsch-jüdische Probleme der Gegenwart: Eine Auseinandersetzung über die Grundfragen des Central-Vereins deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens E. V.* (Berlin: Philo-Verlag, 1929), p. 14.
- ¹². Bernard Reisman, *The Chavurah: A Contemporary Jewish Experience* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1977), p. 9.
- ¹³. Michael A. Meyer, 'Gemeinschaft within Gemeinde: Religious Ferment in Weimar Liberal Judaism', in *In Search of Jewish Community: Jewish Identities in Germany and Austria, 1918-1933*, ed. Michael Brenner and Derek Penslar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. 25–30.
- ¹⁴. Robert Alter, 'The Jew Who Didn't Get Away: On the Possibility of an American Jewish Culture', in *The American Jewish Experience*, ed. Jonathan D. Sarna (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1986), p. 279 (originally in *Judaism* 31, 1982).
- ¹⁵. Shapiro, *A Time for Healing*, p. 86.
- ¹⁶. Sylvia Barack Fishman, 'American Jewish Fiction Turns Inward, 1960–1990', *American Jewish Yearbook* 91 (1991), pp. 35–69.
- ¹⁷. Cynthia Ozick, 'Toward a New Yiddish', in *Art & Ardor* (New York: Knopf, 1983), p. 174.
- ¹⁸. *Davar (Musaf le-shabatot ve-lemo'adim)*, 12 Adar (= 8 March) 1925, p. 21.
- ¹⁹. Ruth R. Seldin, 'American Jewish Museums: Trends and Issues', *American Jewish Yearbook* 91 (1991), p. 86.
- ²⁰. Hermann Simon, *Das Berliner Jüdische Museum in der Oranienburger Straße: Geschichte einer zerstörten Kultstätte* (Berlin: Union, 1988), p. 11.
- ²¹. Karl Schwarz, 'Berliner Jüdisches Museum (Aus den Memoiren von Karl Schwarz)', Robert Weltsch Col., *Archives of the Leo Baeck Institute*, New York AR 7185, Box 10, Folder 15, p. 10.
- ²². Bloom, 'Free and Broken Tablets', p. 325; Ozick, 'Toward a New Yiddish', p. 172.