

The Jew in American Literature

by

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GENERATION OF DECISION

GERMANY'S STEPCHILDREN

ARTHUR SCHNITZLER

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THE FLOWERING OF YIDDISH LITERATURE

THE WEAVERS IN GERMAN LITERATURE

LYRIC PIONEERS OF MODERN GERMANY

THE ENGLISH LEGEND OF HEINRICH HEINE

HISTORICAL SURVEY OF GERMAN LITERATURE

FROM NOVALIS TO NIETZSCHE

SHELLEY IN GERMANY

ELIAKUM ZUNSER

PERETZ

HEINE

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INTRODUCTION

Jewishness has become an important theme of American literature in the 1960's. The Jew has become a kind of culture hero among United States intellectuals and artists. The outstanding bestseller during 1965 was Saul Bellow's *Herzog* and during 1966 James A. Michener's *The Source*. The present study supplies the background for an understanding of this upsurge of interest in Jews and Jewishness.

A single volume cannot cover comprehensively the entire vast subject of THE JEW IN AMERICAN LITERATURE. However, the principal layers of the image and self-image of the American Jew, as reflected in belles-lettres, can be outlined and the contributions of American writers, Jews and non-Jews, to a profounder insight into the past and present of the Jewish sector of the American population can be recorded.

In a preliminary study *Generation of Decision: Jewish Rejuvenation in America*, 1958, the author called attention to the impact of the Jew upon the American mind and the repercussions of that impact upon the Jewish character. Since the book is now out of print, some of its observations have been incorporated in the present volume.

As Jews enter upon the last third of the twentieth century, their personalities are being shaped to the largest degree by intense, daily American experiences and to a much lesser degree by ever paling, ever rarer Jewish experiences. The fading of their Jewish consciousness was temporarily arrested

by repercussions of the European Jewish catastrophe and by the dramatic rebirth of Israel. However, as these tragic and heroic events recede in time, the meaningfulness of retaining Jewish identity in America is again questioned.

Since the founding of the Jewish state, members of the American Jewish community can freely choose between three alternatives. They can migrate to the land of their Biblical forefathers, bringing to it their valuable American know-how, enriching the nascent Israeli personality with a precious American ingredient. Or, they can assimilate into American life and rid themselves entirely both of the burden of Jewishness and of the blessing of this burden. Or else, they can continue a bicultural existence in Jewish time and American space, improving the quality and intensity of their Jewish living, buttressing themselves with Jewish religious and cultural institutions which would survive the ravages of encircling non-Jewish forces, and striving towards a Golden Age of American Jewishness.

The choice is an individual choice but it is best based on knowledge and not on inertia. The present study seeks to contribute to this knowledge of what it means and what it has meant to be a Jew in America. Since literature is a seismograph of life, a survey of the changing image and role of the Jew in American literature casts light upon past and present attitudes of Jews and towards Jews and may stimulate further thinking on looming possibilities.

The Jew in American Literature

CHAPTER I

THE COLONIAL ERA

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Jew was a subject for American literature but he did not figure to any important extent as a creator of American literature. Even as a subject, however, it was more often the Biblical Jew rather than the contemporary one who inspired creative minds.

The influence of the few Jews who came to America's shores and whose numbers probably did not exceed three thousand by the end of the Colonial Era was insignificant in comparison with the impact of the Biblical Jews upon the early American settlements.

For the Puritans who colonized New England the Bible was the supreme authority. It spelled out for them God's will. They were ever mindful of the fact that the idealized founder of the Christian faith had been a Jew and that Christian civilization and Christian ethics stemmed from ancient Israel. They saw themselves as instruments of Providence, as successors of the Hebrews who had once been God's Chosen People but who had forfeited this privilege by refusing to accept the new revelation brought by Jesus. They were prepared to take up the burden once borne by Israel and to organize their new commonwealth according to the covenant entered into at Mt. Sinai and incorporated in the Torah. This sacred text could indeed serve as the fundamental law of the New

Jerusalem of the Puritans and it deserved to be studied in its purest form, in the original Hebrew, God's own tongue.

The earliest settlers included scholars with an excellent command of Hebrew, generally acquired at English universities. Among such noted Hebraists were the Puritan leaders John Cotton (1584-1652), Thomas Shepard (1605?-1649), Nathaniel Ward (1578?-1652), John Harvard (1607-1638), Michael Wigglesworth (1631-1705), Richard Mather (1596-1669), Henry Dunster (1609?-1659), the first president of Harvard College, and Charles Chauncy (1592-1672), his successor.

William Bradford, a founder of Plymouth Colony and its governor from 1621 to 1656, studied Hebrew to the end of his days and recorded the prevalent adoration of this tongue in these words: "Though I am grown aged, yet I have had a longing desire to see with my own eyes something of that most ancient language and holy tongue in which the law and oracle of God were written; and in which God and angels spoke to the holy patriarchs of old time; and what names were given to things from creation. And though I cannot attain so much herein, yet I am refreshed to have seen some glimpse hereof (as Moses saw the land of Canaan from afar off). My aim and desire is to see how the words and phrases lie in the holy text and to discern somewhat of the same for my own content."¹

Cotton Mather, in his *Magnalia Christi Americana*, 1702, reported that his grandfather John Cotton understood Hebrew so well and so readily that he was able to discourse in it.² There is no evidence that he actually did discourse in it, although he probably interspersed Hebrew phrases now and then in his learned conversations with Puritan divines, a

¹ William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, New York, 1952, p. XXVIII.

² David de Sola Pool, "Hebrew Learning Among the Puritans of New England Prior to 1700," *American Jewish Historical Society Publications*, XX (1911), 36.

habit indulged in by religious scholars and clergymen of his day. Ever since the Renaissance, men of classical education and broad culture were wont to display their knowledge of Latin and Greek by frequent quotations in the original. This tendency was expanded to Hebrew by those cultured persons who mastered even the rudiments of the language.

Puritans preferred to choose Hebrew names culled from the Bible for their children and to assign to their towns and villages names reminiscent of ancient Hebrew settlements.

The first significant book printed in a British colony in North America was the *Bay Psalm Book*, issued in 1640 by the Cambridge press, which had been set up the preceding year. This book was a metrical translation of the Psalms rendered directly from the Hebrew text. In contrast to the King James' Version, which aimed not only at accuracy but also at stylistic felicity, the Puritan scholars felt, and expressed their feeling in the Preface penned by Richard Mather, that "God's altar needs not our polishings." Religious truth was paramount and hence the more literal the translation the less would it offend the consciences of those worshippers who wished to "sing in Sion the Lord's songs of prayse according to his own wille." How much more literal and how much less literary than the King James' Version was their rendering, despite the fact that their version was metrical while the latter version was in prose, becomes apparent if the two translations are compared. For example, the very first lines of the opening Psalm in the *Bay Psalm Book* read as follows:

O Blessed man, that in th' advice
of wicked doeth not walk;
nor stand in sinners way, nor sit
in chayre of scornful folk,
But in the law of Jehovah,
is his longing delight;

and in his law doth meditate,
by day and eke by night.

The same passage in the King James' Version reads:

Blessed is the man
That walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly,
Nor standeth in the way of sinners,
Nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.
But his delight is in the law of the Lord;
And in his law doth he meditate day and night.

As the archetype of all tongues and as the key to the Bible, Hebrew was prescribed for all students of Harvard from the very beginning and was especially emphasized during the incumbency of Harvard's first two presidents, Henry Dunster and Charles Chauncy. This college was founded primarily to perpetuate a learned ministry for the churches of New England. Ability to read the Bible in the ancient tongue was necessary, since graduates in their lifelong career as clergymen would be called upon to elucidate the holy text for their parishioners. As Cotton Mather explained in his *Magnalia*, it was not the opinion of men, but the exact wording of the Scripture which must decide any controversy.³

One of the requirements for graduation from Harvard was the ability to translate from Old Testament Hebrew into Latin. Students assembled in the College Hall daily to listen to the reading of a passage in Hebrew. For over a century and a half, until 1817, the Commencement exercises included an oration in Hebrew. However, Hebrew was not too popular among the students, most of whom dreaded examinations in its grammatical structure, especially its irregular verbs.⁴

The difficulty of mastering Hebrew was increased, from the

³ Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, Hartford, 1920, II, 53.

⁴ Isidore S. Meyer, "Hebrew at Harvard (1636-1700)," *American Jewish Historical Society Publications*, XXXV (1939), 159.

students' viewpoint, by the fact that the only textbooks available were in Latin. Not until the eighteenth century did Hebrew-English textbooks come into use. These were prepared and published by Judah Monis in 1735, by Stephen Sewall in 1763, at Harvard, and by Samuel Johnson, 1767, upon his retirement as president of King's College, later renamed Columbia University.

Judah Monis (1683-1764) taught Hebrew at Harvard from 1722 to 1760 and Stephen Sewall (1734-1804) was his successor from 1764 to 1785. Not until 1787, when the Colonial Era had ended and the new Republic had arisen, was the prescribed study of Hebrew made elective in Harvard for all students, although a few students were allowed from 1782 on to substitute French for Hebrew, provided they received special permission.⁵ Samuel Johnson (1696-1772), who presided over King's College during its first decade, 1754-1764, required all tutors to have a knowledge of Hebrew but not all students. However, Yale College, founded in 1701, more than half a century before King's College, continued to insist on Hebrew for all its students and included Hebrew words in its official seal. Two of Yale's presidents, Timothy Cutler (1694-1765) and Ezra Stiles (1727-1795), were noted Hebrew scholars in their generations.

Other colleges, which arose during the Colonial Period and which taught Hebrew from the beginning, included Dartmouth—founded in 1769, Princeton—founded in 1746, and Brown—founded in 1764. The signers of the Declaration of Independence included graduates of New England colleges and some of them, who had completed the prescribed curriculum for the degree of Bachelor of Arts, knew not only Latin and Greek, but also some Hebrew.⁶

⁵ Abraham I. Katsh, *Hebrew Language, Literature, and Culture in American Institutions of Higher Learning*, New York, 1950, p. 4.

⁶ James J. Walsh, *Education of the Founding Fathers of the Republic*, New York, 1935, p. 35.

Love for Hebrew implied a love for the Hebrews of old, patriarchs and prophets, heroic judges and Maccabean warriors, but this love did not extend to contemporary, living Jews. These were not welcome in Puritan New England and when on rare occasions a Jew did find his way to Massachusetts, zealous efforts were made to convert him to Christianity.

Cotton Mather's *Diary* was replete with references to his efforts in this direction. Often he expressed the hope that it might be vouchsafed him during his years on earth to bring a Jew within the Christian fold. A typical expression of this missionary yearning was his prayer of July 18, 1696: "This day, from the dust, where I lay prostrate, before the Lord, I lifted my cries: For the conversion of the Jewish Nation, and for my own having the happiness, at some time or other, to baptize a Jew, that should by my ministry, be brought home unto the Lord." ⁷

Three years later Cotton Mather published *The Faith of the Fathers*, dedicating this pamphlet to the Jewish Nation. He implored the Jews to see the error of their ways, not to remain unregenerate, but to accept the only true, complete Jewish religion as developed by Jesus. In his *Diary*, he wrote on April 9, 1699: "This week, I attempted a further service to the name of the Lord. . . . I prefaced the Catechism with an address to the Jewish Nation, telling them in some lively terms, that if they would but return to the faith of the Old Testament, and believe with their own Ancient and blessed Patriarchs, this was all that we desired of them or for them. I gave this book to the Printer and it was immediately published. Its title is *The Faith of the Fathers*." ⁸

⁷ Lee M. Friedman, "Cotton Mather and the Jews," *American Jewish Historical Society Publications*, XXVI (1918), 202.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

After the appearance of this publication, he noted in his *Diary* under May 21, 1699: "I have advice from Heaven—Yea, more than this; That I shall shortly see some Harvest of my Prayers and Pains, and the Jewish Nation also." ⁹ When this hope was not fulfilled, he published a second tract in 1701, entitled *American Tears upon the Ruins of the Greek Churches*, in which he called attention to the conversion in London of a Jew, Shalome Ben Shalomoh. His own efforts were constantly being frustrated by the stubbornness of the stiff-necked Jews. He was especially concerned with a Jew who was permitted to trade in Massachusetts and who seemed to be a likely object for conversion. Of this Jew, for whom he prayed throughout the night of July 4 to July 5, 1713, he made the following diary-entry: "Vigil-prayer. For the conversion of the poor Jew, who is this Day returned once more unto New England, and who has now for 19 years together been the Subject of our Cares and Hopes and Prayers." ¹⁰ For another month he continued to pray for this Jew and then he gave up, or else the Jew failed to show up.

When news reached Cotton Mather of the conversion of three Jewish children in Berlin, who cast off their parents and embraced Christianity despite discouragement from the Protestant minister, he expressed the hope in the pamphlet *Faith Encouraged*, 1718, that the example of these daughters of Isaac Veits, ranging in age from eight to twelve, would be an inspiring model to be followed by others. "If but one Soul of all that Beloved People should be found, and reached and touched, by the Things to be now laid before them, it will be well worth while the Pains of these Expostulations. It may be, the same Spirit, who wrought upon the Babes at Berlin, will fall upon some of that Beloved People, while they have

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

these Words before them. We will prophesy over these Dry Bones, and see what the Spirit of Life will do upon them!"¹¹

In this zeal for saving Jews for Christianity, Cotton Mather was but following in the footsteps of his father Increase Mather, who as early as 1669 had collected a group of sermons dealing with the conversion of the Israelitish Nation in a tract entitled *Mystery of Israel's Salvation*. There Increase Mather tried to prove that all the descendants of the twelve tribes would yet be saved; he speculated as to when this would happen; he explained why this must come about; and he explained that the kind of salvation the tribes of Israel would partake of would be glorious and wonderful, spiritual and temporal. In 1709, he reiterated his belief in the inevitability of this development in his *Dissertation Concerning the Future Conversion of the Jewish Nation*.

If all twelve tribes were to accept Christianity so that the Messianic age might dawn, then the descendants of the missing ten tribes had to be found and the descendants of the other two tribes convinced of the truth of the New Testament. A search must, therefore, be made for the ten tribes at the same time as the teaching of Jesus was brought to the professing Jews. To many Puritans, the evidence was irrefutable that the North American Indians were the offspring of the dispersed of Israel. Thomas Cromwell, a rich buccaneer, who died in Boston in 1646, assured the Governor of Massachusetts Thomas Dudley that he had himself witnessed Indians to the south being circumcized. Others claimed that the word Hallelujah could be discerned in the chanting of Canadian Indians. The New England Indians were said to share with the Israelites the custom of the separation of the women on certain occasions. John Eliot, who lived among the Algonquins, claimed that these Indians spoke in parables just as the Israelites had done in Biblical days; Indians anointed

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

their heads; Indians delighted in celebrating victories by dancing; Indians computed time by nights and months; Indians gave dowries for wives; Indians chanted loud dirges for their dead; Indians disliked swine.¹² Was this not evidence enough of the Israelitish origin of the Indians?

Samuel Sewall (1652-1730), who was Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Bay Colony from 1718 to 1728, befriended the Indians because he believed them to be part of God's anointed people; he had scruples as to whether a declaration of war against them was just or prudent. "He was a commissioner from the corporation for propagating the gospel among them, and with his own substance built them a synagogue and did many other charitable acts."¹³

In a letter of 1686, Sewall wrote: "Dr. Thorowgood writ a treatise about thirty years ago entitled *Jews in America*, showing Americans to be Abraham's Posterity. If so, the day of their Espousals will make all the Christian world glad, and the rich among the people will desire their favor. How advantageous then and seasonable would it be by a holy anticipation to desire favor of God for them; especially seeing 'tis hoped the set time to favor Zion is very near come."¹⁴

Anne Bradstreet (1612?-1672), the earliest woman poet in America, daughter of one governor of Massachusetts and wife of another, speculated in her poetic epic *The Four Monarchies* as to whether the descendants of the lost Ten Tribes were to be sought among the Indians of the East or the Indians of the West, but of one fact she was certain: "yet know we this, they shall return and Zion see with bliss."¹⁵

William Penn believed that within his province of Penn-

¹² Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, Hartford, 1855, I, 560.

¹³ Thomas Hutchinson, *History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay*, Cambridge, Mass., 1936, II, 203.

¹⁴ Samuel Sewall, *Letter-Book*, Massachusetts Historical Society Collection, Boston, 1886, I, 22.

¹⁵ Anne Bradstreet, *Works*, Charleston, S.C., 1867, p. 196.