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Andrew R. Heinze: Jews and the American Soul

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Introduction

Jews and the American Soul

When Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence, he took “life, liberty, and property”—the standard trio of rights assumed by British citizens—and, for reasons unknown, replaced “property” with an elusive psychological ideal: the pursuit of happiness. In doing so, he anticipated what would become a national passion for achieving peace of mind.

Though often described as the most religious of modern societies, America is certainly the most “psychological,” for it has been a tireless host to new ideas about the psyche. Since the late 1800s, when psychology began to vie with religion for the right to determine how we understand ourselves, Americans have developed an extraordinarily large and dynamic market for psychological, as well as religious, advice. However, if we are curious about the history of American ideas of human nature in the twentieth century, we quickly encounter a problem.

That problem might be called the myth of Protestant origins, if we understand myth to mean not a false story but one that, for all its richness, remains radically incomplete and therefore misleading. According to this myth, modern American views of human nature are aftereffects, mutations, or extenuations of Protestant modes of thought, starting with the Puritans and moving up in time through such seminal thinkers as John Dewey and William James, who were raised as Protestants and ended up as great post-Protestant thinkers of the twentieth century.1

If American history had stopped at 1900, this account would be sound enough. But standing on the other side of 2000, we must dismiss it as outmoded. Where are the Catholics, who became a more and more significant presence in the United States after 1900? And perhaps even more urgently, we must ask, where are the Jews, whose numbers include some of the most eminent commentators on human nature to be embraced by Americans in the twentieth century? (By the opening of the twenty-first century, we should note, a new wave of non-Christian newcomers from Asia and the Islamic world had formed a foundation for further additions to American thought about the human condition.)

Because thinkers of Jewish origin were so important in this domain of American life, they pose an especially blunt challenge to the old Protestant story. It is well known that Jews authored many of the terms Americans use to describe their pursuit of happiness—the search for identity,
the desire for self-actualization, the wish to avoid an inferiority complex and to stop compensating for inner weaknesses, rationalizing powerful drives and projecting them on to others, and the quest for an I-Thou relationship—to name a few. Nevertheless, historians have been content to treat Jewish thinkers as isolated individuals inexplicably dotting a post-Protestant landscape. About a thinker like Freud, whose impact on America was simply too conspicuous to be ignored, we are told that his ideas lost whatever Jewish aspect they may have possessed once Americans adapted them to meet the needs of a Protestant public.

This book explores a new hypothesis: that modern American ideas about human nature have Jewish as well as Christian origins. Only by looking at the interaction between Jews and Christians (both Protestants and Catholics) will we arrive at a more complete picture of popular thought in the twentieth century.2

The story to be told here uncovers ethnic and religious elements of American thought that have lingered in the shadows of history. We will bring together parts of the national past that are usually studied in isolation: the history of immigration, ethnic identity and race, popular psychology and religious inspiration, and the moral traditions of both Jews and Christians. Because the United States is an ethnically and religiously complex society with a buoyant consumer demand for psychological and spiritual advice, we will see how new ideas about the mind and soul have ricocheted back and forth between natives and newcomers, Christians and Jews, intellectuals and the mass media.3

*Jews and the American Soul* focuses on psychological and religious thinkers whose ideas attracted a mass audience. The book highlights a variety of psychologists and psychiatrists, rabbis, philosophers, intellectuals, journalists, and creative writers. My goal is straightforward: to uncover and track the flow of Jewish values, attitudes, and arguments into the mainstream of American thought.

A word should be said here about the term “Jewish values.” Since Jews first arrived in North America, they have lived not in a segregated world of their own but alongside other Americans in a society of ever-shifting values and complicated involvements between people of various faiths and backgrounds. And even in other times and places, “Jewish values” have never existed in a vacuum, subsisting unchanged from generation to generation, immune to the winds of history. Instead, the ways in which Jewish people have chosen to live constantly changed, for the simple reason that the conditions and surroundings in which Jews found themselves constantly changed. The very definition of “Jewish” has been unstable since ancient times. And yet, Jewish values exist as a real, identifiable, and consequential force in the history of Western civilization and, as we shall see in the pages that follow, in the history of modern American culture.
Over the years our histories of colonial New England have produced profound observations about the transformation of a Puritan mentality into a distinctive American culture. From them we have learned that certain cultural tendencies and myths—about the wilderness, about an American sacred destiny, about the possibility of a morally self-regenerating society—grew in the ideologically rich soil of New England Puritanism.

The story to be told in these pages runs parallel in some respects to the Protestant narrative of spiritual pilgrimage, dissarray, and quest for redemption. The extensive Jewish engagement with modern psychologies happened not by accident but as a result of the religious and moral transformation of Jewish life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Jews in the Western world embarked on an errand not in the wilderness, like that of the American Puritans, but into modern culture. Their errand was not to create a City on a Hill, a moral place from which to regenerate the world; it was to create a moral space within European and American culture, from which to secure themselves as citizens and to purge the evils they associated with Christian civilization.

Before we begin, I want to explain the meaning of my title, Jews and the American Soul. “Jews” does not refer to all or even most Jews but to a select group whose ideas entered into the mainstream of American thought. The Jewish background of the people I discuss was significant; it made a tangible difference in their values. In what follows, I avoid the parochial assumption that the mere fact of being a Jew automatically makes one’s ideas or values Jewish. That might have been true for shtetl Jews living a fairly cloistered life in communities that operated on the basis of Jewish law, but it is certainly not true of Jewish men and women living in modern societies. Imagine an American of Jewish parentage who has had no contact with Judaism or Jewish culture and whose social life does not differ from that of other Americans. Unless we indulge in a kind of genetic mysticism, we would have no reason to describe that person’s ideas or values as Jewish.4

By the same token, neither should we be so cautious as to assume that a Jewish perspective will be found only among those who are immersed in Judaism or Yiddishkeyt (“Jewishness,” Jewish culture). Half a century ago Albert Einstein gave a vivid, though not definitive, answer to the question of what makes a person a Jew. In an attempt to explain the apparent paradox of people, like him, who had abandoned Judaism but still considered themselves thoroughly Jewish, he rejected as insufficient the definition, “A Jew is a person professing the Jewish faith”:

The superficial character of this answer is easily recognized by means of a simple parallel. Let us ask the question: What is a snail? An answer similar in kind to the one given above might be: A snail is an animal inhabiting a
snail shell. This answer is not altogether incorrect; nor, to be sure, is it ex-
haustive; for the snail shell happens to be but one of the material products
of the snail. Similarly, the Jewish faith is but one of the characteristic prod-
ucts of the Jewish community. It is, furthermore, known that a snail can
shed its shell without thereby ceasing to be a snail. The Jew who abandons
his faith (in the formal sense of the word) is in a similar position. He re-
mains a Jew.5

In short, the integrity of our story depends not on quick assumptions
about whether someone is capable of speaking from a Jewish point of
view, but on solid evidence and plausible suggestions that a particular
statement, attitude, or idea comes out of a clearly identifiable Jewish
context. In order to say that a point of view is Jewish we must make the
case that it either derives from Judaism or Jewish culture or reflects a
state of mind shared by Jews in response to bigotry or social ostracism.6

The other phrase in my title, “The American Soul,” must be under-
stood figuratively. I do not mean to imply that a nation has a soul, or that
the people of the United States are so fundamentally similar as to have
one common mentality that we refer to as a soul. I use the phrase “Ameri-
can Soul” as a metaphor for public ideas about the psyche and human
nature (“psyche” being Greek for “soul”).

This leads to the question, which public? Americans have always en-
compassed a variety of “publics” based on racial, religious, ethnic, gen-
der, regional, and socioeconomic differences among others. There are
also “taste” publics: groups of people who share a passion for a certain
kind of music, art, recreation, or hobby. The public with which this book
is most concerned cannot be profiled precisely, but it includes that great
multitude of Americans who have taken an interest in mass-marketed
inspirational literature and have been eager to know (via books, newspa-
pers, magazines, radio, and television) what psychologists and psychia-
trists, as well as spiritual leaders, think about human nature. Those who
make up this public have often belonged to religious communities but,
rather than restricting themselves to religious doctrine, have remained
open to the mass market of ideas.

Our story opens with the era of the great mass immigration that
brought two million Jews from Europe. That era, from the 1880s to the
1920s, also witnessed the rise of modern psychology as a force in Ameri-
can society. New ideas about the divisibility of the psyche appeared simul-
taneously with new ideas about the ethnic divisibility of the nation, and
Jews played an important symbolic and intellectual role in that transfor-
mation of popular attitudes.

In order to fully understand why psychological ideas became so im-
portant so quickly in America, and why Jewish psychological thinkers
were disproportionately involved in the dissemination of those ideas, we will travel back in time to examine the rise of new concepts of the psyche, especially in the nineteenth century, to see how closely interwoven they were with varieties of Christian thought and to identify some of the Jewish religious innovations that made Judaism more attentive to the psychic condition of the individual.

As a point of departure, we will look at an unusual, and quite early, interaction of American and Jewish values of individual development—the adaptation of Benjamin Franklin’s famous self-improvement plan into the Hebrew ethical literature of eastern Europe, a genre known as musar—in the early 1800s. The intellectual and moral restlessness that led Jews to adapt new techniques of self-improvement also led to the psychoanalytic moralism of Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler, the first major approach to the psyche to emerge out of a Jewish moral environment.

Once we have viewed the trajectory of Western and Jewish conceptions of the psyche, we will return to America and examine the reasons why popular psychology became a booming cultural industry, outstripping theology and philosophy as a guide for a literate mass audience seeking advice about how to live. We then turn to Jewish thinkers in the field of psychological advice between the 1890s and 1940s. Through them, Jewish concerns and values first entered into American popular thought.

As popularizers of psychology, a number of men conveyed a Jewish moral perspective into American conversations about the nature of intelligence, personality, race, the subconscious mind, mass behavior, and evil. Jewish interpreters of the psyche, no less than Protestants, hoped to move public values in a direction that would produce the kind of society they wanted to inhabit. Sensitive to both overt and implicit Christian biases in popular thought, they campaigned against them and counterpoised Jewish moral reference points, which had previously been rare in public forums. For them psychology was a potent instrument with which to combat pernicious stereotypes about ethnic minorities in general and Jews in particular. It also gave them a means of reaffirming a rationalist code of emotional restraint that, in America, had become outmoded by more spectacular views of the psyche as a source of divine power or a machine that could be programmed for perfection.

As they went about the business of issuing prescriptions for the psychological and moral improvement of America, they encouraged greater public appreciation for the sensitive and intellectually intense individual and greater vigilance about the evil people produced when they formed a mob. According to their moral critique of society, the proverbial neurotic Jew, whose credentials for assimilation had been challenged by nativists, possessed certain characteristics that were ideally suited to a fast-paced urban America. By the same standards, the bigot was redefined as
a psychopath and as the primary obstacle blocking the road to a more democratic future.

After World War II, Jewish interpreters of the psyche increased in both numbers and variety. The most popular inspirational book to appear since 1900, *Peace of Mind* (1946), was written by a rabbi, Joshua Loth Liebman, who became not only the first rabbi with an interfaith audience of national dimensions but also the clergyman most closely associated with the problem of psychic pain, mental readjustment, and the Freudian vogue after the war. Liebman was the first American clergyman of national stature to have undergone psychoanalysis, and his *Peace of Mind* heralded a postwar romance with the psychological and therapeutic values that had been growing steadily since the 1890s. Religion needed the insights of depth psychology, Liebman argued; without them it could not guide Americans toward spiritual maturity.

Liebman’s career marked a turning point in American culture. Jewish psychological thinkers had written popular books before, but his was the first best-seller by a religious Jew. For the first time Judaism, and an explicit Jewish theology, had to be taken seriously in the arena of public opinion about the human condition. *Peace of Mind* contained a strong polemic beneath its appealing message about the healing of American psychic pain. Liebman defined Judaism as a religion of love, not the legalistic faith Christianity had traditionally deemed it, and unflinchingly asserted Judaism’s unique ability to lead Americans toward the ideal of loving the neighbor as oneself. He called for a new democratic “God-idea for America” rooted in Jewish values.

*Peace of Mind* elicited sharp criticism from both Jewish intellectuals and traditionalist Christians. The most interesting controversy over Liebman’s Freudian religious vision, however, involved Fulton Sheen and Clare Boothe Luce, the two most charismatic leaders of American Catholicism in the 1940s and 1950s. Psychology provided a perfect focal point for a culture clash between Jews and Catholics as they moved from the periphery toward the center of a society traditionally dominated by Protestants. For many Jews, psychology and Freud represented a path toward a more sophisticated, cosmopolitan America; for many Catholics, Freud signified a heretical departure from fundamental religious values. This postwar culture clash expressed itself with particular poignance in the life and career of Clare Luce, a convert to Catholicism whose stirring public confession of faith and renunciation of Freudianism led her to be accused, wrongly, of antisemitism. Our story takes up the circumstances of that allegation and reveals the intriguing personal relationships with Jewish men that lay hidden beneath Luce’s public role in the Catholic-Jewish clash over Freud.
Although many Jewish thinkers took up the cudgels of psychology in the second half of the twentieth century, a few played a formative role in the development of humanism, the most powerful psycho-spiritual movement in America after the 1950s. We remain surprisingly unaware, or forgetful, of the strong Protestant and Jewish sources of postwar humanism. Our story compares two triads of thinkers—one Protestant, the other Jewish—whose ideas established the foundation of a distinctly American humanist philosophy: Paul Tillich–Rollo May–Carl Rogers, and Martin Buber–Erich Fromm–Abraham Maslow. We will see how Buber, Fromm, and Maslow stressed Jewish values of “relatedness” while Tillich, May, and Rogers focused on a Protestant concern for “acceptance.” We will also examine the immigrant and Jewish context of Erik Erikson’s pioneering theory of identity and see how a rising generation of writers, including Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Allen Ginsberg, added a Jewish dimension to the postwar “crisis of conformity” out of which humanism arose.

We then explore a phenomenon closely related to humanism, the conspicuous presence of Jewish women in public discussions of human potential. Jewish women took up psychology, either formally or informally, in greatly disproportionate numbers and created a niche for themselves as moralists in the mass market of advice and self-help. In the 1950s, by a seemingly odd coincidence, Betty Friedan, Ayn Rand, Ann Landers, Abigail Van Buren, and Joyce Brothers all became, or were on the verge of becoming, public advisers of wide influence, especially in relation to American women, and Gertrude Berg, who had emerged as the archetypal Jewish mother in the age of radio, consummated that career by moving to television and incorporating psychology into the didactic repertoire of her popular sitcom, *The Goldbergs*. Our story will focus especially on Joyce Brothers, for she became the most influential popular psychologist in America between the 1950s and the 1990s. Though entirely overlooked by historians of postwar America, Brothers was a figure of real significance who imparted a practical feminism to a multitude of American housewives in the suburban age. Her stream of advice over the course of a generation reveals many of the philosophical and ethical complexities inherent in the Jewish and American embrace of psychological values, which promised human liberation while struggling to produce a coherent substitute for traditional religion. Her complexities were, in many respects, the complexities of an entire generation of American women whose worlds were shaken and permanently altered by the feminist revolt of the 1960s.

Our story moves to a close by turning to the ways in which Judaism figured into American meditations on evil, suffering, and redemption in the final decades of the century. The key figure of that chapter of our
history is Rabbi Harold Kushner, whose book of consolation, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, exalted him as a popular authority on the enduring question of theodicy—why does an omnipotent and benevolent God allow the innocent to suffer? To interpret Kushner’s theodicy, we must first consider the surprising prominence of the Holocaust and Hasidism in American popular thought, because they established the background for Kushner’s conception of suffering and redemption.

The Holocaust filtered into public awareness through a variety of Jewish interpreters, the two most significant being Viktor Frankl and Elie Wiesel. Wiesel, in particular, had a powerful effect on American thinking, for he came to personify the ultimate suffering of the Holocaust victim and the prospect of spiritual rejuvenation, or redemption, through the Hasidic traditions in which he was raised. Wiesel’s popular neo-Hasidic lore formed part of a larger emergence of Hasidism into American culture, including the inspirational writings of Abraham Twerski, a Hasidic psychiatrist who created a unique blend of *musar* and the Twelve Step program of recovery from addiction. Twerski was one of the more prolific rabbis to follow Joshua Liebman’s lead into the mass market, but Kushner was by far the most important and *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* probably the most consequential work of theodicy written for an American mass audience since the nineteenth century. Kushner proposed a controversial idea of God that became a touchstone for subsequent American meditations on evil, and he created a coherent theory of suffering and redemption that tapped popular interest in the Holocaust and Hasidism.

Between the Hebrew version of Benjamin Franklin in the early 1800s and American versions of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, in the late 1900s, our story contains many new twists and turns in the history of ideas about the mind and soul. We will see that American understandings of human nature in the twentieth century evolved out of an intriguing and, until now, unexamined exchange between Jews and Christians.