

Imagining American Jews: Recent Visions and Revisions

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The title for my talk this evening is borrowed from a polemical essay by Philip Roth, in which the author both defends himself against charges that *Portnoy's Complaint* is rife with Jewish self-hatred and persuasively justifies his repeated depictions of good Jewish boys caught in the act of surrender to what Roth calls "non-negotiable demands of crude anti-social appetite and vulgar aggressive fantasy." I shall not take sides in that debate; rather, I intend to play a bit with several ideas derived from Roth's concluding observation that "imagining what Jews are and ought to be has been anything but the marginal activity of a few American Jewish novelists."¹ Roth was more right in this than he knew, I shall argue. Imagining Jews has in fact been a central activity of Jews in America, and not only of novelists, and (I would add) religious thinkers, but of historians and sociologists as well. What is more, all have been telling versions of a single story about who we American Jews are and what we ought to be. Sharing Sol Feinstone's enthusiasms, they have been preoccupied with the "relationship between Judaism, democracy, immigration and the American experience." My aim in this paper is threefold. First, I will try to lay out schematically this story that we tell about ourselves. Second, I will trace chronologically several of its principal articulations. Third, and in most detail, I will discuss several of its most recent retellings—particularly those which will probably be shelved in the library as non-fiction, but, at least in part, should not be. My hope is to suggest a feature of our discourse about ourselves which remains elusive, which I at least cannot grab hold of with any certainty, but which seems to me very real for all that, and all too determinant of our self-reflection.

1.

We can get a good sense of the plot of the story, and of what is at stake in it, from one of its first definitive recitations: an address delivered in 1907 by a

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native of these parts, Israel Friedlander. The title of Friedlander's address itself tells us much of what we need to know: "The Problem of Judaism in America."² On the one hand, Friedlander argued, there was a problem, and a very serious one. Kaufmann Kohler's paeans to the "tocsin peals of American liberty" were at the very least premature. Redemption was not yet in sight. An entire drama awaited, its resolution by no means certain. But, on the other hand, there was hope. An American Jew could not very well raise the problem of Judaism in America before a generation of Jews who had recently wagered their lives on America, escaping to it from the realities of the Jewish problem in Eastern Europe, unless he could at least hold out hope of some solution unavailable elsewhere. Friedlander did that in his address, and more, framing both problem and solution in a way that countless observers and admonishers of American Jewry have repeated on countless occasions since. Note the five steps through which Friedlander had his audience travel.

First: the problem of Judaism, stated in strict Ahad Ha'amian terms. We must understand, Friedlander begins, that Judaism is not a religion but rather a culture,

the sum total of those inner characteristics, as interests, sentiments, convictions and ideals, which are to a lesser or larger degree common to the individuals of the aggregate known as the Jewish people.³

To define Judaism in this way was to realize the urgency of its situation. Judaism was in a state of advanced decay. One could not but fear for its continued existence. Friedlander's survey of Italian, French, German and English Jewries reveals one example after another of "slavery under freedom." Hungarian, Galician and Russian Jews, he reports, had fared no better. All these cases demonstrated "what Judaism may expect from the effects of freedom and the influences of the surroundings."⁴ Only the naive could be sanguine.

Second: America had thus far proven no exception to the rule. Disintegration—what Friedlander calls de-Judaization—had been directly proportional to the length of exposure to American life and liberty. And whereas the problem of the Jews had been recognized and addressed, that of Judaism had been ignored. Ahad Ha'am had once again been all too accurate in his analysis.

But, third, "is there really no escape from this frightful dilemma?" Friedlander then finds not only hope but precedent: the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry, a simile which is then pressed into the service of imagination. We American Jews could be like them, Friedlander assures us, if we insisted on the authentic definition of Judaism as culture, as "the full expression of the inner life of the Jewish people." American Jewry must refuse to be "forced on the Procrustes' couch" of definition as a religious denomination.⁵

Such authenticity, the fourth point, was possible only in America. For this new land was fast becoming the center of the Jewish people of the Diaspora, and had every chance of becoming the center of Judaism as well. Only

American Jewry had the numbers, the prosperity, the freedom, the context of ethnic pluralism and the resources of knowledge carried by its immigrants to build a large and powerful center of Judaism. Only America, in all the modern world, could give birth to a new type of Jew.

The rhetoric then soars, the reins of analysis are loosed, as Friedlander turns to imagination of that "modern American Jew," who would "combine American energy and success with that manliness and self-assertion which is imbibed with American freedom." A "vision unfolds itself before our mind's eye," he continues, and you will forgive me if I let a good bit of it wash over you as well.

We perceive a community great in numbers, mighty in power, enjoying life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; true life, not mere breathing space; full liberty, not mere elbow room; real happiness, not that of pasture beasts; actively participating in the civic, social and economic progress of the country . . . yet deeply rooted in the soil of Judaism, clinging to its past, working for its future, true to its traditions, faithful to its aspirations, one in sentiment with their brethren wherever they are, attached to the land of their fathers as the cradle and resting place of the Jewish spirit; men with straight backs and raised heads, with big hearts and strong minds . . . leading a new current into the stream of American civilization; not a formless crowd of taxpayers and voters, but a sharply marked community, distinct and distinguished, trusted for its loyalty, respected for its dignity, esteemed for its traditions, valued for its aspirations, a community such as the Prophet of the Exile saw it in his vision: "And marked will be their seed among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples. Everyone that will see them will point to them as a community blessed by the Lord."⁶

We will perforce return more than once to the details of that vision, but let me note three aspects of it which have remained true of American Jewish imaginings ever since.

First, the American Jew as imagined by Friedlander is bifurcated into two halves, the American and the Jew, rather than a synthesis of the two. We might conveniently label these the outer and the inner selves, corresponding to the public arena in which Jews would move along with all other Americans and the private sphere in which they would define their own distinctive culture. America provides "the straight back and the raised head." It offers a place in which life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are secured. It encourages energy, success, manliness and self-assertion. Judaism by contrast would provide the content to make all this worthwhile, both through its tradition and its community. Friedlander is careful to distinguish the latter from the larger and "formless crowd of taxpayers and voters." Judaism in other words would be *gemeinschaft* to the American *gesellschaft*. It and it alone could provide the gift of meaning to life.

Second, although Friedlander's analysis of the Jewish problem is a Zionist analysis, the land of Israel figures in the talk, as it had for Solomon Schechter and would for Mordecai Kaplan, primarily as a distant anchor for identity, an object of sentiment and philanthropy. The American Jew would be attached to the fatherland as "the cradle and resting place of the Jewish

spirit.” Home, as always, is the place to which one looks back and looks forward, not the place in which one actually resides. Cradle and resting place also conjure up the primary Biblical imagery of exile from the earth from which we come (at birth) and to which we shall return (in death). In the meantime, in life, we wander, and with luck we come to abide temporarily in a place like America. Should the promise of American Jewry be fulfilled, we might even dare, with Friedlander, to apply to it the stirring words reserved by the prophet for messianic return to the Holy Land—all this from the pen of a disciple of cultural Zionism.

Note, third, that God appears in this drama only at the very end: to pronounce blessing on what American Jews will have wrought. Their success shall in fact testify to that blessing. The sense is very much that of a deity who remains, throughout the address and the project which it describes, in “some other place.” Only once the work is done is God appealed to for approval. Judaism, defined as culture, is already a Judaism in which religion is either so taken for granted or so dispensable as not to be mentioned, even by one such as Friedlander. He speaks rather of faithfulness to tradition. The transformation is remarkable. After only a few short years on these shores, Friedlander has mastered both the English language and the language of Judaism in America.

2.

The use to which that language was put in the so-called “second generation” (ca. 1930–1955) has been examined fairly thoroughly by me and others more distinguished, so let me only summarize several relevant features here.⁷

Awareness of the problem that Friedlander identified was, by the ’twenties, nearly universal. Anti-Semitism and economic discrimination had muffled the “tocsin peals of American liberty.” The ’thirties brought pervasive anxiety that the unthinkable might happen even here. Rabbis and communal leaders responded by echoing and re-echoing Friedlander’s hope for America, and by expounding the harmonization of Jewish and American ideals to which he pointed. The ethnic pluralism upon which he counted was invoked time and again. True, the precedent of Spanish Jewry slipped from view. But in its place the Puritans took center stage in Jewish rhetoric: descendants of our ancestors, putative ancestors to our Gentile contemporaries, and so the perfect proof that American Jews were and would always be at home here.

Kaplan, of course the pre-eminent expositor of these dilemmas, stuck close to the line of argument which we have found in Friedlander.⁸ Both his statement of the Jewish problem and his proposed solution paralleled Friedlander’s rather precisely. His Judaism too would be a civilization, and his American Jew live not in one but in two such civilizations. Finally, he too foresaw no synthesis between the Jew and the American, at least not for the foreseeable future, instead reserving the inner self for Judaism while leaving the outer (“social and economic security”) to America. Even Kaplan, a

consummate rationalist if ever there was one, rose to the heights of vision and rhetoric when describing the bright future of a reconstructed Judaism in a democratic, pluralist America. That dream was shared, according to the evidence of the period, even by many who could accept neither Kaplan's theology nor his relegation of religion to the status of an adjective, a mere cupbearer to the new god-terms of peoplehood and civilization.

The nature of American Zionism, then and now—denatured, in the view of European Zionists and the Yishuv—follows rather directly on this imagining of the Jewish future in America. So too does the emergent self-consciousness of the federation world charted recently by Jonathan Woocher.⁹ Assimilationists in the 'thirties and 'forties saw no *Jewish* future in America, while separatists saw no distinctive *American* Jewish future, only the continuation of exiles past. Survivalists won the day with a vision of co-existence in keeping with that of Kaplan and Friedlander. Thus Jews merged some fund-raising activities with non-sectarian Community Chest appeals, but continued separate appeals for sectarian activities such as education. Over time, and with the birth of Israel, the latter grew and the former shrank—just as, with the acceptance of Jews by Gentile Americans, ideological efforts shifted from showing the identity of Jewish and American ideals to providing convincing rationales for Jewish distinctiveness.

In this regard the viewpoint of secular Jewish intellectuals should be remarked, for even in the second generation they felt alien to both the Jewish community and middle-class America. Delmore Schwartz, for example, would have endorsed Friedlander's statement of the Jewish problem in America wholeheartedly, but he regarded any solution as mere wishful thinking. For a Judaism bereft of God had no appeal for him, and neither he nor the characters that he described could or wanted to find their way back to faith. Their faith in America, meanwhile, had been severely tarnished, their own hopes of youth, as articulated by Friedlander, severely disappointed. Their story was bereft of the happy end envisioned by Friedlander with help from Isaiah, and so they were left without *any* image of the future American Jew. Schwartz sustained his personal Jewish identity by the notion that Jew equals artist equals outsider. The consummate Jew, by this logic, would be an outsider even to Judaism and his or her fellow Jews—the position held later by Philip Roth and Daniel Bell, although not without irony.¹⁰

Consider, for example, Schwartz's wonderful story, "America, America," published in 1940, one of several revolving around the self-reflection of an alter-ego named Shenandoah Fish.¹¹ Therein lies the tale: the name itself (one not unlike Delmore Schwartz, of course) betokens deep unease with the combination of a decidedly Gentile American self and a somewhat Jewish self, largely residual. How far back, after all, do "Schwartz" or "Fish" go as Jewish names? In a play published a year later, entitled simply *Shenandoah*, a far more authentic Jew named Jacob tells a new mother about to name her baby after himself that he does not blame her for her ignorance of Jewish tradition, according to which such a naming after the living would not be

done. "You are only a woman, and in this great new America, anyone might forget everything but such wonderful things like tall buildings, bridges, automobiles and iceboxes."¹² The mother settles instead on the name Shenandoah, after the river valley.¹³

The neighbors whom Schwartz pictures for us in "America, America" have the very perception of their new country which Jacob mocks. "One of the most wonderful things about America was the abundance of food." One subject prevailed in their circle: "the wonders of America . . . When the toilet-bowl flushed like Niagara, when a suburban homeowner killed his wife and children, and when a Jew was made a member of President Theodore Roosevelt's cabinet, the excited exclamation was 'America! America!'"¹⁴

But the immigrants' hopes for their new country are always unfulfilled in Schwartz's stories. In this one, the close-knit family—proudest jewel of American Jewish life—is deemed by Mrs. Fish the instrument of her neighbors' downfall, for it had weakened their sons for struggle in a "cut-rate, cut-throat world." "You see," . . . she remarks bitterly upon their failure and her own, "this is what we came to America for forty-five years ago, for this."¹⁵ Shenandoah himself can share neither in the neighbors' dreams for America nor in the meaning stored up somewhere in his own Jewishness. "I do not see myself. I do not know myself. I cannot look at myself truly."¹⁶ This is the only sure knowledge he can convey. Schwartz reaches for more, at times. In "The World as a Wedding," another alter-ego named Jacob insists to his disaffected friends that the world is a wedding feast, and anyone who does not know that "just does not see what is in front of him." But Schwartz refuses to end on this note. Affirmation gives way to irony or worse. "'You can't fool me,' said Laura. 'The world is a funeral. We are all going to the grave, no matter what you say. Let me give you one good piece of advice: Let your conscience be your bride.'" ¹⁷

Philip Roth's third generation evocations of second-generation Jews add little to Schwartz's portrait. In fact, as Irving Howe has noted, Roth generally reduces his second generation characters to stereotypes, for example Portnoy's mother, or the parents of his favorite alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, or the nouveau riche Patimkins. Depth is reserved for the alter egos themselves.¹⁸ Roth does however provide acute insights into the difficulties of some in the third generation both in accepting Friedlander's vision of American Jewish fulfillment and in imagining any coherent alternative.

Let me very briefly discuss the two stories in which Roth is sharpest sociologically, not coincidentally those in which he is most compassionate: "Defender of the Faith" and "Eli the Fanatic," both published in the *Goodbye Columbus* collection in 1959. In each story the hero is caught between two worlds, Jewish and American, unable to enter either, but somehow responsible to the demands of both. Sergeant Nathan Marx is attracted despite himself to a whining, manipulative and self-righteous private named Sheldon Grossbart. When the soldier's demands for special treatment get the attention of his commanding officer, Captain Paul Barrett, Marx to his own surprise finds himself "not so much explaining"

Grossbart's position to the Gentile "as defending it."¹⁹ Eli Peck, similarly, is caught between the zealously assimilating Jews of suburban Woodenton and a newly-arrived Orthodox yeshivah which has just intruded on their acceptance. Eli just wants some peace and quiet, he protests, and along come black-coated refugees who reek of the nightmare from which they—and America—have escaped. "It is only since the war that Jews have been able to buy property here," he pleads, "and for Jews and Gentiles to live beside each other in amity. For this adjustment to be made, both Jews and Gentiles alike have to give up some of their more extreme practices in order not to threaten or offend the other." Their Judaism, in a word, has to be privatized. That is the American way. America will shape the outer self, leaving to Judaism the self within. "If these conditions are met," Eli tells the head of the yeshivah, "we see no reason why the Yeshivah of Woodenton cannot live peacefully and satisfactorily with the Jews of Woodenton, as the Jews of Woodenton have come to live with the Gentiles of Woodenton."²⁰

But of course the Yeshivah Jews refuse to conceive their latest dwelling place in those terms. And they penetrate so deeply into Eli's psyche—he is overwrought for other reasons—that he is driven to switch places with one of the Jewish strangers, and so to become a stranger to any American Jewish self he had ever imagined. "You are us, we are you," says the head of the Yeshivah, but Eli never reaches that affirmation, even in his bout of fanaticism. In the end, we infer, he will succumb to the blandishments of normality. "Okay rabbi," says his friend the assimilationist, "okay okay okay," and Eli finds the word "very soothing."²¹ Nathan Marx also ends by teaching Private Grossbart the lesson of adjustment. "For each other we have to learn to watch out, Sheldon. For all of us"—and that inclusive "all of us" signals a small measure of distinctiveness but, in larger measure, integration to America.²²

Roth never manages to picture authentic Jewishness convincingly. Eli is half-crazy, and even if we go the route of R.D. Laing and argue that in modern culture, where all play social roles, the only authentic identity lies in opting out entirely through madness or revolution²³—still Roth is too critical for that sort of apartness. He cannot be Eli, or the Orthodox Jew. That way lies madness. Neither can he be like Eli's third-generation friends, or his own far from pious parents—even if, in *Zuckerman Unbound*, he has the author's dying father unleash a withering riposte to the son's repeated caricatures. The man's last word to his son is "Bastard," then exegeted by Zuckerman's brother as an indictment of the amorality in which both the author and his characters swim.²⁴ Roth's Jewishness remains a memory, or as he once put it, a psychology without content—and in this he is not unlike many of his contemporaries. The story of Friedlander and Kaplan is not one in which they can find themselves, and they have proven unable to provide any other. "One had to invent a Jew," Roth writes. But the only content which he can credibly or authentically supply is Schwartz's: "my outsidersness to the general assumptions of American culture."

Even Cynthia Ozick's wonderful story "Envy: or Yiddish in America,"

light years away from Roth, Malamud and even Bellow in the Jewish consciousness and sheer Jewish knowledge which inform its characters, only reveals the vacuity of much American Jewish adjustment. The story provides no coherent imagining of alternative syntheses. Can Yiddish, i.e. Yiddishkeit (Jewishness), be translated to English, i.e. America? What is lost and gained in such a translation? Ostrover's commercial success in translation neither establishes nor disproves the Jewish authenticity of that which is translated. The self-evident inauthenticity of the "writers of Jewish extraction" (caricatured by Edelshtein, not entirely unfairly, as "puerile, pitiable, ignorant, *Amerikanergeboren*, pogroms a rumor, *mamaloshen* a stranger, history a vacuum") points to no credible counter-image. For Edelshtein, the Yiddishist in the story, is one who can justly be charged by the young American Jewess with speaking only of and for the dead.²⁵

Robert Alter is right, then, to dismiss as past the time "when many felt that Portnoy and his swarming brood of fictional cousins might be the expression of a distinctive Jewish literary culture in this country," a hope which he attributes to "the need of American Jews to be sustained by the illusion of possessing a culture of their own as they drifted away from their immigrant origins." What we have, he argues, is rather "an experience of Jews in transition," one which therefore cannot meet the test of either authentic Jewishness or high culture. It rather serves to "articulate the ambivalences of a confused cultural identity, or the reflex of guilt in the transition from one identity to another."²⁶

But that, of course, is precisely my question here: are we moving towards, or only away from? What might such a new and American Jewish identity look like? What kinds of American Jews can we imagine, in addition to Friedlander's victims of deracination, his vision of fulfilled synthesis, and the caricatures of our fiction? The most Jewishly informed writers of the past twenty years, Ozick first among them, have taken on this task of imagination far more ably, I think, giving us characters (and authorial sensibilities) of all sorts, their Jewishness figuring in a variety of ways and to a variety of degrees. Think of Mark Helprin's fantasy "Ellis Island," for example, or Jay Neugeboren's richly depicted *The Stolen Jew*.²⁷ That is the way it is with committed third and fourth generation Jews, I would contend: individuals choosing, as they go along, and largely *ad hoc*, from the increasing array of opportunities presented by America on the one hand and rediscovered Jewish traditions on the other. Even denominational allegiances fail to carry with them strictly defined sets of observances, much less beliefs. I would term this a "halfway covenant" with both Judaism and America, in place of the marriage which some in the second-generation urged and others found impossible; in place, too, of the intimate partnership of concentric circles imagined by Friedlander.²⁸

But note the degree to which, in another sense, the imagination of American Jewishness has not changed since Friedlander. The Jewish problem is still regarded as a problem, the opportunity of America still an opportunity, and the vision still a vision, still *his* vision—the difference

being that in most recent writings there is no pretense that it has been realized. Religious thinkers have in turn given their blessing to that vision of coexistence of the inner and outer selves, urging us to participate to the fullest extent in the world of modern American culture while reserving space for the “covenantal community” of prayer and Torah, untranslatable to any other terms.²⁹ Judaism, in much third and fourth generation thought, remains the inner and mysterious complement to outer, scientific rationality, the private sacred spaces of home and synagogue offering meaning to bodies grown tall and strong in the exercise of American liberty—and all the other sorts of exercise mandated by the American lifestyle. There is still no alternative vision, I believe. But recent fiction, unlike recent religious thought, has been turning up an ever increasing plurality of images.

3.

What intrigues me, as I read scholarly analyses of American Jewry and Judaism served up in recent years, is the degree to which even our history and sociology are shaped by the dominant story—Friedlander’s and Kaplan’s—of who we are and what we are about. Take, for example, Jonathan Sarna’s recent fine anthology, titled *The American Jewish Experience*. I believe I do not read too much into the title and its definite article if I infer that Sarna believes that for all its diversity, the experience of Jews in America *has* been essentially unitary. His opening words in fact claim, while appearing to state the obvious, that

American Jewish history weds together two great historical traditions: one Jewish, dating back to the Patriarchs, the Prophets, and the rabbis of the Talmud, the other American, dating back to the Indians, Columbus, and the heroes of the Revolution. Bearing the imprint of both, it nevertheless forms a distinctive historical tradition of its own, one more than three centuries old.

This tradition, he is quick to add, is rooted in ambivalence. Yet it is unified “by a common vision, the quest to be fully a Jew and fully an American, both at the same time.” This vision, he continues,

is perpetuated generation after generation by creative men and women, who grapple with the tensions and paradoxes inherent in American Jewish life, and fashion from them what we know as the American Jewish experience.³⁰

You will agree, I hope, that this is rhetoric rather than analysis; the rhetoric may even be appropriate to an introduction of this sort. But it indicates that the historian has accepted as true the vision of reality which he chronicles, relying on it to supply unity to what is otherwise, even in his terms, “kaleidoscopic, variegated and dynamic.” He has used the self-image of those he studies in order to organize and even select the facts which he deems relevant to his tale.

Thus: Part One—“The American Jewish Community Takes Shape”—consisting of three chapters which take us from the acculturation of colonial

Jews through a “coming of age in the 1820’s.” Then, *a la* Nachman Krochmal, the story repeats itself. “German Jewish identity” is followed by the ups and downs of life in a Gentile world, here personified by the wheeling and dealing of Ulysses S. Grant, and then the rise to fortune of Jewish industrialists, complete with the challenge of assimilation, here evinced by a piece on the seductions of Unitarianism. Again: success of sorts, with the dramatic tension unresolved. The course is steady. Then: Eastern European immigration, with a new testing of the limits of separatism in the *kehillah* experiment; pursuit of adjustment along with Jewish ideals through participation in the American labor movement; the founding of a new sort of Zionism; a pause for taking stock at what is called “mid-passage”; followed by “At Home in America,” the reflections of Robert Alter cited above, and Stephen Whitfield’s thoughts on what he calls the perpetuation and transformation of the ancient and tenacious Jewish heritage—a conclusion titled, fittingly, “American Jews: Their Story Continues.”³¹

It is one story. I do not mean to impugn in the slightest either the factuality of what is presented in these essays or the depth of analysis, which, as in most anthologies, varies considerably from piece to piece. I simply want to remark that many historians of American Jews seem to be retelling this single story—the one that Henry Feingold, to cite another example, recounts in his *Zion in America* and again in his *Midrash on American Jewish History*.³² The message, in his words, is that American Jewry is unique *vis-a-vis* both America and the Jewish past, because we have acculturated on different terms than other minorities. We have retained the strong sense of a “mystical faith” as well as kinship with other Jews.³³ Feingold’s story, the same as Sarna’s, contains virtually the same sub-stories: colonial period, German immigration, denominational development, immigrant culture, labor movement, organizational life, current dilemmas, future prospects. Again, I find the level of discussion high. But I wonder once more whether what the historian tells us has been influenced by the plot which he and we are watching unfold. Would we perhaps ask different questions, seek out different data, were our sense of the tale as a whole other than it is, other than it was already in Friedlander’s address of 1907?

In raising this issue I come armed with theory: Hayden White’s fascinating book *Metahistory*, which attempts to reevaluate the “historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe.” White argues that historians often seek to persuade us of the veracity of their accounts by the way those accounts are “emplotted.” Knowing the kind of story we are hearing, we expect it to proceed and to end in a certain way. When it does, we are not surprised. In fact, we are convinced. “Emplotment is the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually believed to be a story of a particular kind.” The sorts of plot laid out by White are drawn from categories conceived by the literary critic Northrop Frye. Comedy holds out hope “for the temporary triumph of man over his world” through reconciliation of the opposing forces at play, symbolized by the festivities with which such plots often conclude. In tragedy all such festivities prove illusory. “There are

intimations of a state of division among men more terrible” than those which impelled the dramatic action in the first place. In romance the hero transcends, or conquers, or is freed from the world of experience. In the opposite plot, satire, the drama is dominated by “the apprehension that man is ultimately a captive of the world rather than its master.” Consciousness will always prove inadequate to the task which it has set.³⁴

I think you will agree with me that most historical accounts of American Jewish life are cast as comedy, if not romance. The opposing forces which beset us are held in tension, and even celebrated—recall Sarna and Feingold. The distinctiveness of that ambivalence is held a triumph of sorts, and is certainly cause for pride. Even Stephen Whitfield, whose recent work on American Jewish popular culture shifts the historian’s lens from synagogues and federations to comedians, journalists and movie moguls, and who in his title emphasizes the problematic double identity of American Jews—*Voices of Jacob, Hands of Esau*—concludes with what can only be called a sermon: the last act which we have come to expect in the story to which we have been attending. “To be a Jew should mean”—note the norm—“to honor at least the residue of faith, to assume the responsibility of commemoration and adaptation, of reinterpretation and reevaluation of the message of patriarchs and prophets.” We are heirs to an ancient tradition. We have travelled a great distance from ancestral piety, but “each generation remains equidistant from eternity.”³⁵ Whitfield even advises us, in a programmatic piece entitled “The Challenge of American Jewish History,” that “the regret that Yiddish is almost entirely lost may be cushioned by the reminder that Philo, who wrote only in Greek, and Maimonides, whose *Guide to the Perplexed* was in Arabic, did not know Yiddish either. . . . Perhaps Americans can find some comfort in that.”³⁶

Beware the substitution of culture for religion, would be my sermon. And beware the snares of emplotment. Shifting the historical lens to Woody Allen, Hannah Arendt and William Safire does indeed tell us much about who we American Jews are. But let us take care lest we find out only what our story leads us to discover: success without inauthenticity, honor joined with memory. Let me reflect briefly on how one might otherwise have considered these matters, on what other sorts of stories one might tell about American Jews. I will suggest three.

First, one might give a Zionist account of what we have been doing on these shores. There is no reason why it could not be sophisticated rather than crude, informed rather than the reverse, and thus unlike all too many penned in Israel with a view to portraying American Jewry as tragedy. Such an account would not begin here in America, of course, but in Europe. It would emphasize the degree to which categories used to analyze other modern *galut* Jewries—say, Yehezkel Kaufmann’s—hold here as well, for the processes at work here are far from novel.³⁷ Gershom Scholem, who questioned the reality of the so-called German-Jewish dialogue, might well ponder the mutuality of the purported dialogue in this country. In fact, he did.³⁸ Arthur Hertzberg’s “law” about the assimilation of fourth-generation communities

is still in force, according to one persuasive reading of the data. Our community could in salient respects be seen to take its place along with a long list of others.³⁹ The end of the story as emplotted by a Zionist would not be triumph even if it would not be ignoble. American Jewry would in this vision find its permanent home in a corner of *Beit Hatefutzot* (The Diaspora Museum), the only “Home for the Diaspora” that many Israeli Zionists can imagine. This, at any rate, is one alternative story.

Another would follow up on the reflections of a late member of my department, William Clebsch, in a book entitled *From Sacred to Profane America: The Role of Religion in American History*. Clebsch’s thesis is that “the chief features of the American dream were formed by people’s religious concerns but they came into realization outside the temple.” American aspirations have often been sacred in origin, their achievements profane in the fruition.⁴⁰ Clebsch reflects on six examples, all of which are relevant to the tale that we have been recounting. First, the sense of novelty in the American experience, celebrated by countless Christian sects. Second, the norm of participation in the American polity and society rather than separatism. Third, emphasis on the virtue of education. Fourth, what Clebsch calls a certain prudential morality which, he argues, became the basis both of an ethos or etiquette and of a commitment to social welfare. Fifth, the belief that American nationalism is unlike any other. Sixth, the belief that America’s pluralistic culture is the ideal accompaniment to a plurality of religions. Clebsch’s conclusion is that religious groups in America, were they only to see clearly what they have wrought, could not but be ambivalent. Sectarian colleges, to cite but one example, have turned into bastions of secular culture.⁴¹ Jews should perhaps wonder, in light of Clebsch’s analysis, whether our pattern of acculturation really is so distinctive, whether our vaunted federations are really the outgrowth of Jewish ideals, whether, in short, the American Jew who we imagine is not simply a variation on larger themes which we have not inherited from the Jewish past, but developed in common with others in response to American realities.

I could with profit introduce a feminist complaint here: that by and large our history is the history of males, written by males; that our imagination of the American Jew is thereby impoverished as well as skewed. Should one reply that in this Jews have been no worse than anyone else I would say: precisely; where then, once again, is the vaunted Jewish morality which according to the Story and to popular Jewish opinion is still said to distinguish us? I raise this point not only because of the recent reports of corrupt Jewish politicians and stock traders, but because Eugene Borowitz’s ingenious argument in *The Mask Jews Wear* is that our continuing commitment as Jews to a higher ethical standard is evidence for a larger commitment to particularity that we tend to hide, first of all from ourselves.⁴² One could come up with a very different description of American Jewry, I think, in which talk of self-deception and self-aggrandizement would figure prominently. Such a story would also tend to poke holes in the claim to a secular Jewish identity in America that is more than sentimental and vestigial. It

would make a far different story than the one which we are accustomed to hear.

The claim which I have just questioned is precisely the one advanced by Charles Silberman's recent work *A Certain People*. He bills his account explicitly as a story of success. Exile is behind us. Jews are home. "There is a striking parallel," he begins, "between the Book of Esther's legend of salvation . . . and the post-World War II experience of American Jews, who have moved from the periphery of American society into its mainstream."⁴³ This misreading of the lesson of Purim, or rather this subversion of the rabbinic reading of the story, is of course part and parcel of the transformation in identity which Silberman celebrates. Judaism is not, *pace* Friedlander, "seriously threatened by the new openness of American society." It is not, because Friedlander's definition of Judaism as culture has been appropriated to make the point that "the overwhelming majority of American Jews are choosing to remain Jews—some kind of Jews, if not necessarily the kind their grandparents or great-grandparents were."⁴⁴ Some forms of Jewishness, like Yiddish and dietary laws, are gone. But new ones have taken their place—aid to Israel, lobbying for Soviet Jews. We are, Silberman predicts, "in the early stages of a major revitalization of Jewish religious, intellectual and cultural life—one that is likely to transform as well as strengthen American Judaism."⁴⁵

Prophets make easy targets. Silberman's biases are clear. The plot of his story—The Story—is transparent. Indeed, the argument is advanced largely via anecdotes, which are meant to have the cumulative effect of confirming what we already knew, or at least hoped—even to the point of pronouncing Friedlander's vision fulfilled. Look, however, at a recent study by a first-rate demographer, Calvin Goldscheider, entitled *The American Jewish Community: Social Science Research and Policy Implications*. Goldscheider tells us near the start that he, as opposed to die-hard theorists of inevitable secularization and die-hard Zionist negators of the diaspora, will give us the facts and only the facts.

This thesis is not based on an ideological commitment; it is not an outgrowth of a theological or religious position. It is based on new, detailed social scientific evidence and a reanalysis of historical and comparative materials on Jews and other ethnic groups in the United States and elsewhere.⁴⁶

Goldscheider protests too much, of course: in fact, the guiding assumption of the study is that Jewish identity is to be measured by group cohesiveness, what he would call community. In the body of the paper we learn that interaction among Jewish youngsters, and among these youngsters, their parents and their teachers is "clearly what community is all about." The ramifications of that view, he notes, are extensive. For example, Jewish education should focus not on the specifics learned in a relatively few hours of instruction, the content, but on becoming a principal "arena for Jewish cohesiveness."⁴⁷

How can one derive comfort from intermarriage data, and then go on to admit that “only very poor quality data are available on intermarriage and the eventual Jewishness of the children of intermarried couples?”⁴⁸ How can one be optimistic about Jewish continuity while conceding parenthetically that “there seems to be little doubt about the growing secularization of American Jews?”⁴⁹ How can one claim as a sociologist that the data available on Jewish “religious and ethnic communal bonds” are “relatively known,”⁵⁰ when only Jonathan Woocher and one or two others have gone beyond mere surveys of ritual observance and synagogue attendance—data which, sociologists of religion agree, tell us little of what we want to know about contemporary faith? How can one present all this as pure fact untinged by ideological prejudice?

Goldscheider apparently believes, as a wayward Kaplanian, that what we do as Jews is therefore *ipso facto* Jewish; that the adjustments we devise are by definition American Judaism; and that of course the standards by which Jewishness has been judged until now are inoperable—for America is different. This is a legitimate stance. But it is not only views to the contrary which are ideology; this one is ideology as well. Only it is not recognized as such; so pervasive is the story which American Jews have told and retold about their origins and destiny. If one fully believes in that account, however, if we completely remain prisoners of our own emplotting, why then pack the kids off to Israel, as Goldscheider recommends,⁵¹ when we want to give them an integral and authentic experience of Jewishness?

Woocher’s otherwise excellent study of Federation civil Judaism—my final example—falls into precisely the same trap. Despite himself, Woocher often conflates the American Jews whom he has studied, some two hundred Federation leaders, with all American Jews, then catches himself, notes the problem of generalization, and does it again.⁵² This is not carelessness, I believe, but ideology. His is more than a study. At times, it is also a manifesto for civil Judaism. His young leaders are seen as achieving the overarching unity of American Jewry precluded by denominational rivalries, precisely as they would have us believe.⁵³ Their faith in the Jewish people and Jewish destiny is said to link secularist with believer, Zionist with non-Zionist. In his final chapter Woocher even suggests how this civil Judaism could develop a public theology, thereby deepening what are otherwise superficial and partial affirmations. After summarizing the resources offered to that end by Kaplan, Buber, Fackenheim and Borowitz, he concludes with Irving Greenberg’s notion of a voluntary covenant, which was framed with precisely that aim in mind. Greenberg, he writes, is perhaps “the first true public theologian” of the contemporary Jewish civil religion, though other individuals too have begun to fill this role—“men like Daniel Elazar, Leonard Fein and David Hartman.”⁵⁴ Elazar and Fein, whatever else one may think of their writings, are of course not theologians in any sense of the term except the one operative within the Jewish civil religion. Woocher has adopted the point of view which he studies, and in the process has become but the latest

scholar-spokesman for a venerable vision of who American Jews are and should be.

4.

Three reflections, in conclusion, about why we American Jews have so persistently engaged in telling and retelling this story of our condition.

First, we are different, in this sense at least: unlike premodern Jews, we do not know from the start who we are. Previous generations were to a significant degree the children of their parents, the descendants of their ancestors, chosen by God and distinguished by the gift of Torah from all other creatures on earth. Such Jews knew exactly who they were. What choice did they have? They also knew *where* they were—in exile. The images by which they defined and withstood their situation were taken from an ample storehouse. A Jew was a Jew, an exile an exile. Little more had to be said. But American Jewry is premised upon its own exceptionalism. It is the negation of past diaspora life, not its continuation. It would be, if not in Zion, at least at home. It would be a story of success: of immigrants who struggled and made good; of education as the door to opportunity; of a unique harmony between Jewish and Gentile ideals. American Jews, in other words, have defined themselves first of all by what they did not wish to be: just another chapter in the long history of diaspora communities. They wanted rather to be a new type of Jew. Novelty cannot be recalled or imitated. It has to be invented, to be imagined.

That imagination is all the more necessary, perhaps, because underneath the dream lurks the nightmare; under the repeated assertion that we are different may lie the fear that our story too will end in persecution or worse. There is good ground for that fear in recent Jewish history, of course, and the continuing threat to Israel's survival keeps fear close to daily consciousness. If Jewish history in America is to prove an exception to the rule, Jews must believe it can be such, and convince their fellow Americans to believe it as well. Imagination not only transfigures the past. It helps for better and for worse to shape the future.

A final stimulus to the recounting of our collective story is the fact that few of us get to see first-hand the American Jewish community of which our story tells, and of which we want and need to feel a part. Imaginative visions are all the more important because actual vision is lacking. Previous generations could know their small corner of the Jewish world intimately, and rest confident that others elsewhere replicated it. All were bound by the same laws and subject to the same authority—variations on a single theme. The only communities we ever know, even if they are smaller than New York or even the Upper West Side, are generally too complex for intimate acquaintance, too diverse for easy characterization. When I try to picture the American Jewish community to myself I rummage in my mind through encounters with Jews in Houston, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, New York. Beyond this I, like everyone else, fall back on media, the main suppliers of

the images we call America. Because we Jews have neither a television network nor a national newspaper nor a president who can act as a symbol of our collective purpose, and because we deem ourselves an exception to the past images which all of us draw upon only selectively, we are denied an immediate sense of our community as a whole. Woocher has noted perceptively that the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds has become for its participants an experience of *communitas*, because it produces “the impression that one is at the center of a vast and important Jewish world. Jewish community is palpable, and it is exciting.”⁵⁵ The “G.A.” is held only once a year, however, and most of us do not go to it, or even to comparable meetings of our small sub-sections of American Jewry. What we do day after day is read, consuming in prodigious quantities the literature of self-reflection in a variety of genres which tells the story of who we are and what we should be.

I think we like what we read, And, in part, what we read may even be true. It certainly might become true in the course of time, fulfilling the vision first set out by Friedlander and since then many times renewed. If that happens, I will be the first to concede my short-sightedness in questioning the single-mindedness of American Jewish imaginings. For the Messiah will have come.

NOTES

1. Philip Roth, “Imagining Jews” in *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), pp. 245–46.
2. In Israel Friedlander, *Past and Present: Selected Essays* (New York: Burning Bush Press, 1961), pp. 159–184.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 162–165.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 169–73.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 181–84.
7. See my *The Chosen People in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), chs. 2–5.
8. On this issue see my *Galut: Modern Jewish Reflection on Homelessness and Homecoming* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 158–59.
9. Jonathan Woocher, *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).
10. Cf. Eisen, *Chosen People*, pp. 131–37. Schwartz’s biographer reports that in a review of Saul Bellow’s *Dangling Man* Schwartz himself attempted to sum up the experience of his generation, “which he liked to refer to as the class of 1930.” James Atlas, *Delmore Schwartz: The Life of An American Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), pp. 148–49.
11. In Irving Howe, ed., *Jewish-American Stories* (New York: New American Library, 1977), pp. 195–216.
12. Cited in Richard McDougall, *Delmore Schwartz* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974), pp. 78–79.
13. For more on Schwartz’s preoccupation with his own name, see Atlas, pp. 178–79.
14. “America, America,” pp. 201, 205–206.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 213, 215. See also p. 209.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 215–16.
17. Delmore Schwartz, *The World is a Wedding* (Norfolk, Conn: New Directions, 1948), pp. 66–68. The theme of disappointed hope is pervasive in the story. For disappointment with America see especially pp. 58–59.

18. Irving Howe, "Philip Roth Reconsidered," in Abraham Chapman, ed., *Jewish American Literature: An Anthology* (New York: New American Library, 1974), pp. 709-727.

19. Philip Roth, "Defender of the Faith," in *Jewish-American Stories*, p. 376.

20. Philip Roth, "Eli the Fanatic," in Irving Malin and Irwin Stark, eds., *Breakthrough: A Treasury of Contemporary American-Jewish Literature* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1965), p. 36.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 38, 61.

22. Roth, "Defender," p. 401.

23. On this point see Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (London, Oxford University Press, 1974), ch. 6.

24. Philip Roth, *Zuckerman Unbound* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), pp. 193, 217-19. Roth's latest novel, *The Counterlife*, is something of an exception to this rule, but unfortunately appeared too late for consideration in this paper.

25. Cynthia Ozick, "Envy: or Yiddish in America," in *Jewish-American Stories*, pp. 129-77. Cited passages are on pp. 129 and 175.

26. Robert Alter, "On The Possibility of an American Jewish Culture," in Jonathan Sarna, ed., *The American Jewish Experience* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1986), pp. 270, 272.

27. Mark Helprin, *Ellis Island and Other Stories* (New York: Delacorte Press, (1981). Jay Neugeboren, *The Stolen Jew* (New York: Pinnacle Books, 1981).

28. Eisen, *Chosen People*, p. 148.

29. This is, to cite only one prominent example, the message of Joesph Soloveitchik's essay "The Lonely Man of Faith," which appeared in *Tradition*, Summer 1965, pp. 5-67.

30. Sarna, "Introduction," p. xiii.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 284.

32. Henry Feingold, *Zion in America* (New York: Twayne, 1974); Henry Feingold, *Midrash on American Jewish History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982).

33. Feingold, *Midrash*, p. xii.

34. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), pp. 7-11.

35. Stephen J. Whitfield, *Voices of Jacob, Hands of Esau: Jews in American Life and Thought* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1984), pp. 274-78.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 71-72.

37. Yehezkel Kaufmann, *Golah Ve-Nekhar* (Hebrew), 2 vols. (Tel Aviv: D'vir, 1962).

38. Cf. Eisen, *Galut*, pp. 148-152 and see Scholem's "Against the Myth of the German-Jewish Dialogue" in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), pp. 61-64.

39. Arthur Hertzberg, *Being Jewish in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979).

40. William Clebsch, *From Sacred to Profane America* (Chico, Ca.: Scholars Press, 1968), p. ix.

41. *Ibid.* See particularly ch. 1.

42. Eugene Borowitz, *The Masks Jews Wear* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973).

43. Charles Silberman, *A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), pp. 9-10.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

45. *Ibid.* See also p. 226.

46. Calvin Goldscheider, *The American Jewish Community* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), p. 10. Goldscheider notes that the study is based on the findings of two recent and more detailed works, *The Transformation of the Jews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) and *Jewish Continuity and Change* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

47. *Ibid.*, p. 28. See also p. 20.

48. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16, 23.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 27. The qualification voiced there—that "there is no basis for concluding that religious decline means the absence of ethnic continuity"—depends upon the assumption at issue here.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 41-46.
52. Woocher. Compare for example p. viii with pp. 19-21.
53. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-14. For more of what I am calling the manifesto see pp. 20-21, 38, 51, 94, and the conclusion.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 198.
55. *Ibid.*, pp. 148, 152-53.