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# An orphaned culture : American Jewry from David Levinsky to Alexander Portnoy

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Culture: American  
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June 2000

**An Orphaned Culture:  
American Jewry from David Levinsky to Alexander Portnoy**

by

Alan Rubin

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in

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## An Orphaned Culture: American Jewry from David Levinsky to Alexander Portnoy

This paper examines the development of American-Jewish culture as it is represented in *The Rise of David Levinsky* and *Portnoy's Complaint*. Facing circumstances unprecedented in Jewish history, American Jewry has necessarily broken with traditional Jewish culture and in the process has been orphaned, bereaved of its roots and struggling to establish its identity.

Jewish history began in exile. According to the Old Testament, Abraham, the putative founder of Judaism, left his ancestral homeland in Ur and settled with his wife, father, and nephew in Haran in northwest Mesopotamia. Such migration was not uncommon, but Abraham's case was special. Paul Johnson points out that the "movements of Semitic peoples westwards, along the arc of the fertile crescent, is usually presented as a drift under the pressure of economic forces. But," he goes on, "it is important to grasp that Abraham's compulsion was religious: he responded to an urge he believes came from a great, all powerful, and ubiquitous God" (Johnson, 16). Abraham (called Abram at this time) receives remarkable instructions from God: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (Genesis, 12:1-2). The apparent significance of this passage is that it is the moment at which God reveals his plans to establish the Jews as his elect nation of people. Less apparent, though not less significant, is that God makes clear that the Jews were to be both spiritually and geographically separate from other Semitic communities.

Despite Abraham's covenant with his God, Yahweh, and his acquisition of a homeland for the elect, the Hebrews were hardly a community with well-defined, unifying religious and cultural practices. "Indeed," writes Karen Armstrong, "it is probably more accurate to call [the] early Hebrews pagans who shared many of the religious beliefs of their neighbors in Canaan" (Armstrong, 14). Even the introduction of the relatively sophisticated Mosaic law did not vanquish competing gods and

religious ideologies. In fact, it was not until the Babylonian Exile, 1200 years after Abraham's death, that the Judaism of the modern world was first codified and distinguished as the religion of the Hebrew nation. In Babylon, the pre-Exilic prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah were vindicated and proved to the exiles that religious purity was vital to their survival. In the face of adversity and impending doom, the Jews were galvanized and united under a common religious culture. According to Armstrong, "Yahweh had finally absorbed his rivals in the religious imagination of Israel; in exile, the lure of paganism had lost its attraction and the religion of Judaism had been born. At a time when the cult of Yahweh might reasonably have been expected to perish, he became the means that enabled people to find hope in impossible circumstances" (Armstrong, 61).

It is probably not a coincidence that Judaism was born in exile and that Jewish folklore is infused with stories of displacement and glorification. From the first story of Abraham's migration, to the Exodus and redemption of Moses, to the historically evincible exile in Babylon, the early history of the Jews was defined by constant displacement and the subsequent struggle to survive under unfavorable conditions. The predominant means of survival was to remain a united nation, loyal to their religion and culture, and separate from the indigenous peoples of their adopted lands. After the Babylonian exile, this pattern of dispersion and regrouping would dominate Jewish history—until the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century exodus from Europe to America.

While Jewish history has been defined by constant displacement, the dilemma facing American Jewish immigrants was unprecedented. Until the massive emigration to America, the Jewish nation, largely residing in eastern Europe by the end of the nineteenth century, lived in exile even as it was subject to the hegemony of larger, hostile social and political institutions. Yet, while this isolation was involuntary, it actually served to codify and strengthen Jewish culture, as the Jews remained largely unaffected by foreign influences.

What was different about the Jewish experience in America was that personal survival depended not on separation but on assimilation, as Jews who were less visibly Jewish were less susceptible to anti-Semitism. Cultural hostility toward Jews was still commonplace in America, but those who were Americanized had unprecedented opportunities to thrive in business. Of those who were not prosperous (most, in fact, were not), many opted for Jewish solidarity in the form of socialism. But as ideological disillusionment and, after the 1930's, a strong American economy, withered the appeal of socialism, Jews enjoyed the most auspicious social and economic conditions in centuries. As a result, the imperative for Jews to remain an isolated and cohesive community became irrelevant.

The dilemma that threatened immigrant Jewish culture was a peculiar historical irony. The culture was threatened not by hostile anti-Semites but by the internal threat of immigrants' desire to assimilate. This was a troublesome issue because the primary threat to the Jews was no longer tangible and external but abstract and internecine—the material threat of pogroms was replaced with the pernicious ideology of

assimilation. The focus of the immigrant Jews' efforts to survive shifted from a struggle to survive as Jews to survival as immigrants, from a collective struggle to a personal one. Irving Howe writes of this dilemma:

Once past initial barriers, the Jews were allowed an entry into social and economic life on terms more favorable than any they had dreamed of. But America exacted a price. Not that it "demanded" that the immigrant Jews repudiate their past, their religion, or their culture; nor that it "insisted" they give up the marks of their spiritual distinctiveness. American society, by its very nature, simply made it all but impossible for the culture of Yiddish to survive. It set for the east European Jews a trap or lure of the most pleasant kind. It allowed Jews a life far more "normal" than anything their most visionary programs had foreseen, and all that it asked—it did not even ask, it merely rendered easy and persuasive—was that the Jews surrender their collective self. (Howe, 641)

In the years since the Diaspora, their sole means of survival had been to form closely-knit groups with a shared culture grounded in a common religion and a common history. In America, survival was still of paramount importance, but the means of achieving it changed drastically. It became necessary for Jews to venture away from their own community in order to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the New World. While economic and linguistic barriers initially caused many of the immigrants to remain in closely-knit communities, the porous economic and social structure in America allowed Jews to enter the mainstream.

In Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*, the Russian-American Levinsky's experience as an Old World Talmudist who finds that survival in the New World is facilitated through assimilation typifies the experience of the upwardly mobile immigrant Jew. He recognizes almost immediately upon his arrival in America that the historical circumstances of the Jewish-American immigrant necessitated the

abandonment of the religious and cultural traditions that had sustained the Jews for centuries:

The orthodox Jewish faith, as it is followed in the old Ghetto towns of Russia or Austria, has still to learn the art of trimming its sails to suit new winds. It is not exactly the same as it was a thousand years ago. It does not attempt to adopt itself to modern conditions as the Christian Church is continually doing. It is absolutely inflexible. If you are a Jew of the type to which I belonged when I came to New York and you attempt to bend your religion to the spirit of the new surroundings, it breaks. It falls to pieces. The very clothes I wore and the very food I ate had a fatal effect on my religious habits. A whole book could be written on the influence of a starched collar and a necktie on a man who was brought up as I was. It was inevitable that, sooner or later, I should let a barber shave my sprouting beard.” (Cahan, 110)

Levinsky severs his ties to the Old World in order to thrive. Yet while he achieves great financial success, he never feels fulfilled. His experience is similar to that of an orphan, who, rootless and alienated, longs for spiritual fulfillment and a reclamation of ties to the culture that engendered him.

It is significant that Levinsky is literally orphaned before he emigrates to America from his native Russian village of Antomir. His father dies before his third birthday and his mother raises him until, when he is eighteen, she dies defending him against anti-Semitic thugs. To fill the void created by his father's death, Levinsky becomes the protégé of Reb Sender, a caricature of the Old World talmudic scholar. Under Reb Sender's tutelage, Levinsky is schooled in the traditions of Talmudism and learns the paramount importance of intellectual pursuits to the exclusion of all else. He also learns another lesson about female sexuality that will haunt him throughout his life. Reb Sender teaches Levinsky to make a distinction between women who nurture men and those who would destroy them through immoral, lecherous acts. Though

Levinsky rationalizes this distinction by concluding “that there were two kinds of kisses: the kiss of affection and the kiss of Satan,” he remains confounded by conflicting notions of female sexuality, and his struggle to reconcile these notions defines his experiences in America both literally and symbolically (Cahan, 44).

If Levinsky is literally orphaned before he emigrates to America, his arrival in the New World signals a symbolic orphaning from his culture. His physical displacement is followed by an ideological one evidenced by his rejection of Jewish religious tenets in favor of Darwinism. Levinsky’s espousal of Darwinism is significant not only because it is contrary to his former beliefs but also because it indicates his growing sense that only the fittest survive. He feels that for him to survive in America it is imperative to abandon his childhood moral convictions for a pragmatism consistent with advancement. Such drastic changes in his ideological orientation, however, are contrasted with a longing to reclaim his intellectual and cultural heritage, for he often seems uncomfortable with an adopted secularism.

Levinsky associates America with femininity, a land whose fecundity is limitless and whose *raison d’être* is to be subjugated by those willing to exploit her. This vision is consistent with Levinsky’s understanding of the satanic femininity whose appeal is wholly sensual. America, therefore, stands in stark contrast to the matronly women of his childhood in Europe, particularly to Matilda, his first, though unrequited, love. As he enters New York Harbor he is filled with ambivalence. He is both excited by the literal and symbolic possibilities of conquering America and distressed about forfeiting spiritual nourishment: “My unhappy love never ceased to

harrow me. The stern image of Matilda blended with the hostile glamour of America” (Cahan, 87).

Levinsky’s experiences in America result in a sexual and ideological quandary. On the one hand, he longs for the spiritual nourishment offered by the motherly women of his youth, while on the other, he is inescapably enthralled by the forbidden love represented by American women and America itself. It is no surprise, then, that Levinsky falls in love with Dora Margolis. The wife of his friend Max, Dora becomes Levinsky’s obsession after he realizes that her femininity is both sexual and motherly. She is a greenhorn, a recent emigre from Europe, still a follower of Old World traditionalism. While she struggles with the language and customs of her adopted homeland, her demeanor is obviously more European than American. She also happens to be the mother of two small children, and her motherly qualities are not lost on Levinsky. At the same time, however, she is young and attractive and represents the sexuality supposed to be incompatible with motherly love. When he realizes what she represents he becomes obsessed with her. He characterizes his feelings for her as “a blend of animal selfishness and spiritual sublimity,” a testament to his longing for a woman who can provide both sexual and spiritual fulfillment.

If it is not surprising that Levinsky falls in love with her, it is also not surprising that their relationship is destined to fail. Cahan suggests that there is no common ground between the Old World and the New and that Levinsky is far too removed from his European heritage to be able to reclaim it without sacrificing the success he has achieved in America. Nor is it surprising when Levinsky fails in his attempt to seduce

Anna Tevkin, who, like Dora, bridges that chasm between European and American Jewry. Although his relationships with Dora and Anna are similar in that they are doomed to fail, his intentions are different. While his desire for Dora is physical and spiritual, his desire for Anna is primarily intellectual. She is the daughter of the Russian poet Tevkin whose Hebrew poetry idealizes Jewish cultural and religious traditions, and Levinsky believes that his being welcomed into the Tevkin family will enable him to reestablish a connection to his Jewish intellectual background. His attempt to seduce Anna, therefore, is a symbolic attempt to seduce her father, whom Levinsky exalts as an exemplar of his forsaken religious and intellectual heritage. Tevkin, however, has, like Levinsky, succumbed to the spiritual stultification that seems unavoidable in America and has supplanted his poetry with real estate speculation. In response to Levinsky's question, "Why don't you give us some more poems like those?" Tevkin produces his business card and says "This is the kind of poetry that goes in America." Tevkin goes on to tell Levinsky that "Business is business and poetry is poetry. I hate to confound the two. One must make a living. Thank God I know how to look things in the face. I am no dreamer. It is sweet to earn your livelihood" (Cahan, 457). For a while, Levinsky denies to himself that Tevkin too has forsaken his intellectual pursuits, but he understands by the end of the novel how incompatible American and European cultures are. His failure to find a father figure in Tevkin confirms his alienation from his identity and his status as a cultural orphan.

In the final pages of the book, Levinsky laments his decision to go into business:

The day when that accident turned my mind from college to business seems to be the most unfortunate day in my life. I think that I should be much happier as a scientist or writer, perhaps. I should then be in my natural element, and if I were doomed to loneliness I should have the comforts to which I am now a stranger. That's the way I feel every time I pass the abandoned old building of City College. (Cahan, 529)

While Cahan's elegy mourns the passing of a culture, Levinsky never explicitly recognizes what his own narrative suggests: that such a passing was probably inevitable, the cost of providing a foundation upon which future generations might build a new culture. As editor of the *Forward*, Cahan vociferously advocated the necessity of Americanization for the survival of the Jews, but, as Sanford Marovitz points out, this practice was not without damaging consequences: "To Americanize according to Cahan's guidelines required a virtual transformation of identity, and for a long time after this dramatic process of acculturation had occurred, it often left the new American Jew uncertain of exactly who he or she really was" (Marovitz, 167).

Thus, while David Levinsky and his generation made possible the upward mobility of American Jews and ended the centuries-old cycle of persecution and stagnation of the Jewish culture, the benefits of this upward mobility were not attained without serious challenges to Jewish identity. As an archetypal Jewish immigrant, Levinsky created a legacy of moral ambiguity and conflicting allegiances by adulterating a moral code based on religious and filial loyalty with one founded in the culture of American opportunism. The paradox of this legacy, that a prerequisite for success in the New World was the abandonment of the traditions that had made possible the survival of the Jewish people in Europe, was unavoidable. Many immigrants and first-generation

American Jews who espoused the traditions of European Jewry seemed unaware of this paradox, not recognizing that in their new homeland such traditions were obsolete. The mission of uncompromising Jewish parents to maintain these dated cultural practices therefore exacerbated the tension between Old and New World values and created a new set of problems for the heirs of Levinsky's legacy.

Seen in this context, Jack and Sophie Portnoy are the consummate first-generation Jewish parents, a generation upon which the significance of its place in history is lost. They continually assert their Jewishness yet are either unaware that European Jewish culture cannot survive in America or they refuse to admit it. They are, as Aharon Appelfeld explains, part of a generation that

have neither Jewish prayer nor knowledge of Judaism, yet they have both. They do not live any longer in overcrowded ghettos but nevertheless they are immersed in the ghetto existence: The way in which they live with, speak to, and attach themselves to each other, or the ways in which they leave each other alone express an ancient mentality, as does the manner in which they relate to strangers by being attracted to as well as being alienated from them. (Appelfeld, 15)

In short, they are unaware that they are immersed in the contradictions of being a Jew in America, and this ignorance begets their son's identity crisis. While Alexander Portnoy is not literally parentless, therefore, he is in many ways like an orphan, bereft of the desperately needed parental guidance he will need to flourish in his adopted homeland. Although he is not often read sympathetically, he deserves to be reevaluated as a victim of historical circumstance. He is, after all, the exemplar of an unfortunate generation conscripted to sort out the cultural and ideological mess created by immigrant forebears. Whereas Levinsky uses his well-developed cultural identity as

a lens through which he narrates his story, Portnoy is the bewildered, culturally bereaved scion who does not enjoy the benefits of a well-developed identity. Levinsky tells of a confrontation between two clearly defined, though incongruous, cultures, a confrontation he ultimately fails to resolve, but it is Portnoy who must struggle with the problems created by such ambivalence. And if Levinsky personifies the death-throes of a culture, Portnoy personifies the distress and alienation resulting from the incipience of a culture.

Portnoy's difficulties are both the result and the cause of his alienation from his parents, reactionaries who live according to the rules of the shtetl and decry the influence of the *goyim* and everything else unfamiliar. For Jack and Sophie Portnoy, even the most innocuous bits of Americana are morally objectionable. Sophie tries to convince her son that eating O Henry candy bars and drinking Pepsi will give him colitis. Hamburgers and French fries, too, are off limits, as she explains “*tatelah*, it begins with diarrhea, but do you know how it ends? With a sensitive stomach like yours, do you know how it finally ends? *Wearing a plastic bag to do your business in!*” (Roth, 35). Portnoy's responds, as usual, by running to the bathroom to masturbate as a means of reclaiming his body from his neurotically possessive mother: “Against the suffocating ubiquity of his mother, Portnoy pits his penis, which he describes symbolically as his ‘battering ram to freedom.’ As an adolescent, masturbation becomes his primary method of self-assertion” (Jones and Nance, 75).

His relationship with his mother is defined by such moments of moral ambiguity and sexual perversion. She is both the bearer of tough love and the object of his

unrequited sexual longing, a muddled anomaly who, according to Portnoy's recollection, has done much to encourage her son's confusion. In a single thought he remembers a moment of seduction in which she asks him to help her put on her stockings and then threatens him with a knife for not eating his dinner. He remembers her tenderly caressing him and then locking him out of the house for talking back to his sister. As a child, Portnoy is a willing lover whose advances are mocked and deferred. He is a lost little boy who seeks his mother's approval and guidance, only to receive perversely conflicted moral and sexual signals.

As an adult, Portnoy seems like the same lost little boy who has been suspended in a state of childlike confusion. What is different about his adult life is that he has the freedom to explore his conflicted desires and avenge the spurned advances of his youth. Interestingly, and perhaps inevitably, the object of his conquest is that which was so strictly proscribed as a youth: America and American culture, embodied by the *shikse*. Portnoy fantasizes about Thereal McCoy—"to whom no one has ever said 'Shah.' Or 'I only hope your children will do the same to you someday!'"—the imaginary icon of all things American, the anti-Jew whose subjugation would represent for Portnoy a triumph over his psychological self-oppression and an end to the cultural and ideological isolation demanded by his parents. And so the *shikses*: Bubbles Girardi, Kay Campbell, the Monkey—"These people are the *Americans*," he tells Spielvogel. "O America! America! It may have been the gold in the streets to my grandparents, it may have been a chicken in every pot to my father and mother, but to me, a child whose earliest movie memories are of Ann Rutherford and Alice Faye,

America is a *shikse* nestling under your arms whispering love love love love love!" (Roth, 163-165). Thus, "(Portnoy's) sexual acts with the blond, blue-eyed daughters of the dominant culture are a kind of vengeance against the image of the American Dream whose reality is inaccessible to him; they are, as he finally admits, attempts to 'conquer America'" (Jones and Nance, 78).

While America is able to satisfy Portnoy's displaced sexual desires, however, it is still an inadequate replacement for the consummate female figure he so desperately desires. His conquest of America is purely sensual, and he still longs for a woman who can fulfill his need for a mother figure. He finds her near the end of his story in the character of Naomi, the socially conscious Israeli girl who he believes will provide the nurturing withheld by his mother. He declares "my salvation is clearly in this Naomi!" (Roth, 293). Within hours of their meeting, he pleads with her: "Be my wife. Mother my children. Every *shtunk* with a picture window has children. *Why not me?* I carry the family name!" (Roth, 297). However, Naomi, who is not an American and cannot understand the historical dilemma of American Jews, has a vision of the Jews' place in history that sounds suspiciously like the one he has learned from his parents. She admonishes him that he is "the epitome of what was most shameful in 'the culture of the Diaspora.' Those centuries and centuries of homelessness had produced just such disagreeable men as [himself]—frightened, defensive, self-deprecating, unmanned and corrupted by life in the gentile world" (Roth, 299). In response to this admonition, Portnoy tries to rape her, a symbolic act in which he tries to assert his individuality and independence from Jewish self-oppression. He

ultimately fails because he is impotent with her, an indication that he has still, despite his masculine exploits with American *shiksies*, failed to reconcile his Jewish identity with his desire to be free from it.

Such freedom had been restricted from the beginning by his parents, whose belief in the destructive nature of *goyishe* culture was as intuitive as Naomi's was intellectual. Portnoy feels alienated from them, the result of their unwillingness to accept or to try to understand that European Jewish traditions have become obsolete in America. Jack Portnoy is breathing the last breaths of shtetl Jewry. He is a feckless man who is ineffectual as a businessman and a father, and more significantly, one who does not recognize the desuetude of his own intellect. He clings precariously to his misinformed notions about what it means to be a Jew, berating his son about his atheistic ideology. He condemns Alex for not attending synagogue on the High Holidays:

Tell me something, do you know Talmud, my educated son? Do you know history? One-two-three you were bar mitzvah, and that for you was the end of your religious education. Do you know men study their whole lives in the Jewish religion, and when they die they still haven't finished? Tell me, now that you are all finished at fourteen being a Jew, do you know a single thing about the wonderful history and heritage of the saga of your people? (Roth, 69)

Jack's words are hollow and hypocritical, of course, because he himself has little understanding of Jewish history and his place in it. The rabbinical scholars of the shtetl were concerned primarily with the kinds of intellectual exercises that more closely reflect Alex's ways of thinking than his father's. The secularism and socialism that was enormously popular among immigrant and first-generation Jews, the basis of

young Portnoy's ideological orientation, is a more legitimate intellectual heir to traditional Judaism than his father's misinformed religious notions. Jack's ignorant dismissal of Alex's ways of thinking leaves him starved for spiritual guidance. To make matters worse, Portnoy's only recourse as a youth is Rabbi Warshaw, whom he sees as a buffoon hopelessly mired in misguided traditionalism of the old country.

The man Portnoy recruits to help sort out his problem is Dr. Spielvogel, who, like the other paternal figures in the book, represents old country values. Spielvogel's symbolic role in *Portnoy's Complaint* is unmistakable—he is a European Jewish immigrant who is the subject of Portnoy's search for a cultural identity. Portnoy thus turns to him for legitimation: “Bless me with manhood! Make me brave! Make me strong! Make me *whole!* Enough being a nice Jewish boy, publicly pleasing my parents while privately pulling my putz! Enough!” Spielvogel, however, withholds his blessing and does not speak until the end of the book when he utters the punch line to Portnoy's protracted setup. Portnoy not only doesn't find the spiritual gratification he seeks, but is spurned and made the subject of a practical joke.

Spurned and mocked repeatedly by the very people who should be guiding his spiritual development, Portnoy is alone and unaware of how he should behave. At the end of the book there is no resolution and he has gotten no further in his search for a cultural identity; he remains in what Sanford Pinsker describes as “that uneasy limbo between total assimilation and authentic Jewishness” (Pinsker, 57). But how exactly are we to define “authentic Jewishness?” The shtetl culture of eastern Europe, with a centuries-old history of its own, is one type of authentic Jewish culture but it by no

means has an absolute right to authenticity, for it is only one in a series of Jewish cultures since Judaism was consecrated during the Babylonian Exile. What makes the American-Jewish experience “inauthentic” is that it violates the tradition of spiritual and geographical separation, thus creating not only an unprecedented set of problems for Jewish culture but also an unprecedented set of possibilities. In writing about the legacy of David Levinsky, Jules Chametzky characterizes Old World and New World Jewry as no less than completely at odds:

For the immigrant, the American Dream of acceptance into mainstream society, the promise of meaningful work and material well-being was obviously desirable... Yet the dilemma persisted: how to make up for the acute and inescapable sense of loss—of mother, of childhood, of innocence. Despite everything, one kind of paradise was lost. The rite of passage from one state to another was so much more than symbolic: the ocean crossing, the cutting off from one culture and the emergence of a new one was absolute, complete, traumatic—a second birth. (Chametzky, 91)

More than eighty years after David Levinsky’s ascent to improbable heights of success, this newly born culture still searches for its identity.

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**Publications**

- “Postindustrial America” entry in Grolier’s forthcoming *Encyclopedia of American Studies*.
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