Ambivalent Embrace: Jewish Upward Mobility in Postwar America
Synopsis

This new cultural history of Jewish life and identity in the United States after World War II focuses on the process of upward mobility. Rachel Kranson challenges the common notion that most American Jews unambivalently celebrated their generally strong growth in economic status and social acceptance during the booming postwar era. In fact, a significant number of Jewish religious, artistic, and intellectual leaders worried about the ascent of large numbers of Jews into the American middle class. Kranson reveals that many Jews were deeply concerned that their lives—affected by rapidly changing political pressures, gender roles, and religious practices—were becoming dangerously disconnected from authentic Jewish values. She uncovers how Jewish leaders delivered jeremiads that warned affluent Jews of hypocrisy and associated "good" Jews with poverty, even at times romanticizing life in America's immigrant slums and Europe's impoverished shtetls. Jewish leaders, while not trying to hinder economic development, thus cemented an ongoing identification with the Jewish heritage of poverty and marginality as a crucial element in an American Jewish ethos.
Ambivalent Embrace
Jewish Upward Mobility in Postwar America
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For Jamie, Sasha, and Ezra

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Introduction

In a 1954 article for Commentary magazine, Sylvia Rothchild, writing under the pseudonym Evelyn Rossman, expressed her dissatisfaction with synagogue services in postwar America. “If the service reminded me of the little shul [synagogue] my father went to, I was sad because I remembered how shabby and poor it was,” she complained. “If I found a
wealthy Conservative or Reform temple I sat there like a stranger thinking how insincere and hypocritical it all was. Weren't all good Jews supposed to be poor?" Sylvia Rothchild herself represented one of the many American Jews who, by the postwar period, had left behind economically unstable childhoods and entered the swelling ranks of America's middle class. Born on January 4, 1923, to Yiddish-speaking immigrants from Romania, she grew up in the densely Jewish neighborhood of Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Before the birth of her first child in 1948, she and her husband, chemist Seymour Rothchild, moved to a spacious, single-family home in Sharon, Massachusetts, an affluent suburb of Boston. There, she witnessed the establishment of her adopted town's synagogues and religious schools, all funded by the growing group of upwardly mobile Jews who chose to live in leafy, suburban Sharon instead of the urban enclaves in which they had been raised. By 1951, Rothchild started publishing essays and short stories in American Jewish periodicals such as Commentary, Hadassah, and Moment, and her first novel, Sunshine and Salt, appeared in 1964. Uneasiness about her new life among the middle class surfaced as a prominent theme throughout her work. While she acknowledged the appeal of the space, greenery, and quiet she had never known growing up in the city, she also suffered an acute sense of loss over the vibrant intellectualism and sincere religiosity that she believed her new, well-heeled neighbors lacked. Author Sylvia Rothchild. Used with permission from Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University Archives. Rothchild was far from alone in her critical assessment of the new, Jewish, middle class. As Rothchild pondered the possibility that poverty might be a necessary component of being a “good Jew,” she joined a chorus of American Jewish commentators who expressed misgivings over the consequences of Jewish upward mobility in the two decades following World War II. Ambivalent Embrace traces these concerns over Jewish upward mobility, challenging the notion that American Jews welcomed their postwar economic rise without reservation or hesitation. On the contrary, the subjects of this study continued to identify with the Jewish history of poverty, even as their fortunes grew. Because they understood economic and social marginality as something integral to the Jewish experience, they could not wholeheartedly celebrate American Jews’ ascent into the middle class. Jewish anxieties over upward mobility, I argue, emerged out of this dissonance between the financial and social successes of midcentury American Jews and their deeply felt histories of exclusion and want. Despite widespread worries over the effects of upward mobility, Jewish life seemed to thrive in the economic boom following the Second World War. Newly prosperous American Jews used their growing resources to transform Jewish culture and practice, creating new modes of ritual and socialization that harmonized with their middle-class standing. They exhibited their devotion to Judaism and Jewish communal life by constructing a spate of up-to-date, modern synagogues. And the unprecedented numbers of Jewish children being educated in religious schools and summer camps spoke of their ongoing commitment to a vibrant American Jewish culture. Postwar American Jews also dared to build their new cultural and religious infrastructure on the suburban fringe of America’s cities, where Jews generally did not constitute the majority of residents. Their willingness to invest in communities with a Christian majority demonstrated the new social acceptance that they had achieved along with their financial gains. While most of these suburban Jews would continue to socialize primarily with coreligionists, and “gentlemen’s agreements” still restricted their residence in some of the toniest developments, they nonetheless felt confident enough to branch out of ethnic enclaves. Their acceptance as racial whites, coupled with their rising finances, offered them a relatively smooth entry into areas that were once Protestant strongholds. While newfound affluence and acceptance seemed to offer American Jews security and opportunities for innovation, it also
tested the ways in which they constructed their Jewish identities and conceived of their differences from other Americans. After all, much of American Jewish life before the postwar years had been shaped by exclusion and economic instability. The distinctive political leanings of American Jews, their religious practices, and their attitudes toward gender had all been forged in an atmosphere of social and economic uncertainty. The rapid upward mobility of the postwar years threatened to undermine Jewish distinctiveness in all of these areas. These transformations led to the idea, expressed most forcefully by the religious, intellectual, and cultural leadership of American Jewry, that the ostensible blessing of prosperity presented a dire threat to the integrity and viability of American Jewish culture. The words of Rabbi Harold Saperstein, the spiritual leader of Temple Emanu-El in Lynbrook, New York, encapsulated the mind-set of many of his contemporaries when he declared that “the great test of Jewish life in our time is whether it can survive in the affluent society.”

As postwar American Jews adapted to lives of prosperity, their leaders came to suspect that an authentic Jewish life could thrive only in an environment of scarcity. The history of Jewish poverty loomed large in their writings, and idealized images of economically insecure Jews living richly satisfying Jewish lives provided the measure against which middle-class Jews invariably fell short. For many of those American Jews who had grown up in densely Jewish, urban neighborhoods, the affluent, suburban Jewish communities of the postwar years seemed to pale in comparison to the politically charged, Yiddish-speaking enclaves of their childhoods, which they often recalled through a rosy, nostalgic lens. They looked even less like the impoverished Eastern European shtetlach that, in the imagination of the thousands of American Jews who wept at the 1964 Broadway production of Fiddler on the Roof, served as an idealized setting for a profound and genuine Jewish religiosity. Finally, taking their cues from popular novels such as Leon Uris's Exodus, many midcentury American Jews had also come to imagine a nascent state of Israel populated by heroic idealists who eschewed financial gain in order to pursue the dream of Jewish autonomy. In contrast to these romanticized sites of Jewish vitality, some American Jews, and particularly the Jewish leadership, began to view middle-class, Jewish life in postwar America as tragically complacent, superficial, and incapable of nurturing future generations of committed Jews.

The Jewish rise into the middle class also destabilized worldviews fostered by histories of poverty and exclusion. Jewish activists who had formerly taken their status as oppressed outsiders for granted now had to forge political identities that better reflected their privileges. Religious leaders struggled to engage constituents who, they suspected, joined synagogues largely to increase their social standing in middle-class suburbs that linked respectability with religious affiliation. Additionally, the gender ideologies adopted by Jews as they entered the American middle class often seemed limiting to those who had been raised in a working-class milieu that upheld more expansive conceptions of appropriate masculinity and femininity. As upward mobility forced American Jews to reimagine their political affiliations, religious expressions, and gender ideologies, Jewish leaders questioned whether an authentic Jewish culture could emerge out of this process of transformation and negotiation. Those postwar Jews who worried about the authenticity of the Jewish middle class unwittingly participated in a discourse with a history that dated back to eighteenth-century romanticism. Romantic nationalists such as German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder, for instance, presumed that each nation possessed its own unique, timeless genius and inimitable ways of functioning in the world. They feared, however, that nation-states would lose their cultural authenticity as their cities became more cosmopolitan, modern, and affluent, and their people began to borrow the customs and habits of other nations. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Herder viewed the diversity, complexity, and wealth of modern life as evidence of cultural degradation
and loss. At the same time, he idealized the lives of the isolated, poor, and rural “volk” who, to his mind, continued to uphold their pure and authentic national traditions and to protect them from alien influences. Herder’s understanding of cultural authenticity resonated well into the twentieth century. Indeed, the assumption among my postwar American Jewish subjects that a genuine Jewish life could be found only in isolated and impoverished Jewish communities, and their concern that increased acculturation and financial resources would somehow dilute or degrade Jewish civilization, hearkens back quite directly to romantic notions of cultural authenticity and the corrupting nature of a diverse and wealthy modern world.

Recent thinkers have deconstructed the notion of authenticity, refusing to view it as an objective entity that can be found, traced, lost, or corrupted. Rather, they understand authenticity as a set of collective expectations regarding how people ought to behave, how events ought to transpire, and how rituals ought to be performed. Scholars like Dean MacCannell, Eric Hobsbawm, and Benedict Anderson have traced the ways in which various institutions, from nation-states to tourist attractions, invented and manufactured the images and customs that have come to feel authentic to those who encounter them. They argue that events, rituals, and behaviors feel authentic when they are able to live up to people’s preconceived notions of how they ought to happen, and not because they tap into an essential, and unchanging, cultural truth.

Though I, too, am deeply suspicious of the notion of authenticity, I nonetheless take postwar Jews’ yearning for it quite seriously. The customs and values that my subjects sought to protect may well have been collective fictions about the essential nature of Jewish identity. Still, they felt absolutely real, meaningful, and important to those who upheld them. Their desire for a genuine Jewish life shows how highly they valued their distinctive heritage, however they understood it, and uncovers their distrust of any influence, even one as appealing as upward mobility, that seemed to threaten it. Moreover, their laments over the loss of Jewish culture during a moment of rapid economic change were in themselves productive, forcing them to conceive of new, albeit ambivalent, ways of expressing their Jewish difference in a middle-class environment. How American Jewish leaders articulated their longing for authenticity, then, can reveal much about their hopes, fears, and concerns as they moved up the economic ladder.

Popular, ugly stereotypes of Jews as preternaturally good with money heightened the stakes of these anxieties surrounding Jewish upward mobility. Denigrating Jews as exceptionally money-hungry, a convention that dated back to medieval European antipathy against Jewish moneylenders, emerged as a common anti-Jewish trope in the American context as well. While American antisemitism in all its forms dropped markedly during the postwar years, negative portrayals of Jewish greed continued to circulate, and to sting. Both implicitly and explicitly, those American Jews who expressed ambivalence over their newfound affluence engaged with the long-standing tendency to depict Jews as acquisitive and grasping. Certainly, critiquing the foibles of the Jewish middle class served as a means by which Jewish leaders sought to police the behavior of their constituents so as not to aggravate antisemitic assumptions of Jewish avarice. But more importantly, as they romanticized the history of Jewish poverty, these leaders also pushed back against stereotypes of Jewish greed by denying the existence of materialism in an authentic Jewish culture.

The Jewish leaders who composed these critiques of affluence responded not only to the antisemitic tropes that circulated in the United States during the postwar years but also to the calamitous history of European antisemitism. While the preservation of an authentic Jewish culture in its encounter with a prosperous American society had long been a concern for American Jewish leaders, the genocide of European Jews during the Second World War intensified this impulse. After the vibrant Jewish communities of Europe had been annihilated in the Holocaust, they came to
believe that the enormous responsibility of sustaining Jewish life and providing leadership for the rest of the Jewish world rested on their shoulders. Historian and Jewish educator Israel Goldberg, writing under the pen name Rufus Learsi, declared in his 1954 history of American Jewry that the Jewish population of America had become “the most influential and also the largest in the world. The war made it a dominant factor in the destiny of the Jewish people as a whole.” Many of the leaders who condemned the habits of middle-class Jews considered it an unthinkable tragedy that, even after the destruction of Jewish life in Europe, the privileged Jews who lived in the United States seemed ready to give up crucial elements of their heritage in exchange for the comforts of affluence. While upward mobility may have provided American Jews with opportunities for innovation and transformation, knowledge of the destruction of Jewish life in Europe fostered a particularly strong desire for cultural preservation. In the years after World War II, the transformative power of economic gain came into stark conflict with the impossible desire to uphold the Jewish world that had existed before the Holocaust.13To many of the subjects of this postwar study, thinking of Europe as the doomed wellspring of authentic Jewish culture hinged on family histories of migration. Ambivalent Embrace traces the descendants of the 2.5 million Jews who, like the parents of Sylvia Rothchild, had immigrated to America from Eastern Europe between 1870 and 1924, stopping only once the Johnson-Reed Act reduced the flow of Jewish migrants to a trickle. These impoverished Jewish immigrants made their homes in urban slums throughout the United States, with most settling in New York City. They eked out a living on the margins of the American economy, through factory work, taking extra boarders into their already cramped quarters, or engaging in small-scale retail and wholesale trade. These turn-of-the-century Jewish immigrants far outnumbered the approximately 200,000 Jews from Central Europe—commonly, but mistakenly, referred to as “German” Jews, since Germany did not become a state until 1871—who had come to America in the middle of the nineteenth century. While many of these Jews from Central Europe had already climbed into the middle class by the turn of the twentieth century, the influx of struggling, new Jewish immigrants ensured that most of America's Jews remained mired in poverty. As early as the economic boom of the 1920s, the financial situation of American Jews started to improve. Jewish laborers in the garment industry benefited from the strong unions they helped to create, and small, Jewish-owned businesses flourished. Higher incomes enabled them to move from their original immigrant slums to more desirable urban neighborhoods, which struck them as quite fine with their wide, clean streets and solid housing stock. The gracious avenues of these new, densely Jewish enclaves, where residents chatted easily in both Yiddish and English and enjoyed pickles and pastrami in their local delicatessens, made them feel, in the words of historian Deborah Dash Moore, “at home in America.”14While the depression of the 1930s slowed their economic growth, American Jews nonetheless moved gradually toward greater financial stability in the first half of the twentieth century. Despite continued discrimination against Jews in many fields of professional employment and the quotas that restricted Jewish students from attending prestigious educational institutions, their increasing resources allowed them to improve their standard of living and provide the next generation with educational opportunities and commercial contacts.15In fact, quite a few Jewish writers and filmmakers were already expressing their concerns over Jewish upward mobility in the early years of the twentieth century. From films like The Jazz Singer (1927) to books like Abraham Cahan's The Rise of David Levinsky (1917), Anzia Yezierska’s Salome of the Tenements (1923), Samuel Ornitz’s Haunch, Paunch and Jowl (1923), and Jerome Weidman’s I Can Get It for You Wholesale (1937), popular narratives depicted protagonists who abandoned the poor Jewish masses, often losing—at the very least
—their moral compass in the quest for upward mobility. By the postwar years, however, it seemed to many Jewish leaders that there were no longer any poor Jewish masses left to abandon, at least not in the United States. The financial mobility of America's Jews spiked, dwarfing the relatively modest economic successes of the early twentieth century and affecting much larger swathes of the American Jewish population. In the decades after World War II, Jewish clergy, writers, and intellectuals no longer worried about the exceptional Jews who “made it”; instead, they fretted over the integrity and viability of the entire American Jewish community. Born in America, and raised amid the uncertainty of the depression, the subjects of this study entered adulthood in the flush 1950s, where they prospered during a decade of economic growth that had transformed the lives of many Americans, especially those of European extraction. Like the other descendants of the approximately 12 million Southern and Eastern European immigrants who entered the United States between 1870 and 1924, these postwar Jews also benefited from the home loans and educational grants offered predominantly to white-skinned, male veterans of World War II through the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. These government programs, combined with the investments made by their own families earlier in the century, gave American Jewish men a secure base from which to participate in a flourishing economy. American Jews experienced a particularly rapid rate of upward mobility during the postwar decades, often outpacing Americans of other ethnic backgrounds. A survey of male college graduates in 1947, for instance, revealed that more Jews than non-Jews went on to become professionals, proprietors, managers, and officials, though fewer of their parents had enjoyed these high-status, lucrative occupations. And, after conducting studies in 1953 and 1955, the National Opinion Research Center found that salaries of American Jews had eclipsed those of other religious groups. During those years, Jewish households enjoyed a median family income of $5,954, while the average income of a Roman Catholic household fell at $4,340 and Protestant households at $3,933. These quantitative measures of the income and occupations of Jewish men underlay, but cannot transparently explain, the middle-class identity claimed by so many American Jews during these years. After all, class identity is a notoriously slippery category that can hardly be dictated solely by a person's income, or, as Marx would have had it, by a person's relationship to the means of production. Labor historian Daniel Walkowitz's apt example of early twentieth-century, female social workers largely understood to be “middle class,” but who nonetheless earned salaries similar to, or lower than, contemporaneous male factory employees of the “working class,” offers a sense of some of the complexities involved in class identification. In the context of postwar America, middle-class identity operated most often as an articulation of how people perceived themselves or others in relation to what they viewed as an American “mainstream” defined not only in terms of income and occupation but also by such factors as gender norms, race, religion, consumer patterns, education, and geography. Indeed, it was not only the growing income of Jewish men that enabled American Jews to be so widely classified as “middle class” but also such factors as their racial identification, the decision of most married Jewish women to refrain from wage work, the new and widespread acknowledgment of Judaism as a legitimate American religion along with Protestantism and Catholicism, Jews' relatively high rates of educational attainment, and their suburban migration. While certainly constituted by categories such as gender and race, postwar Americans generally understood the concept of class differently in that they assumed that a person's class status was malleable, while they considered a person's gender and racial identity to be essential and permanent. The powerful, long-standing myth of the American Dream, defined by Jennifer Hochschild as “the promise that all Americans have a reasonable chance to achieve
success . . . through their own efforts," depended on the assumption that every American, regardless of background or creed, could raise their class status through determination and hard work. That this ideology ignored the very real obstacles that made it more difficult for some Americans to achieve prosperity than others, and in fact served to blame poor Americans, rather than an inequitable economic system, for their poverty, did little to diminish the significance of this myth in the eyes of many Americans throughout the twentieth century and beyond.21 The notion that American Jews could move up the economic ladder—and, moreover, that this mobility served as a prerequisite to their becoming fully American—became a source of tension for my subjects. They were uncertain that a genuine Jewish life, in any of its various political, religious, or cultural iterations, could be reconciled with this process of upward mobility. At the same time, however, they could not realistically expect Jews to forgo their opportunity to embrace the American Dream. As my subjects expressed their concerns over the economic rise of American Jews, they simultaneously participated in a widespread American discussion regarding the supposed perils of upward mobility. Midcentury prosperity led to a deluge of best-selling sociological studies and journalistic treatises that bemoaned the effects of wealth on the “American national character.” Works like David Riesman’s The Lonely Crowd (1950) and William H. Whyte’s The Organization Man (1957) argued that material abundance effectively destroyed the ethos of individualism that had once constituted the backbone of America’s greatness, and they portrayed the growth of middle-class suburbs as the physical manifestation of a conformist culture. In The Affluent Society (1958), John Kenneth Galbraith condemned the accumulation of private wealth that, he felt, had led to the impoverishment of America’s public infrastructure. And in The Feminine Mystique (1963), Betty Friedan leveled a forceful invective against a wealthy American society that had imprisoned its women into suburban homes she characterized as “comfortable concentration camps,” rendering them incapable of self-fulfillment. For these journalists and social scientists, growing prosperity had trapped Americans within the confines of a culturally bland and morally complacent middle class.22 Some of these writers, specifically David Riesman and Betty Friedan, came from Jewish backgrounds.23 While their Jewish heritage may have had a formative impact on their thinking and writing, and likely played a role in their tendency to link suburban conformity with their fears of totalitarianism, their work displayed little overt acknowledgment of the distinct concerns of upwardly mobile Jews. Friedan and Riesman, no less than Whyte and Galbraith, spoke for and about all middle-class, white Americans and did not directly contribute to the particularly Jewish conversation examined in this study. Rather, their discussions of postwar wealth provided a general framework of ideas that the members of many ethnic and religious subcultures would adapt to their specific circumstances.24 Christian leaders, for instance, participated in this postwar critique of affluence and related it to their particular theological and communal concerns. In 1961 religious sociologist Peter Berger’s The Noise of Solemn Assemblies accused American churches of sanctifying middle-class conformity and complacency, values that he believed to be at odds with true, Christian faith. Gibson Winter, then a professor of ethics and society at the University of Chicago’s Divinity School, penned The Suburban Captivity of the Churches in 1962. In this work, Winter accused suburban Protestant churches of retreating from their religious responsibility to ease urban poverty and suggested the idea of a “metropolitan church” that would simultaneously serve the suburban affluent and the urban poor. Catholics joined these Protestant thinkers in decrying the effects of postwar affluence in books like Andrew M. Greeley’s The Church and the Suburbs, which pondered the adjustments that American Catholicism would have to make as it transitioned away from being “the Church of the working class” and engaged a more
Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier also contributed to this wider conversation regarding the dangers of postwar wealth and considered the specific impact that it had on African Americans. Published in 1957, Frazier's Black Bourgeoisie condemned the behavior and the priorities of the new, black middle class. He charged that affluent black Americans spent both time and resources emulating the extravagant lifestyles of white Americans instead of providing leadership to the impoverished masses of the African American community. Like their intellectual counterparts who spoke on behalf of Catholic, Protestant, and black Americans, many American Jewish leaders absorbed the critiques of affluence that filtered through American society in the postwar years and built on those ideas as they created a distinctly Jewish conversation. Although critics like Riesman, Whyte, and Galbraith professed to speak on behalf of all white, middle-class Americans—a position that most American Jews, by the postwar era, had come to claim—the leaders of American Jewry insisted that upward mobility posed unique dangers to the survival of Jewish life in America. Their discussions referenced Jewish cultural symbols and interpreted the events of Jewish history to evince a specifically Jewish ambivalence toward postwar prosperity. The Jewish leaders who expressed ambivalence over Jewish upward mobility inhabited an array of positions within the American Jewish world. Some, like Sylvia Rothchild, expressed their concerns in the pages of magazines and novels. Most of the fiction and nonfiction writers profiled in this study found their readership within the Jewish community. Others, like Philip Roth and Herman Wouk, found much broader audiences, although they generally understood themselves, and were understood by others, to be writing from a distinctly Jewish perspective. Jewish intellectuals, academics, and scholars also participated in this conversation, publishing their views in the Jewish press, academic journals, and full-length books. Finally, American rabbis composed many of the critiques of affluence that circulated during the postwar years and voiced their trepidation from their pulpits, in the press, and in congregational newsletters. While the religious and intellectual leadership of postwar American Jewry had the most to say about the threat of Jewish affluence, the leaders who lamented Jewish upward mobility did not necessarily hold radically different views from the laypeople who hired them as rabbis, listened to their sermons, read their novels, and discussed their essays. Indeed, in certain ways, it is difficult to distinguish between the “leadership” and the “laity” of American Jews during the postwar years. Generally, both groups, though from economically modest upbringings, came to enjoy middle-class incomes after the Second World War. The same rabbis who lambasted opulent suburban synagogues often spearheaded the building drives that made their construction possible; and the writers who condemned Jewish life in the suburbs, such as Sylvia Rothchild, often lived there themselves. Rather than disgruntled elites lashing out at an ignorant public, the leaders who complained about Jewish upward mobility were very much a part of the communities they disparaged, and their writings contained a good measure of self-critique. Moreover, the leaders who lamented Jewish upward mobility also depended on newly affluent American Jews for their status and income. The laity voted to hire the rabbis who spoke out against the perils of wealth, and these rabbis collected middle-class salaries provided by their well-off constituents. Jewish intellectuals secured speaking engagements at synagogues and Jewish community centers, and the Jewish authors who savaged the Jewish middle class often depended on these same people to purchase their books. This situation reveals, at the very least, a Jewish laity willing to support the leaders who questioned the benefits of upward mobility. While this does not necessarily mean that people defined here as “leadership” and “laity” agreed with one another about the dangers of their economic rise, it points to a wide community of Jews who legitimated concerns over affluence through their institutional and financial backing. Relying primarily on the writings of the
leadership excludes many voices from this project. Not one denomination of American Judaism ordained women as rabbis during these years, effectively eliminating the opinions of women from one of the main sources of evidence on which this study relies. Furthermore, women proved far less likely than men to be hired as academics or accepted as intellectuals in the postwar era, further restricting their capacity to publicly express their views on upward mobility. While I pay close attention to the ways that all of my subjects understood gender and its effects, this study nonetheless makes a concerted effort to include sources written by women, and not only in the sections specifically devoted to issues of gender and gender roles. Geographic scope also limits this research. As it would have been impossible to read every single sermon and community newsletter produced in the twenty-year period that bounds the core of this study, I decided to restrict my local sources to those produced in the largest metropolitan areas that experienced rapid suburbanization in the postwar years. Therefore, in addition to going through the national Jewish press, I concentrated my local research on records that came out of Jewish communities in the New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago areas. So, while the conclusions of this study applied broadly to many American Jews during the postwar years, these issues may not have played out in quite the same way in places outside my areas of focus, such as small towns, small cities, or the South. They may also have been appreciably different in the sunbelt cities of Los Angeles and Miami, areas that did not have major Jewish communities until the postwar years and, therefore, were not destabilized by suburbanization to the same extent as the older urban centers were. Additionally, not all midcentury American Jews fit neatly into my historical narrative. Some Jews did not undergo a process of marked economic change in the decades after World War II. Elderly Jews who lacked younger family members to propel them into the middle class did not necessarily experience upward mobility in the postwar era. Neither did many of the single, divorced, or widowed Jewish women who did not have male partners to reap the high salaries offered predominantly to men during these years. Furthermore, while most postwar American Jews could trace their origins to the 2.5 million Jews from Eastern Europe who migrated between 1870 and 1924, not every Jewish family shared this background. This study does not reflect on the histories of American Jews whose families migrated to the United States earlier in the nineteenth century and had achieved middle-class status well before the postwar era, nor does it register the distinct concerns of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews and their responses to financial success. Finally, though they too saw upward mobility during the flush postwar years, my research does not separate out the experiences of Jews who immigrated to the United States just before or after World War II, such as the refugees from Hitler’s Germany, Holocaust survivors, the growing numbers of ultra-orthodox Jews, and later Jewish immigrants from Hungary, Poland, Cuba, and the Middle East. I look forward to future research that will include more of the diverse histories that made up American Jewry in the years after 1945. Finally, not all American Jews joined the chorus of ambivalence over their postwar financial success, and at times Jewish leaders applauded the Jewish move into the American middle class. In fact, public celebrations of Jewish contributions to America often painted a triumphant picture of upward mobility that contrasted sharply with the critiques of affluence that circulated primarily, although not entirely, among Jews themselves. For example, the 1954 Tercentennial celebration of Jewish settlement in America, which American Jews commemorated with a series of dinners, concerts, museum exhibits, and scholarly publications, extolled the achievements and integration of American Jews. In highlighting Jews’ successful “participation in every circle and corner of American life,” wrote Tercentenary chairman Ralph E. Samuel, the celebration offered evidence of “how a so-called minority group
can thrive in a climate of freedom and democracy.”27The 1954 Tercentennial provides only one example within a long history, dating back at least to the nineteenth century, of how American Jews publicly claimed a space for themselves as Americans and as Jews, stressing as they did so the fundamental complementarity of Jewish and American cultures. Indeed, several American Jewish scholars have studied the ways that American Jews, more or less successfully, proclaimed to the non-Jewish public that they were both fully American and also fully Jewish, and that these two identities enhanced one another.28This project uncovers the flipside to these declarations of mutual compatibility between American and Jewish values. When postwar American Jewish leaders articulated their fears over upward mobility in missives that were most often, though not always, directed at Jews themselves rather than at the wider American society, they created a tense, ambivalent discourse that questioned the success of the Jewish encounter with America. During the postwar period, these troubled conversations circulated contemporaneously with upbeat messages of a triumphant American-Jewish synthesis, revealing the many, sometimes conflicted, ways in which Jews understood their American experience. Relatively little of the work in American Jewish history has concentrated on the ways in which American Jews have expressed doubt or reservations about the American Dream of upward mobility. Most of the literature has focused on how American Jews effectively adjusted to American abundance, and, indeed, this approach has served scholars well. Some of the most groundbreaking studies of Jews in postwar America have showcased American Jews’ ability to build thriving institutions in their new, affluent communities, and this study builds on their insights.29While this approach to American Jewish history has been productive in many respects, focusing solely on the positive aspects of the Jewish adaptation to the American middle class often masks concerns that have long plagued American Jews. Within much of the historical literature on twentieth-century Jewish life, American Jews seem to be able to reinvent themselves as consuming Americans, and then middle-class Americans, without significant debate or discussion. If upward mobility has long been a catalyst for creativity and innovation within American Jewish communities, it has also spurred impassioned arguments over how to protect the integrity of Jewish life from its influence. Downplaying these concerns obscures some crucial reservations that Jews have had over their encounter with America and the value of the American Dream. While most historians have focused on American Jews’ constructive encounter with prosperity, not all scholars have had such a positive spin on the history of Jewish life in the years after World War II. Indeed, some have echoed the rhetoric of the postwar critics who condemned middle-class American Jewish culture as inauthentic and compromised. In his study of American Jews after World War II, for instance, historian Edward S. Shapiro posited an “inverse relationship between social mobility and Jewish identity,” mirroring postwar-era arguments that Jews had become cultural and economic insiders at the cost of their commitment to Jewishness. Others bemoaned the purported moral decline of American Jews as they entered the middle class and accepted white-skin privilege, or lamented the breakdown of ethnic patterns of identification as Jews left urban neighborhoods.30This project attempts a fresh approach to the study of Jewish upward mobility and the ways that Jews responded to their economic rise. My intention is neither to celebrate Jewish financial success nor to echo the critics of the era who condemned postwar Jewish culture as shallow, inauthentic, or destined for decline. I think we can learn more about American Jews by taking a step back, examining the language and images through which they voiced their anxieties over upward mobility, and teasing out the concerns that underlay their unease. The result, I hope, will be a work of history that adopts neither a tone of triumph nor one of lamentation, but instead uncovers the doubts, desires, and aspirations of postwar Jews.
as they embraced, however ambivalently, the American Dream. After all, as pessimistic as these Jewish critiques of upward mobility might seem, they nonetheless represented a significant way in which American Jews adjusted to postwar American realities. My subjects keenly felt the tension of identifying with a Jewish history of poverty and oppression as they moved into the privileged middle class. In response, they did not advise American Jews to cease striving for financial growth, nor did they reject their own economic security. Rather, decrying their affluent communities as inauthentic and compromised enabled them to retain their sense of being different from the American mainstream, even as they continued to engage in the process of upward mobility. In ways both subtle and direct, these critiques became their way of insisting that, while American Jews might have been in the middle class, they were most certainly not of it.

One: Materially Poor, Spiritually Rich

Poverty in the Postwar Jewish Imagination

On February 12, 1961, Dr. Judah Pilch of the American Association of Jewish Education took the podium at the Stephen Wise Congress House in New York City to discuss the culture of the shtetlach, those “little towns” of Eastern Europe that had once been home to the ancestors of most American Jews. During his presentation, Pilch portrayed the shtetl as a place of extraordinary “cohesion,” “warmth,” and “spiritual bliss.” It fostered these idyllic qualities, he claimed, because of the “precarious state of life” and “complete isolation” suffered by the Jews who lived there. For Pilch, the poverty and oppression that Jews experienced in Eastern Europe led directly to the heightened faith and joy that characterized the shtetl, making life “bearable” for them in spite of their misery. Pilch believed that the remarkable virtues of the shtetl continued to animate the lives of the Jewish migrants who left Eastern Europe, but only so long as they remained poor and ostracized from the wider population. The Jews who bore “privations and hardships” in the immigrant slums of New York City at the turn of the century, he contended, retained a “spiritual kinship” with their Eastern European forebears. Similarly, he maintained that the halutzim, the Jewish pioneers who left “their comfortable homes and pleasures” to live in the economically insecure and war-torn state of Israel, nurtured the ideals of the shtetl. But if, for Pilch, the Jewish inhabitants of the Lower East Side and Israel succeeded in preserving the meaningful and authentic Jewish life of the shtetl because of their shared poverty and isolation, the middle-class, well-integrated Jews of postwar America most assuredly did not. “In an atmosphere of ‘all is well,’” Pilch lamented, “there can be little Jewish creativity.” Only through suffering and dissatisfaction, he concluded, could there be any hope of “re-introducing those shtetl values . . . which may re-Judaize the de-Judaized Jews.”

Judah Pilch’s presentation illustrated a common mode of romantic invention, intertwined with self-critique, that threaded through the conversations of American Jews during the postwar years. As the fortunes and social status of American Jews grew, the symbolic power of the shtetl, the immigrant slum, and the struggling, new state of Israel gained in importance. Jewish writers, educators, and clergy depicted these communities as deeply authentic Jewish spaces, uncorrupted by the influence and the comforts of the non-Jewish world. Isolated rather than integrated, impoverished rather than affluent, they seemed to represent the opposite of midcentury American Jewish life. As American Jewish leaders looked to the shtetl, the Lower East Side, and the nascent state of Israel from a position of relative privilege and economic security, the deprivations suffered by their ancestors and current coreligionists became transformed into sources of pleasure, strength, and Jewish authenticity. In the imagination of postwar Jews, poverty and isolation had become integral components of a genuine and deeply satisfying Jewish identity. Such romantic renderings provided a crucial set of images through which American Jewish leaders expressed
their concerns over Jewish upward mobility. Even as they benefited from the opportunities and comforts that their new status afforded them, they still maintained a complicated relationship with their new and relatively privileged status. For far too long, experiences of exclusion and want had been part and parcel of their Jewish self-image. The relative acceptance and abundance of the postwar years, therefore, seemed to threaten the very essence of their Jewish difference. By idealizing isolated and impoverished Jewish communities, they preserved their sense of a Jewish identity intertwined with exclusion and suffering without compromising their recent social and economic gains.

We begin our discussion with romantic depictions of the Jewish shetl, the rural market villages of Eastern Europe. Postwar American rabbis and scholars were not the first Jews to look back to these villages as the wellspring of authentic Jewish culture. Yiddish writers such as Isaac Leib Peretz had been romanticizing the shetl since the late nineteenth century, when the villages began their slow decline in the face of the uneven industrialization and urbanization of Eastern Europe. The tendency to idealize the shetl reached new levels of poignancy, however, after the Holocaust wreaked its abrupt and complete destruction of Jewish life as it had existed in Eastern Europe. In fact, the word shetl did not enter common English parlance until 1949, when the YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science translated and published Abraham Ain's 1944 study of the Belorussian town of Swislocz. The translator's decision to retain the Yiddish word shetl instead of translating it into English offered American Jews a new vocabulary through which to commemorate the destroyed culture of Eastern European Jews. Indeed, during this period, some scholars even acknowledged the trend among postwar Jews to wax poetic over the virtues of the shetl and to gloss over the many problems that had existed there. Discussions of the shetl have “invariably been tinged with romanticism and nostalgia,” insisted historian Abraham G. Duker, president of the College of Jewish Studies in Chicago. Similarly, Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg admitted in their introduction to A Treasury of Yiddish Stories that postwar Jews conveniently forgot that shetl society had often been “ignorant, provincial, superstitious, and corrupt. . . . [But] once this world had been destroyed in the gas chambers,” they continued, “the romantic impulse became irresistible; [the shetl] acquired a new and almost holy authenticity.”

Despite these warnings, postwar American Jews continued to compose idealized depictions of the shetl, and this discourse became one of many ways that they commemorated the genocide of European Jewry. Contrary to the pervasive myth that midcentury American Jews did not dwell upon the trauma of the Holocaust out of fear that it might distinguish them from their non-Jewish neighbors and threaten their ascent into the middle class, recent scholarship has demonstrated that postwar Jews actively memorialized the Holocaust during these years. They incorporated commemorative rituals into their holiday celebrations, consumed books and films featuring Holocaust themes, planned events in remembrance of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and consecrated special areas of their synagogues in which they displayed sacred objects salvaged from the destroyed Jewish communities of Europe. Postwar Jews also used their growing financial resources to provide aid to those who survived the Holocaust. As early as 1939, American Jews had created the United Jewish Appeal for Refugees and Overseas Needs, a fundraising organization aimed to support those Jews who were suffering oppression in Europe. In 1945 the United Jewish Appeal collected $45 million for the survivors of the Holocaust. A year later, when the UJA set a fundraising target of $100 million to address the pressing physical and emotional needs of the survivors, American Jews exceeded this goal, donating a full $131 million to the remnants of European Jewry. The remarkable success of American Jews’ philanthropic drives during these years proves that postwar Jews actively grappled with the Holocaust. Their sense of the disparity between their own rising fortunes and
the dejected state of the beleaguered Jews of Europe—from whom they were separated only by an ocean and the lucky decisions of immigrant grandparents—contributed to the romantic lens through which they viewed the Jewish life that had once thrived in the shtetl.6 The renderings of shtetl life that circulated among postwar American Jews depicted Jewish poverty as the handmaiden of deep spirituality, intellectualism, and generosity. They tended to emphasize three themes: first, that the inhabitants of the shtetl achieved a spiritual greatness that provided them with a refuge from poverty and persecution; second, that in an environment of scarcity, they learned to value the life of the mind over the accumulation of wealth; and, third, that they were extraordinarily charitable and community minded and made great personal sacrifices in order to provide succor to the poor. Jewish writers, scholars and rabbis cited these shtetl values as rebukes to their audience of postwar American Jews who, they imagined, lived their lives according to decidedly inferior standards.

One of the most influential works to portray the shtetl as a space that prioritized deep religious feeling over material wealth was Abraham Joshua Heschel's 1949 elegy The Earth Is the Lord's: The Inner World of the Jew in Eastern Europe. Heschel himself was born to a traditional Jewish family in Poland before benefiting from a wide-ranging education that included traditional yeshiva study, liberal Jewish ordination, and a doctorate in Semitics and philosophy from the University of Berlin. Efforts by Reform movement leaders to rescue Jewish scholars from the Holocaust enabled Heschel to escape from Poland months before the Nazi takeover. After moving to the United States in 1940 and taking on faculty positions at the Hebrew Union College and then at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Heschel ended up becoming a prominent Jewish theologian, philosopher, public intellectual, and activist. His roots in Europe, and his many loved ones who perished there, haunted his career. The Earth Is the Lord's was Heschel's attempt to commemorate the destroyed world of his youth, which he painted as being the ideal Jewish life not in spite of, but because of, its destitution. The lyrical volume told the story of the impoverished Jews of Eastern Europe, “whose children knew only the taste of ‘potatoes on Sunday, potatoes on Monday, potatoes on Tuesday,’ ” yet still “sat . . . like intellectual magnates . . . ” to study the Torah and its commentaries.7 Heschel lovingly described parents “ready to sell the pillow from under their heads” in order to enable their sons to study religious texts, and townspeople who happily “shared their scanty food” to support young men who studied the Torah.8 He recounted the tale of the poor Hasidim of Seraph who, when given the opportunity to directly entreat God for sustenance, became so immersed in their prayers that they entirely forgot to ask for an end to their poverty. For Heschel, the physical deprivations of Eastern European Jews compelled them to develop a religious life so fulfilling as to make their physical suffering irrelevant.9 Heschel also presented the Jews of the shtetl as completely isolated from their non-Jewish neighbors. As he understood it, this segregation may have been the result of deep-seated hatred, ignorance, and oppression, but it nonetheless produced the shtetl's Jewish authenticity. Since shtetl Jews “borrowed from other cultures neither substance nor form,” he insisted, their Jewish life “grew out of its own ancient roots and developed in an indigenous environment.” Echoing romantic, nationalist notions of cultural purity, Heschel imagined the shtetl as the place where the Jewish people, untainted by outside influences, “came into its own.”10 As Heschel romanticized both the poverty and the isolation of shtetl Jews, he simultaneously critiqued the spiritual lives of integrated, middle-class, American Jews. After all, if the history of the shtetl represented “the golden period . . . in the history of the Jewish soul,” as Heschel insisted in The Earth Is the Lord's, then the souls of American Jews, not subject to the impoverishment and oppression that shaped their forebears, must have been deficient in comparison. To wit, in one of the closing paragraphs of the volume, Heschel beseeched the
affluent, postwar Jews of America to cherish “the incomparable beauty” of their “old, poor homes.” Heschel’s tribute to the shtetl linked thematically with photographer Roman Vishniac’s iconic portraits of impoverished, pious, Eastern European Jews taken in the months preceding World War II. Indeed, Heschel’s “The Inner World of the Polish Jew,” an essay that would later evolve into The Earth Is the Lord’s, served as an introduction to Polish Jews: A Pictoral Record (1947), Vishniac’s first published volume of pre-Holocaust photographs. The images in this collection, which featured traditionally clad old men and young boys poring over religious texts, perfectly matched Heschel’s idealized vision of the otherworldly spirit of destitute shtetl Jews. The thirty-one images printed in this book portrayed, in the words of the preface to Polish Jews, “one great portrait of a life abjectly poor in its material condition, and in its spiritual condition, exaltedly religious.” Vishniac carefully curated and captioned his images to create this idealized portrait of the religious poverty and cultural isolation of Eastern European Jewry. Although Vishniac would later deny it, the Joint Distribution Committee had sponsored his travels to Eastern Europe and commissioned him to document only the most pious and most impoverished segments of the Jewish population. However, as art historian Maya Benton discovered upon studying Vishniac’s unpublished archive of photographs, Vishniac had, indeed, captured images of some of the cosmopolitan and well-off Jews who also dwelled in the cities and towns of Poland alongside their indigent and traditional coreligionists. But Vishniac never published the images that did not correspond to the vision of piety and poverty that both he and Heschel advanced. Photographs of women wearing their hair in fashionable bobs, of bakeries filled with flaky pastries and of shops selling glowing oranges from Palestine languished in his personal archive as his images of poor and devout Eastern European Jews became enshrined in the public mind as the official visual record of pre-Holocaust Jewry.

Much of the postwar scholarship on Eastern European Jewry echoed Heschel and Vishniac in portraying the shtetl as culturally isolated, materially poor, and spiritually rich. The decades after World War II produced an extensive trove of academic work focusing on the shtetl, the original funding for which came from a somewhat unlikely source. In 1946 anthropologists Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead secured a grant from the Office of Naval Research to conduct ethnographic projects that sought to understand why certain cultures might end up becoming belligerent toward the United States. Their methodology consisted of interviewing exiles from Europe who had moved to America, and many of these informants turned out to be Jewish refugees. While Benedict and Mead had not initially set out to study Jews, the insights of their many Jewish interlocutors made them curious about Jewish life in Europe. With new backing from the American Jewish Committee’s Department of Scientific Research, they formed a “Jewish research group” to start studying the recently destroyed culture of Eastern European Jewry.

The best-known product of this “Jewish research group” was Life Is with People, the popular 1952 ethnography of the shtetl authored by Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog. Additionally, other researchers within the working group, such as sociologists Natalie Joffe and Celia Stopnicka Rosenthal and anthropologist Ruth Landes, published articles on the topic in prominent social-science journals such as Social Forces, the American Journal of Sociology, and Psychiatry. Some members of the group, like Zborowski and Stopnicka Rosenthal, had been born in Eastern Europe and brought their own memories to bear on this project. Though these researchers used the tools of the academy to conduct their research, their scholarship generally produced a romantic, elegiac picture of the shtetl that mirrored the literary and photographic portrayals constructed by Heschel and Vishniac.

These scholars described the shtetl as a place where Jews treasured the study of Torah over the accumulation of wealth, a tendency that they saw as essential to an
authentically Jewish value system. “Historically, traditionally, ideally, learning has been . . . regarded as the primary value and wealth as subsidiary or complementary,” wrote Zborowski and Herzog in Life Is with People. If sometimes shtetl Jews failed to prioritize learning over wealth, they continued, this was due to “economic pressures and outside influences,” factors they imagined were alien to the indigenous Jewish life that thrived in the shtetl setting. Natalie Joffe elaborated on this idea in Social Forces, insisting that “the greatest claim to status in the shtetl” was “the possession of learning . . . although the rich man was respected, the well-learned man was admired, loved, and held up as an example to children.” Similarly, Celia Stopnicka Rosenthal claimed that shtetl dwellers who used their money “only to satisfy . . . physical needs” were considered to be “lacking in Jewishness” and “referred to as pigs.” But someone who was learned in Torah “was never ‘common’ or a ‘pig’ . . . it was unimaginable that a man of learning could behave improperly.”16 According to these researchers, the Jews of the shtetl never prized money for its own sake but only because it enabled people to perform good deeds. “There can be no study, no donations, no ‘social justice,’ no zestful celebration of Sabbath and the holidays, no proper rearing of children and setting them up to produce families of their own, unless one can meet the cost,” wrote Zborowski and Herzog. Valuing wealth for its own sake, the ethnographers insisted, would have been considered an “anti-Jewish” attitude that contradicted “the community’s basic beliefs about human relations.” According to Stopnicka Rosenthal, shtetl Jews saw wealth as “a source of prestige only in so far as it enabled a man to contribute to the welfare of the community.”17 As the scholars of the Jewish Research Group created this idealized conception of shtetl Jews’ relationship to wealth, they intimated that American Jews had adopted a very different approach. After all, there would have been no need to memorialize the economic attitudes of the shtetl if postwar Jews had continued to uphold them. Implicitly, they argued that the shtetl’s approach to money, which the ethnographers painted as the only authentically Jewish attitude toward wealth, had been destroyed in the Holocaust along with the shtetl itself. In addition to the elegies and ethnographies composed by postwar Jewish scholars, American Jews also attended theatrical performances that sentimentalized the shtetl as both a locus of Jewish authenticity and the antithesis of their own spiritual impoverishment. Certainly the best-known example of a romanticized shtetl hit the Broadway stage in 1964, when the chorus of Fiddler on the Roof wondered if the Sabbath would ever “be so sweet” as in their “underfed, overworked” shtetl of Anatevka, and the influence of this popular musical has been well documented.18 While none matched the overwhelming fanfare accorded to The Fiddler on the Roof, other postwar performances featuring the shtetl took place as early as 1945. That year, The Eternal Light broadcast “The World of Sholom Aleichem,” a radio play based on Maurice Samuel’s 1943 book of the same name, which presented an idealized snapshot of the shtetl to the American public. The Conservative movement’s Jewish Theological Seminary introduced The Eternal Light radio program in 1944, in partnership with the NBC radio network. The half-hour weekly radio show consisted of radio plays dramatizing aspects of Jewish life, history, or culture, with the dual goals of promoting Judaism in a positive light to the non-Jewish public and providing inspiration for Jews themselves. During the 1940s and 1950s, millions of listeners tuned in to the program.19 The broadcast introduced listeners to “Kasrielevky,” the shtetl in which the famed Yiddish humorist Sholem Aleichem situated many of his stories. Sholem Aleichem, according to the script, wrote “with a humorous, exuberant lyricism of the life of the poor,” taking for his subjects those Jews of Russia who “lived a life that was walled-in, shut off.” But in this program, too, the poverty and isolation of the Jews of Kasrielevky led to the development of a superlative and deeply spiritual culture. There, the narrator insisted, religion proved
“inseparable” from daily life and “a little learning” was the “first thing” that inhabitants “looked for in a man.” As with many of the other postwar renderings of the shtetl, The Eternal Light’s “The World of Sholom Aleichem” also compared American Jewish life unfavorably to the one lived by the indigent inhabitants of Kasrielevsky. “The worlds of Sholom Aleichem are gone,” lamented the narrator at the close of the program, “Now in America it is different. . . . And all of the surviving Kasrielevkites . . . remember now and again with a nostalgic pang the far-off magic of those sacred hours . . . for which even progress and freedom have found no substitute.” The radio show left listeners with a clear message: that Eastern European Jews lost their otherworldly authenticity when they became affluent, integrated, American Jews. The first major staged performance of the shtetl dates back to 1953, eleven years before the production of Fiddler on the Roof. That year, Arnold Perl’s The World of Sholom Aleichem, also based on Samuel’s 1943 text, played at Broadway’s Barbizon Plaza Theater. While the entire play focused on the lives of impoverished, deeply spiritual, and idealistic shtetl Jews, the second act commented most directly on Jewish poverty with the tale of Bontshe Schweig, a story originally written by Yiddish author Isaac Leib Peretz in 1894. Bontshe Schweig was a poor man who had faced abuse his whole life, yet did not allow these experiences to embitter him or cause him to behave with anything but kindness toward his fellow human beings. When Bontshe finally died and entered Heaven, the angels tried to reward his goodness by offering him anything he desired. But Bontshe’s final request was as modest as the life he lived: “Could I perhaps have, every day, please—a hot roll with fresh butter?” While the playwright only indirectly compared the lives of affluent American Jews to the penniless and saintly characters of The World of Sholom Aleichem, contemporary observers made the contrasts explicit. Journalist Alfred Segal, who reviewed the play for the Philadelphia-based Jewish Exponent, felt that Bontshe’s simple wants and basic goodness contrasted sharply with the materialism of midcentury American Jews. The gentle innocence of Bontshe Schweig, he believed, shamed the acquisitive Jews who viewed his story in the theater. Using the image of a Jewish woman to stand in for the entire community’s conspicuous consumption, he asked, “Could that lady in mink still be wanting a Cadillac after meeting Bonche who asked for no more than hot rolls and cream when he had all of heaven to choose from?” Most reviewers of The World of Sholom Aleichem praised the play, accepting it, as did the New York Times’s Brooks Atkinson, as a literal depiction of the “experience, hopes and dreams of a homogeneous group of fervent people who lived the spiritual life of their forefathers and the daily life of indigent villagers in an alien land.” However Commentary’s Midge Decter argued that the play flattened the complexity and dynamism of shtetl life when it portrayed its poor inhabitants as folk heroes rather than conflicted, and often impious, human beings. According to Decter, The World of Sholom Aleichem rendered the shtetl as a “Never-Never-Land American Jews like to think they came from, quaint, not quite respectable, but abounding with a special sweetness.” It also portrayed the inhabitants of the shtetl, Decter pointed out, as “poor,” “pure and simple,” and “close to their God.” While Decter readily admitted that the Jews of the shtetl were, indeed, quite poor, she refused to accept the widespread notion that their poverty made them both innocent and devout. What if the poor Jews of Eastern Europe “weren’t pure and simple?” Decter contended. “What if they were about the most God-forsaken, mixed-up, complicated people that ever lived?” For Decter, idealizing the poverty of the shtetl not only distorted Jewish history but also presented a political threat. Decter, then a liberal-leaning critic of the left, would develop by the 1970s into a fervent antifeminist and advocate of neoconservativism. She was deeply suspicious of the motivations of playwright Arnold Perl, who had been blacklisted from the film industry for his Communist ties, as well as those of the left-leaning actors, such as Howard Da
Silva, who had been cast in the play. As Decter saw it, romanticizing the poverty of the “folk” too often served as a partisan strategy aimed at evoking sympathy for the “reprehensible politics” of the radical left. A segment of The World of Sholom Aleichem entitled “High School,” in which revolutionary students passionately called upon their peers to strike, convinced Decter that Perl had indeed put Sholem Aleichem’s work “to ideological use.”


What people say about this book

Ebook Tops Reader, “Enlightening and thought-provoking read. I don't want to be totally hyperbolic here, but I read this book for a Judaic Studies course and I think it's kind of a masterpiece. Kranson manages to pack this thing full of tons of reactions to Jewish upward mobility and does so in a way that reminds the reader how complex the Jewish community's reactions to assimilation are. In doing this, she illuminates the angst Jews felt (and continue to feel) with their increased economic power and works against the idea that Jews fit perfectly into a white, protestant, suburban box. It's not only a detailed study and accurate depiction of Jewish upward mobility - it's an explanation of how the Jewish community has come to be what it is today, in all of it's intricacies, based on the postwar period. I honestly loved it and really enjoyed reading it. I learned a lot. Would recommend to a friend.”


Jodi Eichler, “A vital focus on class. A thoughtful, elegantly written contribution to how we think about class and belonging in twentieth century American Jewish history.”

The book has a rating of 5 out of 4.8. 7 people have provided feedback.