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Michael Alexander: Jazz Age Jews

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INTRODUCTION

BY THE 1920s a new generation of Jewish children had grown up in America. Many had migrated from Eastern Europe in the great transatlantic waves of 1882, 1891, 1904, and after. Others, though born in the United States, had immigrant parents. Either way, their fathers and mothers had suffered hunger, humiliation, and pogroms in Europe, but this was not the children's experience. Generally they went to American public schools and colleges, found white-collar jobs, escaped the urban ghettos of first settlement for greener places, and entered the middle class. Along the way they built Jewish neighborhoods with their own religious schools and community centers. They established thriving Jewish businesses and even entire industries. They formed a tangible voting block and helped shape public opinion and policy. They also contributed substantially to American cultural production, from popular entertainment to academia. In short, these children were making it in America. Moreso, they were participating in a host society as their ancestors in Galicia, Romania, or the Russian Pale never had.¹

For these Jews in America, in any way calculable by socioeconomic statistics, five hundred years of alienation had ended. At least so it would seem. Yet as this generation took its place among other middle-class groups in American society, some of its members displayed a peculiar behavior that did not correspond to their new social positions: They acted as though they were increasingly marginalized. What is more, many identified themselves with less fortunate individuals and groups, people who remained in America's economic, political, and cultural margins. Jews did this by imitating, defending, and actually participating in the group life of marginalized Americans. I call this behavior *outsider identification*, and it is a paradox in the psychology of American Jewry. As Jews moved up, they identified down. Addressing the origins, influences, and consequences of this exceptional Jewish liberalism is the focus of this book.²

INTRODUCTION

I explore the paradox of outsider identification through three titanic events—the Black Sox scandal, the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti, and the release of the first talkie, *The Jazz Singer*. Though these events are linked by their close company in the ocean of headlines, song refrains, and movie reels by which Americans knew the Jazz Age, they are even more closely connected by the public identification with marginalized Americans made by three children of the great Jewish migration. More important, the wider Jewish community agreed with these children and celebrated them.

Arnold Rothstein, gangster and alleged fixer of the 1919 World Series, is our first subject. While most Jews entered the worlds of law, medicine and pharmacy, dentistry, finance and accounting, social work, education, fashion, and entertainment—all legitimate and respectable industries—some, such as Rothstein, charted an alternate path. They invented the modern business of gambling and rationalized the structure of modern organized crime. Professional gambling was illegal, and worse, it carried a nasty social taint. Yet some Jews chose to run that business despite the other, legitimate choices newly and increasingly available to them. Of course numerous Americans, immigrants and not, participated in illicit behavior in the 1920s. What is remarkable is not only the prominence of Jews in gambling and organized crime, but their warm-hearted reception by many of their law-abiding fellow Jews. Why did upstanding Jewish citizens defend their brethren for being gamblers, even while they themselves tried to forge trusting relationships with gentiles in the legitimate business world?

Next comes politics. Felix Frankfurter, immigrant to the Lower East Side of New York City, had risen about as high in the American aristocracy as anyone could. He was full professor of law at Harvard—and had been since he was thirty-one—and had had the ear of every liberal president since Theodore Roosevelt. He was the closest of friends with both Justice Brandeis and Justice Holmes of the U.S. Supreme Court. Nevertheless, Frankfurter did something that Harvard professors just did not do. He defended two convicted murderers, the anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti, in the face of evidence even Justice Holmes considered ample to justify the convictions. Frankfurter argued that the judge and jury could not have adjudicated fairly because an atmosphere of racial and political prejudice pervading

INTRODUCTION

America during the Red Scare of 1920 had created a condition of regular judicial bias in Massachusetts. While this kind of argument is commonplace today, then it was not. Indeed, Frankfurter may have been the first to make it. Meanwhile, every public voice of the Jewish community supported Frankfurter's position, while none upheld the view of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, that the two anarchists had been fairly convicted. The case of Sacco and Vanzetti divided America but not American Jews. Like no other ethnic group, why did Jews categorically take as their own cause two Italian anarchists?

The third case considers the career of Al Jolson, jazz singer and blackface entertainer. At a time when African-American migration was dividing northern American cities, and as the white middle class defined itself against this new presence, Jews became fascinated by African-American culture or at least their own version of it. On Broadway, along Tin Pan Alley, and in Hollywood they showed off their new attraction and proclaimed themselves to be, if anywhere in the conflict between black and white, decidedly on the side of American blacks. As a group not widely accepted as white themselves, why did Jews take this risky position?

Each case describes an episode in a long career of self-marginalization on the part of children of the great migration, each climaxes in a famous display of outsider identification, and each culminates in epidemic expressions of approval of that behavior by much of the Jewish community. Together, they cover three sociological realms—economics, politics, and culture—in which Jews were making it in America but nevertheless were identifying with those who were not.³

From where did this proclivity for self-marginalization and outsider identification come? Perhaps we should consult the religion, culture, and worldview of Jews as they lived in Eastern Europe for the roots of outsider behavior in America. After all, Jewish Americans were not created *ex nihilo*.

BY THE time of their great migration to America, Jews had lived in Eastern Europe for half a millennium. For most of that time they had been estranged from native society. Take, for example, the Russian case. According to Eli Lederhendler, scholar of Eastern Euro-

INTRODUCTION

pean Jewry, 95 percent of the Russian and formerly Polish Jewry at the turn of the century lived in the Pale of Settlement, the westernmost area of Russia between the Baltic and Black seas in which Jews were legally bound to reside. Non-Jewish Russians made up less than 5 percent of the Pale's urban population. In 1897, 96.5 percent of Russian Jews stated that their mother tongue was Yiddish. In 1898, 54 percent of all Jewish children in the empire attended traditional Jewish elementary schools rather than Russian schools. A separate Jewish social order existed within the confines of the Pale. Jews were alienated from Russia with respect to language, culture, religion, economy, education, geography, demography, and citizenship.⁴

The situation of Jews in Russia was typical of Eastern Jews generally. To explain their systemic alienation from host societies, Jews turned to their sacred texts. They invoked the Exodus account of Jewish slavery to explain how a wandering nation—a people in exile—would inherit the promise of the covenant. As Jews had been enslaved in Egypt, so they were exiled in Europe. As the Israelites had returned home with the commandments, so the current keepers of God's covenant would also be returned home. Through the doctrines of exile and covenant, Jews told themselves that humiliation and alienation were signs of being God's chosen people.

Exile and covenant became core components of Ashkenazic (Central and Eastern European) Jewish culture. According to Jacob Katz, historian of European Jewry, the twin concepts were “embodied in and permeated all the primary sources on which Jewish education was founded. They were not only formulated in words, but also expressed in ceremonial performed both by the individual and by the congregation.” In time, Jews came even to embrace their places on the margins of host societies to prove their special status. Jewish communities would sometimes institute their own social policies of “exclusiveness and tolerance” for the surrounding communities among which they lived, and circumscribe how they interacted with the gentile world by cultivating economic, political, and cultural models of “self-conscious distinctiveness.”⁵

So soundly did Jewish communities mark themselves off from their neighbors, both theologically and socially, and so thoroughly did their neighbors return the exclusion, that Jewish identity fused with out-

sider status. In turn, Jewish identity became threatened by perceived social integration. To halt such integration, Jewish communities revitalized their social distinctions from time to time, *intentionally* impairing their economic, political, and cultural relations with gentiles.⁶ This is rather similar to what happened in the cases of Rothstein, Frankfurter, and Jolson, who marked themselves off from American society and were celebrated by their Jewish peers for doing so.

But Europe—particularly Eastern Europe—differed greatly from America. In late-nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, such traditional institutions of Jewish authority as the rabbinate and *kehilla* were being destroyed by antisemitic policies of the tsars. As the agrarian order of Eastern Europe slouched in the face of the emerging industrial economy of the West, Eastern governments increasingly blamed their misfortune on the “alien” Jews who lived among them. This oppression devastated institutional aspects of Jewish life. Nevertheless, the same official oppression also unwittingly helped maintain Jewish identity. Many Jews remained within their Jewish communities, not for religious reasons, but because the policies of oppression included segregation. Thus the definition of Jews as outsiders and aliens was reinforced.

As they were in Eastern Europe, Jewish institutions of authority were weak in America. It was not government oppression, however, but religious freedom that caused the erosion. The United States had no official policy of segregation concerning Jews. Conversely, it refrained from endorsing a Jewish church, or any church for that matter. To the government, naturalized Jews were simply citizens, not to be distinguished from other Americans. Jewish religious institutions were allowed to thrive or dissolve by the will of the Jewish population alone, without the intervention of government. The American separation of church and state allowed the Jews who came during the great wave of immigration around the turn of the twentieth century to integrate into American society in one short generation. But religious liberty and social acceptance also had drawbacks, which amounted to a double blow against traditional Jewish life: the absence of strong, entrenched institutions of Jewish authority, and the lack of governmental policies of segregation and oppression. What, then, remained to define Jewish identity?

INTRODUCTION

Social acceptance and success in America threatened the status of Jews as outsiders; therefore, Jewish identity was also threatened. At this moment, in the 1920s, while the descendents of the Eastern European migration were finally moving into the mainstream of a host society, they began to identify down. In America, when Jews were not being marginalized, they identified with those who were. Explicitly, the larger community of Jews linked the outsider identification of people like Rothstein, Jolson, and Frankfurter to traditional Jewish identity by *invoking the language of exile* to explain, and finally to praise, their behavior. Thus Jews met the obligation of their self-definition as an exiled people. With the help of outsider identification, at least one foundation of Jewish identity survived in America.

AMERICAN Jews had not always thought this way. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century migrations from Western Europe had also brought Jews to America. Unlike children of the great Eastern European migrations, descendents of these earlier immigrants tended more readily to adopt the social views of the American establishment and of the communities in which they settled. During the Civil War, for instance, Jewish opinion was split according to locale, with Southern Jews (Confederate Secretary of State Judah P. Benjamin among them) supporting the secessionists, and Northern Jews favoring abolition. Ordinarily, the earlier Jewish immigrants tried to emulate the social graces of America's old guard; indeed, even their behavior in synagogue reflected nuances of Protestant worship. When Western European Jews in America acted philanthropically, as they often did, the pattern of their charity was not to identify themselves with the downtrodden but rather to teach poorer peoples to conform to mainstream American conduct, just as they had.

That is to say, when earlier waves of immigrant Jews had come to America they identified up, not down. The routine of upward conformity paralleled Jewish behavior in Western Europe where, unlike Eastern Europe, throughout the nineteenth century Jewry had been emancipated and permitted to join host societies. Jewish acceptance in Western Europe entailed a distressing compromise, however, for the emancipation of Jews as individuals in the body politic meant that Jewish culture, traditionally organized around group life, diminished.

With political emancipation in Western Europe, Jews were expected to quit their separate Jewish nation and conform to the manners and worldview of the society-at-large. Western Jews accepted the condition attached to political equality and brought it with them to America. Even in America, where Jewish emancipation was unqualified, descendents of Western European Jewry still shunned ethnic markers of Jewish difference and looked to mainstream society to define their conduct.⁷

Yet at the turn of the twentieth century the last large wave of Jewish immigrants did not come predominantly from emancipated lands; neither did it bring traditions of acculturation and conformity. Thus the children of the great migration saw little conflict between their Americanization and Jewish group life. Even those who chose to eschew religious practice in America felt no need to lessen other ties to their people.⁸ For Arnold Rothstein, Felix Frankfurter, and Al Jolson, ethnic identity and outsider identification comfortably replaced observance of the Law. For those who saw these three secular Jews as Jewish heroes, models, and exemplars of right Jewish behavior in America, ethnicity and outsider identification complemented religious observance. Neither being Jewish nor being marginalized excluded one from being American, they thought. Rather, they imagined that being marginalized was the most American way to be.

In this sense the stories of Rothstein, Frankfurter, and Jolson are about Americanization. Less about assimilation or the desire to acculturate, the behaviors of these three men and the reactions to them by the bulk of American Jewry are about marking oneself as different—by using a language familiar from centuries of being different—and imagining that you are a better American for doing so.⁹

THESE new American Jews from Eastern Europe, outnumbering the descendents of all previous Jewish migrations to America nearly nine to one, in effect became American Jewry. Within a generation their perspective of Americanization-through-difference trickled through the alleys of America's ghettos, along the parkways of second settlement, and finally into broad Jewish-American consciousness. Often the attitude of Jewish difference came to persuade the descendents of earlier Western European migrations as well, as happened

INTRODUCTION

in the case of American Zionism (discussed in chapter 9). American Jewish identity had been turned on its head. Increasingly, as Jews found themselves succeeding in the American social order and thereby wandering from an identity based on centuries of marginalization, they identified with outsiders to even the balance. As gambling, radical politics, and black music grew chic among the smartest, jazziest cliques, even gentile Americans could participate in the course of difference. In the grand, decade-long showdown between the old and the new that characterized the Jazz Age, descendants of the great Jewish migration found themselves in the middle of the fray. Their tendency to identify themselves with the causes of outsiders had flung them there.

Still, it is sensible to consider the role of antisemitism in helping to forge outsider identification. Indeed, antisemitism did surge in the jazz age, and at many levels of American society. As the Ku Klux Klan rode strongly for the first time in fifty years and Henry Ford appealed to a burgeoning popular spirit of antisemitism in the *Dearborn Independent*, Eleanor Roosevelt expressed her race feelings, privately, after her husband, Franklin Roosevelt, invited Felix Frankfurter home to lunch in 1918. “An interesting little man,” Eleanor wrote of her guest, “but very jew.” Her sentiment was typical of an age some have described as tribal and others have recognized as systemically antisemitic, anti-Catholic, and anti-immigrant. Certain business and law firms remained closed to Jews; certain positions in government could not be reached; certain neighborhoods were simply inaccessible. Undoubtedly, this affected Jewish behavior.¹⁰

Nevertheless, Jews were not the only group to face discrimination. But they were the only group that, as a group, identified with people more marginalized than themselves. The same cannot be said of Italians, Irish, or African-Americans.¹¹ Nor can these associations be described principally as strategic alliances from which Jews benefited. When Jews took the side of ethnic gangsters, anarchists, and African-Americans, they thwarted their own upward mobility. Why? This book posits that their theological belief in perpetual Jewish difference, paired with their understanding of Jewish history as the history of exile—both of which their culture and real social circum-

INTRODUCTION

stances had engrained in them for centuries—gave them ample reason for doing so.

Here, then, are three Jewish stories behind three larger American ones. The events described in these pages were the stuff of conversation and controversy throughout America. Their Jewish fomenters were sometimes hated, sometimes loved, often imitated and caricatured, but they were not ignored. Their deeds helped shape the consciousness of the entire nation and the identity of their own people. More important, though, these Jews stand for something else. The stories of Rothstein, Frankfurter, and Jolson are about making it but thinking you haven't. They are about being there but believing you are held back. My foremost aim, then, is to explore an antilogy of success in America, among Jews primarily but perhaps also among those other Americans who, despite evidence of their own success, understand themselves best by identifying with those who have least.

With this in mind, let us turn to the story of Arnold Rothstein.