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# IN SEARCH OF JUDAISM:
# A STUDY OF THE EARLY AMERICAN JEWISH LABOR MOVEMENT

By

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Jewish Communal Service in cooperation with a degree of Master of Public Administration

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HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUE OF RELIGION
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# IN SEARCH OF JUDAISM:
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## ABSTRACT

The Jewish labor movement was the leading organizer and unifier of the American Jewish community between the years 1880 and 1915. This movement is characterized as the collective action of two consortiums, trade unions with considerable numbers of Jewish members and Jewish communal organizations pursuing union activism. Together they played a significant role in the organizational development of the community. In part, this influence is due to the movement's ability to fuse Jewish religion and culture with trade union ideology.

To better understand the presence of Jewish themes found within labor philosophy, this research analyzes important labor literature produced by this community. Through this investigation, it is evident that the Jewish characteristics of this movement played a role in legitimizing its efforts. This, in turn, led to its success as a central institution in the lives of American Jews at the turn of the twentieth century.

# INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the twentieth century, there was a dramatic change in worldwide Jewish demography as a mass influx of Eastern European Jews flocked to American shores. These immigrants faced many challenges upon arrival, leading to confusion about how their traditional lifestyle and beliefs fit into their desires to be part of modern American society. The Jewish community to live suspended between these two worlds and worked to find a balance that embodied both. Therefore, wherever these two worlds crossed paths in American society, underlying traditional Jewish qualities emerged.

The most common place this internal struggle played out was in the industrial scene. With harsh working conditions and widespread poverty, many Jews who worked in industry embraced American trade unionism that was blossoming at this time. Jewish laborers' interactions with the labor movement greatly impacted their lives and helped them find their voice in society as well as develop their own community. As a result, the Jewish labor movement became *the* leading organizer and unifier of the American Jewish community between the years 1880 and 1915.

The Jewish labor movement fused traditional Jewish practices with newfound American culture and union activism. It is the intention of this study to identify the extent to which distinctively *Jewish* characteristics are present within this movement as well as the role these attributes played in legitimizing trade unionism for the Jewish community.

The *Jewish labor movement*, as defined by this study, is a combination of the collective efforts of two activist organizational consortiums: unions that included significant numbers of Jewish members and internal communal organizations specifically seeking to engage the Jewish community in socialist and union activity and ideology. The scope of this study specifically examines the Jewish community that settled in New York City's Lower East Side, as it held the largest population of American Jews during this time. Further, it is noteworthy to mention that examples used to clarify points have been limited to the garment industry, for at time, the garment industry was the largest employer of the Jewish community and also because Jewish laborers were the majority of its employees.

The literature review following this introduction is provided to explain factors that led American Jews at the turn of the twentieth century to join the ranks of the labor movement in mass numbers. The study following this review examines the Jewish characteristics of this movement and the role these particular attributes played in unifying the community under the auspices of trade unionism. This will be examined through an analysis of Jewish labor movement literature of the time.

# CHAPTER 1
# HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

## Immigration Patterns and Building of the Lower East Side Jewish Community

In order to best comprehend the influence of the Jewish labor movement on the American Jewish community between the years 1880 and 1915, it is essential to understand the makeup and characteristics that distinguished this population.

Between the years 1815 and 1880, an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 German Jews immigrated to the United States, making up a significant majority of the small, but steadily increasing American Jewish community.[1] This population acclimated well to American society and quickly moved up the economic ladder. With this success, they began to create a distinct American Jewish culture including communal organizations to help both themselves and future Jewish immigrants transition into American society. Throughout the following decades, these contributions played a significant role in the development of the American Jewish community.

While German Jewry dominated immigration throughout the nineteenth century, it was Eastern European Jews who marked the next period of Jewish immigration. The year 1880 was a turning point in Jewish immigration patterns as the United States, with doors open, allowed massive waves of Eastern European immigrants into the country. This first

[1] Cohen, Martin A. *Jewish Immigrants and American Trade Unions."* Diss. University of Chicago. August: 1941. (4)

wave of Eastern European Jewry was numerically significant and greatly altered the makeup of the American Jewish population, as seen in the following table:

**Jewish Immigration to United States**[א]

| Year | Total | From Eastern Europe | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1900[2] | 43,507 | 42,888 | 98.58% |
| 1905[3] | 103,941 | 101,762 | 97.90% |
| 1910[4] | 66,153 | 57,456 | 86.85% |
| 1915[5] | 51,423 | 48,730 | 94.76% |

During these years, United States Jewry ascended from 251,000 in 1881 to 2,044,762 in 1910 to 2,933,374 in 1915,[6] with the percentage of Jews from Eastern European decent becoming a significant population of its community. Because this new population quickly outnumbered the standing American Jewish population, American Jewry was redefined. Characteristics of Eastern European Jewish culture and community began to represent the mainstream American Jewish community.

It is noteworthy to mention the conditions that led to this mass exodus of Jews from Eastern Europe, for it was no accident that this wave of immigration occurred at this time. The largest population came from Russia, Romania and Austria-Hungary, which

[א] This table depicts Jewish immigration into the United States through New York City between the years 1900 and 1915. Prior to 1900, incomplete records were kept at ports of entry. While Baltimore, Maryland and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania also had entry ports, the most significant immigrant population came through New York City. Further, there is incomplete data as to the number of Jews entering the United States through other ports.

[2] *American Jewish Yearbook.* Volume 2. 1900.

[3] *American Jewish Yearbook.* Volume 7. 1905.

[4] *American Jewish Yearbook.* Volume 12. 1910.

[5] *American Jewish Yearbook.* Volume 17. 1915.

[6] *American Jewish Yearbook.* Volume 1, 12 and 17, respectively.

were newly emancipated in 1861, 1864 and 1867, respectively. This liberation was a time of great intellectual development as these nations attempted to play catch-up to their philosophical counterparts across Europe. And unlike their previous position in society, Jews living in these nations were also able to enjoy the new freedoms presented. "Some Jewish youths were admitted into gymnasia and universities and thrilled to new ideas of freedom and brotherhood, the new discipline of science, and the lure of contemporary European literature and philosophy."[7] In large numbers, they embraced ideas of modernity and secularism that were recently bestowed upon them as well as newly found socialist teachings.

One such faction, the Jewish *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) movement became widespread. Challenging Jewish tradition and text, shtetl folkways, government authority and Russian culture, *Haskalah* supporters embraced their newly found freedoms.[8] Jewish radical movements, such as the *Haskalah*, played a significant role in altering the community. "The life of east European Jewry boil[ed] over with movements, parties, associations... like socialism and Zionism ... soon becom[ing] major forces in Jewish public life."[9]

However, the liberation of these nations was also troubling, as the emancipated states were juxtaposed between old and new, between medieval and modern. Recently freed

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[7] Levin, Nora. *While Messiah Tarried: Jewish Socialist Movements, 1871 – 1917.* Schocken Books. New York: 1977. (12)
[8] Ibid. (10)
[9] Howe, Irving. *World of our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made.* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. New York: 1976. (16)

serfs poured into urban centers, taking work in the newly developed factories, and replaced Jewish trade laborers' small-scale shops. As the economic condition further unfolded, political instability ensued. Jews sank into unemployment and poverty, leading them to step out of their shtetl existence and find jobs amongst other their non-Jewish neighbors.

But coming in contact with non-Jewish workers only led to growing hostility. With this hostility came increased anti-Semitism, a series of boycotts on Jewish stores, riots, pogroms, and massacres of Jews across Eastern Europe in the 1880s.[10] As anti-Semitism spread, Jews were denied rights recently bestowed upon them as well as permission to live where they wished, pushing them into further poverty. The pogroms of 1881-1882 constituted a turning pointing in Eastern European Jewish history as they led many to flee and begin a new life.[11]

The combination of this enlightenment period and growing anti-Semitism brought forth the question of Jewish survival. Challenged with this dilemma, many were torn between their new universalistic outlook and their long-standing tradition. This led to an immigration debate of whether to settle in America or Palestine. While some Zionists did turn to Palestine, the majority looked towards the United States.

The appeal to immigrate to America over Palestine was two-fold. First, as a growing nation, the United States was said to be full of endless potential opportunities. Second, a

[10] Cohen, Martin A. (17)
[11] Levin, Nora. (18)

move to America seemed a less political and ideological choice. "America remained the goal of most Jews who yearned for physical safety and economic security in a free land, uncomplicated by ideological twists."[12] In the United States, they saw security, liberty and great economic opportunities. In mass numbers, they set sail towards America. "In the thirty-three years between the assassination of Alexander II and the outbreak of the First World War, approximately one third of Eastern European Jews left their homelands"[13] with the majority heading towards American soil.

The growing Jewish radical voice in Eastern Europe at this time played a significant role in the immigration patterns and development of this community. It was these individuals who led Eastern European Jews to immigrate en mass. For some, namely the young intellectuals, this mass immigration was encouraged by their philosophical principles.

One example of the leadership that led this movement to America is seen in the *Am Olom* (Eternal People) society that emerged in the late nineteenth century. With strong leadership, *Am Olom* had established two goals: to embrace socialist values and to encourage immigration to the United States. Once in America, these goals would be interwoven, as they would build communal farms upon arrival. In small, but significant numbers, the *Am Olom* immigrants arrived upon American shores. In the end, the

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[12] Ibid. (47)
[13] Howe, Irving. *World of our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made.* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. New York: 1976. (26)

majority settled in New York City's Lower East Side, as their farming communes never matriculated.

Although their goals of building Jewish agricultural communes were not successful, these individuals had a profound impact on the development of the Jewish community of New York City, the largest centralized Jewish population in the United States at this time. Holding onto their ideology, they became leaders and organizers of the Jewish socialist and labor movement. They "were the pioneers of what later developed into a strong socialist and trade-union movement among the Jewish immigrant worker in this country."[14] In fact, one of the most prominent leaders of the Jewish Labor Movement, Abraham Cahan, emigrated from Eastern Europe with the *Am Olom* community.

As is evident through the *Am Olom* example, ideological organizational efforts, while small in number, made a significant impact on immigration and settlement patterns of their community. Their radical thought and belief in communal action were of great significance. As Morris Hillquit, a Jewish socialist politician, states, "These young people had received their political baptism in the underground revolutionary movement of Russia" and brought it to the United States.[15] This population had come from a place of great anti-Semitism and in America, was hoping for a more promising future. It was this immigrant generation who developed the American Jewish community and who outlined the role played by the Jewish labor movement within it.

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[14] Cohen, Martin A. (35)
[15] Howe, Irving and Kenneth Libo. *How We Lived: A Documentary History of Immigrant Jews in America 1880-1930.* Richard Marek Publishers. New York: 1979. (165)

**Characteristics of Jewish Settlement Patterns in the United States**

Not surprisingly, upon arrival, the Eastern European Jews from Russia, Romania, and Austria-Hungary settled together in America, as they shared similar religious background, culture and language. Dramatically different from the standing Jewish population of the United States, the Eastern Europeans established a unique way of life, isolating themselves from those around them – a commonality among new immigrant populations.[16] With a division between location of housing, industry, culture and language, each immigrant community, including Eastern European Jewry, became an enclave representing their country of origin. It is this communal self-exclusion that will later play a significant role in the development of a separate *Jewish* labor movement.

Key influential factors leading to an immigrant population's settlement pattern were the location of the port of arrival, funds available, their occupational trades and the location of family and friends. Therefore, while some settled in cities throughout the United States, a significant majority of Eastern European Jews remained close to their arrival point of Ellis Island, settling in an enclave of New York City: the Lower East Side. From Bowery Street to the East River, Market Street to Fourteenth, the Lower East Side became the hub of Eastern European Jewish society.[17] In one small square mile of tenement houses, a sizeable community was built. The Lower East Side became a

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[16] Leventman, Seymour. "From Shtetl to Suburb." *The Ghetto and Beyond: Essays on Jewish Life in America.* Ed. Peter Rose. Random House. New York: 1969. (39)
[17] Rischin, Moses. *The Promised City: New York's Jews 1870 – 1914.* Harvard University Press. Cambridge: 1962. (80)

crowded ghetto and the largest concentration of Jews in the United States at this time. Paradoxically looking both different and similar from the Eastern European shtetls from which they came, this community had a unique blend of Jewish tradition and American cultures.

For many, transitioning to American life was a difficult one and their choice to remain close to others from 'the old country' eased this process. "The immigrant now lived in the turmoil of gigantic New York where he frequently felt isolated and alien."[18] So, it is not surprising that these immigrants looked inward. Here, they were able to speak Yiddish, *daven* (pray), buy kosher meat and reconnect with friends from their homeland. There was comfort in this mixture of old and new, further explaining how traditional Jewish religious and cultural attributes continued to play a role in their lives, and affecting their contact with the greater American society. "Physically, they resided in tenements on the East Side of New York ... but spiritually they were rooted in the traditions of the Eastern European towns from whence they emigrated."[19]

Internally, three main community structures were built to sustain the community's needs: synagogues, *landsmanshaftn* and social service agencies. In synagogues, the Old World *shtetl's* core, Jews were again able to come together for prayer and lifecycle events. They took shape in the United States, yet the role they played for the community changed. No longer did synagogues carry the same level of influence they possessed in Eastern

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[18] Menes, Abraham. "The East Side: Matrix of the Jewish Labor Movement." *Jewish Life in America.* Theodore Freidman and Robert Gordis, Editors. Horizon Press. New York: 1955. (140)
[19] Cohen, Martin A. (30)

Europe, for upon arrival to America, many Jews removed themselves from this tradition to find community elsewhere.

*Landsmanshaftn,* or social and cultural lodges, also developed on the Lower East Side, allowing individuals from same towns and villages of the old country to reconnect.[20] These organizations provided opportunities for Yiddish dialogue, theatre and other means of keeping alive the spiritual culture of the Eastern European *shtetl* community. Further, they provided their membership with social services including health professionals, loans and burial needs. These *landsmanshaftn* proved to be important developments within internal Eastern European communal life. By 1920, more American Jews belonged to *landsmanshaftn* than belonged synagogues.[21]

Other agencies emerged – cultural and charitable – to fill the needs of the community and help ease their transition to American society. A strong player in this effort was yesterday's Jewish immigrant, those of German decent, who spearheaded many of the charitable social service agencies. German Jews had come far, both socially and economically, in America. They were ashamed of their 'less refined' Eastern European Jewish brethren and reacted by assisting the transition process, for their own personal benefit as well as for the immigrants themselves. By funding organization like Hebrew Immigrant Aids Society and the Baron de Hirsch Fund, they were able to provide temporary shelters as well as open soup kitchens throughout the Lower East Side. The

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[20] Howe, Irving. *World of our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made.* (183)
[21] Diner, Hasia. *Jews in the United States, 1654-2000.* Oxford University Press. New York: 1999. (139)

German Jews played a significant role in helping their Jewish brethren acclimate to America.

It is important to note that most of these agencies had a distinctive Jewish flair. They were intended specifically to help *Jewish* immigrants and therefore addressed *Jewish* needs. For example, one foundation was the Hebrew Female Benevolent Association. Part of their mission was to assist with death and burial needs, for although many immigrants were removed from religious society, Jewish burial customs were largely upheld. Through this example, it can be seen that the community they developed was a mixture of both modernity and traditionalism. And organizational life, though designed to "Americanize" the population, was sprinkled with aspects of Jewish religion and culture.

Overall, there was varied success amongst these internal organizations. Those that held the longest-lasting and most influential impact were ones that helped the community bridge the gap between the old world shtetl and American society. "The house of prayer and study, literary and dramatic center, home of musical worship, office of mutual aid and communal devotion gradually was bereft of its attractions... bit by bit, its grip was loosened by lodge and benevolent society, newspaper and lecture platform and trade unions."[22] The Jewish labor movement, which brought some comforting elements of Jewish tradition into the folds of American society, was one such organization. Its ability to unify and organize the population under a common cause will be further expressed

[22] Rischin, Moses. *The Promised City: New York's Jews 1870 – 1914.* Harvard University Press. Cambridge: 1962. (146)

throughout this study. For now, it is important to note that it was through the merging of these two identities that the Jewish community was able to smooth the transition from old to new.

## Professions of Jews between 1880 and 1915

A primary reason this community settled in large urban centers is due to the boom in trade industries. The greatest economic opportunities were found within the urban-industrial frontier.[23] And just as this massive Jewish population reshaped the American Jewish community so too did they leave their mark on the American workforce. Their most defining role was within the needle trades, as the community congregated around this industry.

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, the garment industry began growing at a rapid rate. Between 1889 and 1899, its size was two to three times more than the average of all other industries.[24] Where wives once sewed clothing for the entire family, both men's and women's garments were now mass-produced. Separate and detached stages of production became an industry trend, increasing the number of small shops that appeared. The jobs within the industry were repetitious, easily learned and fast-paced. For twelve to fourteen hours a day, employees would find themselves hunched over a sewing machine, basting and hemming garments in these sweatshops.

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[23] Hoxie, Robert E. "Trade Unionism in the United States." *The American Economic Review.* Volume 44. Number 2: May 1954.
[24] Howe, Irving. *World of our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made.* (155)

It was in this industry where the majority of Eastern European Jewish immigrants found work. In the mid-nineteenth century, the German Jews firmly established themselves in the garment-making industries and soon became manufacturers in the field. To help both themselves as entrepreneurs and to assist their Jewish brethren, these manufacturing employers reached out to the incoming Jewish population when hiring employees for their shops. Representatives from Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society would come to the arrival ports such as Ellis Island, ready to hire skilled Jewish tailors and clothes makers, which they succeeded to do in large numbers. "In New York City, the largest and most influential clothing center of the United States, the Jewish immigrants as employers and employees clearly dominated the developments of the industry after 1880."[25]

The way in which the needle trades developed from this time forth was due in large part to the Eastern European Jewish presence in the industry. In spite of low wages, long hours and unsanitary conditions, these individuals were drawn to the contracting shop managed by German Jews. Working for these employers meant working on Sunday rather than on Saturday, working in shops closer to home and speaking a familiar language. These employment benefits helped to ease their transition into America.

While the greatest concentration of Jews was in the needle trades, other industries also held significant Jewish populations. The second largest Jewish presence was in the cigar making industry. In the early twentieth century, over twenty percent of New York's cigar

[25] Cohen, Martin A. (50)

making employees were of Jewish decent.[26] Similar to the needle trades, the large numbers of Jews attracted to this industry began with the German Jewish influence on the manufacturing of cigars. Beyond these two industries, Jews worked in smaller numbers. Some branched out to other industrial fields while others remained in the Jewish economic sphere, as storekeepers, peddlers, butchers and bakers in their local Jewish neighborhoods.

It was the afore mentioned factors and forces: the massive arrival of a Jewish immigrant base from Eastern Europe; its settlement in urban centers such as New York City's Lower East Side; and its concentration in certain American industries; that led to the Jewish labor movement's effectiveness as the leading organizer and unifier of the Jewish community between the years 1880 and 1915. This argument will be further illustrated in the following chapter, which examines the influential characteristics, leaders, organizations and activities of the American Jewish labor movement.

[26] Howe, Irving. *World of our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made.* (162)

# CHAPTER 2
# ORGANIZING THE JEWISH WORKERS

## The American Labor Movement

By the turn of the century, the American labor movement had already begun to take shape as an extensive organizing force. Trade union activity had made its appearance in many industries. A group of workers who developed a consciousness of common interest would speak with a unified voice, fighting for better working conditions, hours and pay.[27] Because it began as a grassroots operation, the American Labor Movement took on many shapes and forms – from small shop locals to large-scale unions such as the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor, who were key players in its widespread expansion.

With such variety of players and motives, the American labor movement embodied broad and diverse principles and represented many different kinds of workers. Unions were as diverse as the American population itself. Some sought immediate changes in working conditions while others found value in the romantic idealism of the movement. American unionism "expressed nothing less than the ideals, aspirations, hopes and fears, modes of thinking and actions of all these working groups."[28] It was the voice of many, for it adjusted to each industry, population and aims. The American labor movement became an outlet for worker frustrations and a means to improve an individual's position in society.

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[27] Hoxie, Robert E. (203)
[28] Ibid. (204)

**Organized Labor Materializes in the Jewish Community**

With harsh working conditions, Jewish laborers, as well, quickly became disillusioned with their position and began looking for answers to their tribulations. Trade union activity seeped into the workplaces and mentalities of the Jewish worker. Jewish involvement in the labor movement materialized for two primary reasons: first, as a ticket to becoming a part of mainstream American society and secondly, as an outlet to express their already-developed radical socialist ideology in their new home.

To begin with, Jewish labor activity was a way for the immigrant population to become absorbed in American society. America was seen as a land of freedom and equality, with limitless potential. However, to them, the means of obtaining this goal seemed to be in the hands of the labor union members. In daily newspapers, on street corners and in the workplace, discussions of the latest strikes and rallies inspired the lone laborer. In New York City, the Knights of Labor paraded through the streets in 1882 and 1884 under the slogan, "an injury to one is the concern of all."[29] The American Federation of Labor picked up where the Knight left off, absorbing the various factions and rallying some of the largest strikes of the 1900's. Many of these strikes affected industries with significant numbers of Jews. Trade unions - including the International Ladies Garment Worker's Union – were created within the industries, changing the economic power struggle by giving a voice to the masses.

[29] http://www.knightsoflabor.org/

The brotherhood of the union movement was appealing to the Jewish community, as it demonstrated American freedom and equality. Preoccupied with the idea of economic success, the Jewish laborer saw that union activism provided an arena for political and economic discussion as well as a political training ground for leadership.[30] The labor platform valued the immigrants' lowly status, connecting them to the greater American society.

Secondly, alongside their desire to become more American, Jews became involved with the labor movement as a result of their radical socialist ideology. The Bund, a Jewish socialist movement founded in Russia in 1897, played a vital role in organizing Jewish workers and intellectuals under their goal of social democracy and a sense of shared culture. Founded in Russia, its popularity soon spread to Jewish communities around the world – including to the Lower East Side. Although the Bund was originally designed as an arm of the Russian social democratic movement, it developed into a separate organization to provide direction and encouragement to the Jewish laborer.[31] This movement, like the *Haskalah* and *Am Olom*, helped bring the themes of egalitarianism and modernity to the Jewish community. Therefore, as the Eastern European Jews fled a land of pogroms and anti-Semitism, the lessons taught by these socialist organizations served to remind these immigrants of their need for a distinctive voice.[32] In America, union involvement became an outlet for this collectivist philosophy. As Cohen states,

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[30] Howe, Irving. *World of our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made.* (322)
[31] Levin, Nora. (260)
[32] Howe, Irving. *World of our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made.* (294)

> The European background of the radical Russian-Jewish intellectual who came here in the early 1880s and [his or her] influences on the Jewish immigrant workers who came here after a career in a revolutionary movement are intimately related to trade-union experiences.[33]

With this background in socialism and radicalism, the Jewish worker moved with ease into the labor movement.

The young socialist intellectuals became the leaders of this movement, bringing with them the immigrant masses.[34] The previous example of the *Am Olom* community further illustrates this point. Struggling with reality, they brought forth their ideologies and applied it to their present plight. Unable to successfully build communal farms, they instead worked toward organizing the community in the Lower East Side. These new leaders stepped forward in America in a manner in which traditional *shtetl* leadership was unable. "Old religious leaders were themselves a loss in America; they did not comprehend the new realities and had no answers to the problems it posed."[35]

One example of this is Abraham Cahan. Emigrating from Russia in 1882 with the *Am Olom*, Cahan quickly became an advocate for the trade union movement. He was a prominent leader for the community because he spoke their language – in both real and metaphorical terms. He was one of the people, giving speeches and teaching in Yiddish, the language of the streets. Further, Cahan emphasized the importance of including

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[33] Cohen, Martin A. (8)
[34] Levin, Nora. (71)
[35] Menes, Abraham. (147)

traditional aspects of Jewish communal culture in his pro-union message, recognizing that he would only be heard if he spoke in a relatable way. This resonated with the community. The radical socialist ideology directly addressed the issues they faced by attempting to "bring an end to the exploitativeness, the inhumane competitiveness, [and] the moral frigidity associated with capitalism."[36] The trade union message, expressed by leadership like Cahan, helped lead Jews into the trade union movement.

### Creation of a Separate Jewish Labor Movement

The goal of becoming Americanized, coupled with the Eastern European Jewish history of radical and socialist values, led many in the Jewish community to the American labor movement. Yet these fall short of explaining why the development of a *separate* Jewish Labor Movement within American society became the substitute for Jewish activity within the mainstream labor movement as well as a key unifier and organizer of the American Jewish community.

This occurred for a variety of reasons. To begin with, while the labor movement was attractive in philosophy, it was not as welcoming or engaging for the Jewish community, for there was a presence of anti-Semitism in the workplace. This anti-Semitism created a rift between Jewish and non-Jewish employees. Unfamiliar with one another's customs and lifestyle, this led to further self-isolation of the Jewish community. And as they were

[36] Howe, Irving and Kenneth Libo. *How We Lived: A Documentary History of Immigrant Jews in America 1880-1930.* (161)

"long habituated to exclusion from social institutions,"[37] it is not surprising that Jews created their own Jewish unions.

This separation became necessary when Jews realized they had different needs than their secular counterparts and that the labor movement was not as attentive as originally hoped. Union chiefs, like Samuel Gompers, although a Jew himself, promoted unification of the various trade locals under the umbrella of the American Federation of Labor. Gompers was founder and long-standing president of the American Federation of Labor. He played a significant role in bringing the union platform to a wider audience, including bringing it to industries heavily populated by Jews and detested any efforts that conflicted with the trade union platform. He adamantly opposed locals embracing traditional customs, socialist agendas or open immigration policies. This alienated many in the Jewish community, for this immigrant population found it necessary to organize in Yiddish, to petition to work on Sunday rather than on Shabbat, to include socialist philosophies that were widely present in the Eastern European Jewish community and also to support open immigration efforts that would bring over family and friends from Eastern Europe. Thus, while Gompers, like other mainstream organizers, preached for American workers' unity and for immediate gains in the workplace – over romantic ideals, the mainstream labor message isolated the majority of Jewish laborers. In this way, one can see how the Jewish community, while interested in embracing Americanism, also wanted to hold onto their traditions, communal practices and philosophies.

[37] Dawidowitz, Lucy. (186)

Another factor that impacted the development of a separate Jewish labor movement was the language barrier. At the turn of the century, Yiddish was the universal spoken language among Eastern European Jews.[38] Capitalizing upon the freedom of expression in the United States, this community built an extensive Yiddish culture of newsprint, novels, poetry, music and theatre. The unfamiliarity of English coupled with a blossoming Yiddish culture further alienated the Jewish community from mainstream organized labor. The Yiddish press played a significant role in the development of the Jewish Labor Movement, to be highlighted in later chapters.

Finally, the trade and profession of an individual influenced his or her involvement in the union movement. For Jews, this meant the presence of union organization in "Jewish" trades – namely, the garment industry. Because garment workshops were small, scattered shops throughout hundreds of tenement structures and storefronts, workers were secluded to their individual workplace. It took a significant amount of effort to organize such a widely dispersed population of laborers. And the mass grouping of Jews in this industry played a significant role in their late entry into the union movement. This organizational challenge and the delayed entry into the movement separated the Jewish community from many union dialogues and partnerships.

The creation of a separate Jewish labor movement can be attested to the influences listed above. However, although these reasons seem to carry negative connotations, the Jewish labor movement was a positive activist force developing within this community. It was

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[38] Rich, J.C. (16)

"in the unions [where] the Jewish workers found not just a protector but a home, a cultural milieu."[39] These reasons: the presence of anti-Semitism, the specific needs of each community, language barriers and areas of employment, led to the creation of ethnic divisions within organized unions. Yet it was the will and desire of the participants within the Jewish labor movement that kept it alive and influential.

The development of a *separate* labor movement that took shape within the Jewish community was not seen exclusively amongst this population. This separate organization and communal building effort was a trend amongst all immigrant groups.[40] Trade unionism, like all other emerging movements at this time, is reflective of this trend.

## The Jewish Labor Movement

For the purpose of this paper, the Jewish labor movement is defined as the collective efforts of two activist organizational consortiums: unions that include significant numbers of Jewish members *and* organizations specifically seeking to engage the Jewish community in socialist and union activities and ideology. Now we will examine the makeup of these key players and their contributions to the Jewish labor movement.

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[39] Howe, Irving and Kenneth Libo. *How We Lived: A Documentary History of Immigrant Jews in America 1880-1930.* Richard Marek Publishers. New York: 1979. (161)
[40] Feingold, Henry. (95)

*Unions with a Considerable Jewish Membership*

Jews joined the ranks of union members in their respective industries. Two examples of labor unions that maintained sizeable Jewish membership during this time period were the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and the Amalgamated Clothing Worker's Union. These examples help clarify both the attraction of unions for Jewish employees as well as the Jewish community's impact on the overall movement.

*International Ladies Garment Workers' Union*

The ILGWU was founded in New York City in June 1900, after years of mounting disparities between garment industry locals.[41] Needle trades were amongst the hardest to organize as employees were separated not only by location, but also by trade and profession. The "lack of cooperation between different elements of the labor force may have been in part a consequence of the structure of the garment industry itself."[42] While previous attempts had been made to organize these various needle trades under an umbrella union organization, efforts did not successfully materialized until the ILGWU in 1900.

Soon after it's founding, the ILGWU was granted recognition and a charter by the American Federation of Labor.[43] Throughout the initial years, the ILGWU grew rapidly and its membership base became active in the larger trade union movement. They fought

[41] Laslett, John and Mary Tyler. *The ILGWU in Los Angeles, 1907-1988.* Ten Star Press. Inglewood, California: 1989. (5)
[42] Ibid. (5)
[43] Cohen, Martin A. (124)

for the rights of garment workers, banning together with other labor activists under the auspices of the AFL.

As the majority of the individuals working in the garment industries during this time were Eastern European Jewish immigrants, the ILGWU membership and activities reflected this trend. Locals' minutes and convention proceedings were printed in Yiddish as well as English. Additionally, "the convention of 1903 adopted a resolution to petition the President of the United States to condemn the Russian government for its part in the Kishineff pogrom of 1903," allowing the political voice of the Jewish immigrant to support the Jewish community from their homeland.[44] Activism of this nature continued for as long as there remained strong Jewish membership. This emphasizes both the number of Jews active in the ILGWU as well as the values they worked to uphold, including their Jewish continuity.

While the ILGWU had a reputation for sporadic membership and periodic activism, much like other needle trade unions, it did hold significant clout both within the overall labor movement and with many prominent labor leaders. At the turn of the twentieth century, ILGWU housed the largest number of union members in the garment industry, which was the largest industry of the day.[45] Because of this, the issues and petitions supported by the ILGWU were brought to the mainstream union movement. This meant that *Jewish* issues at times came to the forefront of the union agenda.

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[44] Howe, Irving. *World of our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made.* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. New York: 1976. (296)
[45] Ibid. (126)

As seen in the ILGWU, the Jewish voice – that of workers rights, the use of Yiddish and the support and protection of Jewish continuity – was outspoken and prominent. Further, the large numbers of ILGWU members demonstrate that Jews were involved in the union movement.

## Jewish Labor Organizations

Alongside the development of these labor unions with large Jewish membership, there were three key organizations that shaped the Jewish communal involvement in the labor movement: United Hebrew Trades (UHT), the Jewish labor press (namely, *The Forward*) and the Workmen's Circle. These three organizations are in many ways responsible for shaping the political, social and cultural labor voice within the Jewish community.

> "The first two decades of the twentieth century... gradually built the Jewish labor movement on a triad of organizations: the UHT, which served as a container for the Jewish locals; the *Jewish Daily Forward,* which served as its press organ; and the Workmen's Circle, which in 1892 had become its fraternal order and welfare agency. It was a solid foundation for the first all-Jewish power base in organized labor."[46]

[46] Feingold, Henry. (104)

### *The United Hebrew Trades*

Taking a lead from other immigrant groups' efforts to organize under the auspices of people hood and unity, the United Hebrew Trades was created in New York City in 1888. Recognizing the benefits of unifying Jewish locals, UHT leadership – including the prominent Jewish labor leader Morris Hillquit – designed an umbrella structure and thereafter recruited locals to join their ranks. A declaration of intent was drafted, stating (in Yiddish) the UHT's ultimate aims, similar to the overall labor movement's demands including: fair working conditions, eight-hour workdays and equal pay for men and women.[47] In order to work towards these issues, UHT took upon the responsibility for organizing Jewish trade locals. UHT preserved those locals with poor leadership or dormant efforts and encouraged individuals to join the ranks, fighting for the underappreciated laborer, their Jewish local and the overall community.

Unlike other organizing efforts within the Jewish community, UHT did not emphasize any cultural or nationalistic aims. For UHT leadership, the ultimate goal was that of labor equity. And although Yiddish was the medium of communication used to talk to Jewish locals, UHT saw this as a 'means to an end' rather than an asset and important characteristic of their efforts. To them, it was necessary to use Jewish rhetoric to reach their intended audience. However, after this was attained, their ultimate goal was to be focused upon. "We recognize no Jewish question and because only we, the Jewish-speaking citizens, can succeed among Jewish immigrants, and because we speak their

[47] Cohen, Martin A. (68)

language and we know their life – only for these reasons do we organize a special Jewish body."[48]

However, despite this mentality, UHT greatly contributed to developing a separate and distinctly *Jewish* voice of labor.[49] Their efforts turned the Jewish locals into powerful players in the great union movement by assisting locals already in existence, giving legitimizing their organizational style and strengthening their efforts through support and encouragement. Further, while UHT's goals were universal, they recognized the importance of speaking to one's audience and infusing its message with the Jewish community's underlying values and customs.

### *The Workmen's Circle*

Beyond UHT's efforts on the political and activist front, their efforts spread to further embody Americanism with uniquely Jewish characteristics. This was accomplished through the development of the Workmen's Circle, a nationalist fraternal order and mutual aid society, in 1892. By 1900, the Workmen's Circle was officially chartered under the banner, "every worker in the land, is united by a ring of friendship."[50] Its goals were twofold. First, to work toward ending oppression and exploitation of laborers and secondly, to preserve and revive Jewish cultural life.

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[48] Cohen, Martin A. (70)
[49] Ruchames, Louis. (234)
[50] http://www.circle.org/.

The Workmen's Circle served to further the mission of UHT by providing supplementary opportunities for individuals to be actively involved. Alongside an individual's participation in pro-union activity, the Workmen's Circle provided educational opportunities for adults and children on topics of labor or Jewish culture. Children attended schools and camps while parents attended weekly lectures as well as Yiddish orchestra and theatre concerts. As Howe states,

> 'One need only go,' remarked a gentile visitor, 'to a Sunday morning Jewish socialist Sunday School to get a glimpse of the leaven of socialism that is among all ages of Jewry. There are over 100 children spending an hour singing, a second hour in classes, eagerly discussing questions as to the relations between the wages John Wanamaker pays his employees and moral goodness.'[51]

The immigrant Jewish community at this time greatly desired and supported these organizations. The radical, intellectual activism allowed individuals an inlet to American society. These organizations also took into account the unique Jewish customs of traditional life. For these reason, the Workmen's Circle quickly gained popularity. In 1900, the year it became chartered, it had just over 300 members. By 1910, the Workmen's Circle boasted a membership of 38,866.[52] The attractive combination of modernity and tradition that the Jewish community looked to find led to the Workmen's Circles' widespread success. The Workmen's Circle contributed to the trade union

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[51] Howe, Irving. World of our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. New York: 1976. (311)

[52] Ruchames, Louis. "Jewish Radicalism in the United States." *The Ghetto and Beyond: Essays on Jewish Life in America.* Peter Rose, editor. Random House. New York: 1969. (236)

movement by helping develop a labor consciousness, contributing to the building of a Yiddish culture, providing educational opportunities and partnering with the Jewish labor movement.

### *Jewish Labor Press*

From the beginning of the development of Yiddish press in the United States, there was an association between Yiddish journalism and the labor movement. In 1885, the Russian Jewish Workers Association published the first Yiddish newsprint, the *Yiddishe Folkzeitung*, leading dozens of other publications to appear throughout this time.[53] This growth of Yiddish writings was a new phenomenon for the Jewish community. For, while Yiddish was the spoken language in the Eastern European *shtetls*, the written language was Hebrew and its literature was religious in context. However, upon arrival to the United States, the yearning for free written expression in their spoken language was widespread and in large demand.

While many Yiddish newspapers were born during this time, the most significant and widest circulated was *The Forward*. In January of 1897, UHT delegates from over twenty Jewish organizations came together to develop an outlet for which to express their pro-union voice. *The Forward* was to serve as this print and as the UHT press organ. Together this delegation, later named the "Forward Association," proposed this newsprint to promote the moral and spiritual values of cooperative brotherhood and democratic

[53] Feingold, Henry. (100)

socialism within the American Jewish community.[54] Quickly they recruited prominent writers and leaders of the community to run this publication – Abraham Cahan and Morris Hillquit.

As editor, Cahan made ultimate literary stylistic decisions for *The Forward.* Knowing that the goals of this publication were to share the socialist and trade union ideology with the general Jewish community, Cahan worked hard to write a publication with simple language use and clarity in style. Together with his contributors, he ensured that *The Forward* read much like a magazine. The articles ranged from political agendas to human interest stories. A reader of *The Forward* would sift through columns, editorials, poetry, short fiction, serialized novels and literature and theatre reviews.[55] "Nothing like it had been seen before in Yiddish journalism: a paper so clear, so simple, so perceptive of the life and interests of its readers."[56]

*The Forward* refused to print anything that went against the union agenda such as any political advertising or 'help wanted' advertisements. However, while clearly aligned with the labor movement, *The Forward* also included many non-political pieces. Cahan fought other *Forward* leadership for these 'light' articles, for their inclusion brought additional readers to its pages. Therefore, while some articles in its pages did not directly address issues in of labor, they did ultimately serve to support its mission. It encouraged a

[54] Rich, J.C. (5)
[55] Rich, J.C. (18)
[56] Ibid. (23)

wider audience of readers to hear the trade union agenda and therefore engaged them in the dialogue of the movement.

*The Forward's* impacts were significant. "It is no exaggeration to say that the pages of the *Forward* ... contain a true epical history of the Jewish mass immigration and the immigrants' adaptation to life in the country."[57] Proven to be the most widely read Jewish newspaper, it provided its readers with an entry point to American culture by addressing domestic issues and concerns as well as guiding moral and ethical justifications of unionism as an assertion of human dignity and an expression of freedom and equality.[58]

> Under the editorship of Abraham Cahan, it became not merely the guide, mentor and organizer of the Jewish trade union, not only a Socialist educational agency of the first importance, but also and perhaps preeminently a powerful cultural and spiritual force among all sections of the Jewish community.[59]

*The Forward* was seen as a pillar of authority on issues of Jewish culture, socialist philosophy, and ways to acclimate into American society. This influence was, in large part, due to its authorship. Virtually every Yiddish author of note had his work published in *The Forward.*[60] Abraham Cahan, Morris Rosenfeld, Joseph Bovshover, David Edelstadt, and Morris Winshevsky established a professional reputation by contributing to this newsprint. Prior to their association with *The Forward*, these men were each

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[57] Metzker, Isaac. A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward. Doubleday and Company, Inc. New York: 1971. (11)
[58] Rich, J.C. (29)
[59] Minkoff, Nochum. "Yiddish Literature in America." *Jewish Life in America.* Ed. Theodore Friedman and Robert Gordis. (240)
[60] Rich, J.C. (15)

considered respected writers, yet their audience was limited. However, through their contributions to *The Forward*, they reached the masses. They were widely received, as they fluently expressed the troubles and aspirations of the Jewish immigrant laborer.

"The *Jewish Daily Forward*, a newspaper printed in a foreign language, has always been an instrument in the Americanization of immigrants by providing spiritual and cultural stimulation."[61] With a variety of news and cultural stories, *The Forward* spoke to a wide audience and served as both an important mouthpiece for labor dialogue and teachings as well as a unifying factor for the community.

The United Hebrew Trades, the Workmen's Circle and *The Forward* served as spokesmen for the voice of labor within the Jewish community as well as political, social, and cultural outlets. "While the organization of the Jewish labor movement was primarily motivated by the desire to improve the economic lot of the Jewish worker, it soon developed more important cultural implications," for it took on characteristics of the community from which it came.[62] Jewish qualities of the Jewish labor movement spoke to the masses and brought them into the folds of trade unionism. However, what is not clear is the significance that these attributes played, which will be further explored in the following chapters.

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[61] Ibid. (5)
[62] Minkoff, Nochum. (217)

## Jewish Labor Movement Activity

Two important events that occurred during this time highlight the combined efforts of these key players: the Uprising of 20,000 and the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire.

### *The Uprising of 20,000*

The 'Uprising of 20,000' began with a garment local's strike in July 1909 when over 200 workers walked out of the Rosen Brother's shop. These workers, most of whom were women, remained on strike for over five weeks. Eventually, the strike ended successfully with an agreement made between management and laborers. The success of this local's endeavors stirred other union activists to step forward on their own picket lines, demanding fair treatment in the workplace. In garment shops such as Leiserson's and the Triangle Shirtwaist Company,[63] these strikers decided to hold a special meeting to unify their message and inspire its participants. The speakers at this meeting were representative from various locals, ILGWU as well as officers of UHT.

A few days later, this overwhelming union community support alongside an increase in workplace disturbances – including the firing of union activists – led to a garment workers strike declared on September 27, 1909. This strike successfully engaged these locals and the picketers' spirits soared. However, as the strike dragged on, week-by-week, these small locals were running out of resources. UHT stepped in to assist by spreading the word of their efforts. UHT worked with other garment industry locals to arrange a strike for the entire trade – greatly expanding the message and proving they

[63] Cohen, Martin A. (150)

were serious in their requests. A meeting was called by advertising in the *Forward* and other such union publications to rally the support of the garment workers.

On November 22, thousands gathered in Cooper Union. After Yiddish speeches given by prominent leaders in the community, one young female striker declared, "I am a working girl. I am tired of listening to speakers who talk in general terms. What we are here for is to decide whether we shall or shall not strike. I offer a resolution that general strike be declared now!" After this proclamation, thousands enthusiastically cheered. With this audience response, the chairman of the meeting, Benjamin Feigenbaum shouted, "Will you take the old Jewish oath? ... If I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge, may my hand wither from the arm I raise!"[64] Within a few days after this rally, thousands of garment workers, in over 500 shops went on strike. The locals, the ILGWU and the UHT organized the masses through combined efforts. They organized picketers, committees, demonstrations and meetings. The strike was funded largely by collections of food, shelter, supplies as well as pro-union resources including complimentary subscriptions to the leading Yiddish newspapers at the time, including *The Forward.*

Final negotiations with industry management concluded on February 15, 1910. Employers conceded to shorter workdays and abolition of supply charges, but refused to formally recognize the union or exclusively employ union supporters. For this reason, the strike was only partially successful for the unions. While it gained mass support from the

[64] Howe, Irving and Kenneth Libo. *How We Lived: A Documentary History of Immigrant Jews in America 1880-1930.* Richard Marek Publishers. New York: 1979. (180)

worker population, it failed to develop the desired relationship between unions and management as well as union recognition within the industry.

The 'Uprising of 20,000' was a significant moment for the Jewish labor movement. It demonstrated the importance of collaborative organizational efforts for the community. Through the combined efforts of labor locals, international unions and UHT, the community was able to organize thousands, provide financial support for their efforts and unify under a collective message. The Uprising also unified a difficult industry to organize, which earned the Jewish local's respect from the overall labor movement. And finally, it succeeded in bringing employers to the table for negotiations, demonstrating its role as a collective voice and a power player.

These successes are in part due to the Uprising's underlying use of Jewish text, traditions and culture. To begin with, the Cooper Hall meeting, where Chairman Feigenbaum stated, "If I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge, may my hand wither from the arm I raise,"[65] echoes the Jewish text found in Psalm 137, stating, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand wither." This use of a religious text within the union oath emphasizes the deep-set Jewish culture that permeated the community. Further, the collection and gathering of funds to provide strikers with necessities – including the High Holiday needs, food and shelter and subscription to *The Forward*, directly correlates to the giving of *tzedakah*, yet combines this traditional Jewish practice with an American

[65] Howe, Irving. World of our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. New York: 1976. (298)

one, to support the underprivileged worker. Their use of Jewish culture and values legitimized their message. Overall, the 'Uprising of 20,000' proved to be an effective community unifier of an unpredictable industry, stimulating a fresh population of Jewish union supporters.

*Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire*

Arguably the most well known occurrence of sweatshop mismanagement and wide scale tragedy was the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of March 25, 1911. 148 workers died, unable to escape from their place of employment, as the management locked all exits to ensure productivity. This incident left a saddened impact on the Jewish community of the Lower East Side. Following months of tumultuous strikes, picket lines and mildly successful labor relations dialogue, the loss of fellow laborers in this tragic accident caused the Jewish community no small amount of hardship. "The East Side broke into scenes of hysteria, demonstrations, mass meetings, as if, finally, its burdens were just too much to bear."[66]

The Lower East Side reaction to the Triangle Shirtwaist fire demonstrated the ownership felt by the general community for its brethren. The men and women who perished were not only the concern of the immediate families or the Triangle Shirtwaist union local, but this tragedy became a symbol of the feelings of hopelessness, turmoil and despair of the overall Jewish community in the Lower East Side.

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[66] Howe, Irving and Kenneth Libo. How We Lived: A Documentary History of Immigrant Jews in America 1880-1930. Richard Marek Publishers. New York: 1979. (305)

The Triangle Shirtwaist fire played a significant role in unifying the Jewish community. Through this disaster, can be seen signs of communal mourning and collective organization and action. A Joint Relief Committee was formed from representatives from the Ladies' Waist & Dressmakers' Union, the Workmen's Circle, the Women's Trade Union League and the *Forward* to collect money relief funds to be distributed as needed.[67] *The Forward* printed a poem, entitled: "Requiem for the Triangle Shirtwaist Victims," by Morris Rosenfeld over the entire front page of their March 29, 1911 issue. This poem, to be further addressed in the following chapter, clarifies the significance of the situation in the lives of the community members and also presents the healing process in a distinctively Jewish and pro-union way, using Jewish traditional themes and language while simultaneously encouraging collective labor action.

As is evident in these three examples, the organizations that make up the Jewish labor movement played a significant role in unifying the Jewish community under the labor banner. Through their combined efforts, a coherent Jewish labor voice arose and helped shape both American society as well as the Jewish community.

**Summary**

Upon arrival, the wave of Jewish immigrants who arrived in the United States at this time had difficulties adjusting to their new country. They struggled to find employment, engage in politics as well as discern the role that Judaism would play in their lives. What

[67] http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/texts/reports/jrc_011513.html.

emerged after this struggle was a blending of the old and new worlds, which is evident in the Jewish labor movement.

> "The union hall began to play the same function that the *Beit Hamidrosh* (house of worship) had played in the *shtetl* (small town) in Eastern Europe. Instead of the revered *Rebbe*, there was now the socialist intellectual labor organizer; instead of the Torah, there was the doctrine of socialism; instead of mitzvoth, there was the struggle to improve the conditions of the underclass" – new *Halakah* were determined.[68]

The Jewish labor movement engaged the community in a wide sphere of activities: rallies and strikes, educational opportunities as well as cultural events and clubs. Diverse opportunities helped make it the leading organizer and unifier of the community. However, yet to be determined are the Jewish attributes present in this movement and the role they played in help the Jewish labor movement become a powerful voice within the Jewish community between the years 1880 and 1915. For, although the Jewish labor movement did not intend to reflect Judaism or serve the causes of Jewish survival, it did so.[69]

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[68] Feingold, Henry. (98)
[69] Levin, Nora. (210)

# CHAPTER 3
# EXPLORING JEWISH ATTRIBUTES WITHIN THE JEWISH LABOR MOVEMENT

## Overview

As outlined in the previous two chapters, the Jewish labor movement became a leading organizer and unifier of the Jewish community between the years 1880 and 1915. This movement possessed attributes of its followers, specifically Jewish attributes, making it successful at bringing together the community. This was due to its combined passion for trade union activism and American culture with their hold on traditional Jewish practices. "Judaism itself endowed labor with divine attributes."[70]

This research attempts to understand the extent to which Jewish religious and cultural qualities played a role in legitimizing labor movement activism within the community. In order to delve deeper into this theory, an analysis of Jewish labor literature will be presented. Through this examination a better understanding of the Jewish characteristics of the movement will be presented.

## Methodology

In order to recognize characteristics of this movement as having a distinctly *Jewish* tone, Judaism must first be defined. Without this as a base point, the "Jewish-ness" of the movement is arbitrary. However, while many scholars have attempted to define Judaism,

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[70] Dawidowicz, Lucy S. "The Jewishness of the Jewish Labor Movement in the United States." *The American Jewish Experience, Second Edition.* Ed. Jonathan Sarna. Holmes and Meier. New York: 1997. (191)

a commonly agreed upon definition is difficult to find. Because of this, detecting distinctively "Jewish" characteristics within this movement is challenging.

For this purposes of this study, the *Harvard Human Rights Journal* article, "The Complexity of Religion and the Definition of 'Religion' in International Law," provides an answer to this quandary.[71] This article outlines a scholarly definition that is used in the development of international law. Because Judaism was included in this broader study of religion, this article will serve as a surrogate definition of Judaism. Three overarching definitions of religion were identified: religion as a *theology*, *identity* and *way of life*.

- *Judaism as a Theology*

  The first of these definitions identifies religion in a theological sense. In this way, it is the belief system that a person upholds which defines religion. For Judaism, this means a belief in the Jewish G-d, the unquestioning truths taught by Judaism and Jewish doctrines that are upheld in order to follow this faith. When viewing the Jewish religion in a theological sense, the emphasis is placed on 'truth' claims of the religion as a basis for conviction.

- *Judaism as an Identity*

  A second way to define religion, and therefore define Judaism, is as an affiliation to a people. Rather than influenced by study, prayer or even conversion, this definition sees Judaism as a rooted identity. In this way, the emphasis is on the

[71] Gunn, T. Jeremy. "The Complexity of Religion and the Definition of 'Religion' in International Law." *Harvard Human Rights Journal.* Volume 16, Spring 2003. (1-24).

community's shared history, culture and ethnicity. Within this definition, even a deliberately non-religious Jew still believes himself to be Jewish in a broader sense, for he is a member of the Jewish people.

- *Judaism as a Way of Life*

  The final definition given for religion is 'as a way of life.' In this sense, Judaism, like other religions, is the actions, rituals, customs and traditions that distinguish its followers from others. Not focusing specifically on spirituality, theological beliefs or people-hood, this definition sees the Jewish religion as a lifestyle choice, based upon an individual's actions and motivations. In this way, the choice to live in a certain neighborhood, avoid eating pork or wearing certain clothing is a way of defining your Jewish-ness.

These three distinct definitions of religion will serve to guide the following research. Each piece of literature read will be evaluated within the parameters of these definitions in order to identify if they hold distinctly Jewish characteristics. And after assessing this literature within this context, the extent to which the labor movement adapted traditional Jewish forms of practice will be evident.

The following analyses of three texts taken from the Jewish labor movement will examine this question.

## Examining Texts of the Jewish Labor Movement

*Morris Rosenfeld: "Requiem: The Triangle Fire Victims"*

Morris Rosenfeld is known widely as the Yiddish-writing "poet laureate of the sweatshops," and as one of four "sweatshop poets" of the Jewish community.[72] His writings were widespread amongst the Lower East Side and are seen today as a glimpse into the lives of the Jewish community. "In Rosenfeld's factory poems, the reader is *in* the sweatshop, feels the way the poet felt when he was slaving away in despair, hopelessness and gloom."[73]

Although he worked steadily as a tailor upon arrival to New York in 1886, Rosenfeld's work was often published. In this way, he became greatly admired for his accurate written depiction of labor issues. Widely respected amongst fellow writers and community leaders, he was an editor and contributor for numerous trade union and socialist-leaning journals and newspapers, including *The Forward.* One example of his influence is seen in a poem he authored, entitled "Requiem: The Triangle Fire Victims." This poem was printed immediately following the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire, across the entire front page of *The Forward's* March 29, 1911 issue. Using the afore mentioned criteria, this poem will now be examined to identify the extent to which Jewish characteristics were present in his writings and if so, what messages they convey.

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[72] Stein, Leon. Abraham P. Conan, and Lynn Davison. *The Education of Abraham Cahan* (translation of Cahan's autobiography). The Jewish Publication Society of America. Philadelphia: 1969. (145).
[73] Cohen, Mortimer. *Poems of Morris Rosenfeld.* Retriever Books. New York: 1979. (17).

An English translation of this poem, taken from Leon Stein's *The Triangle Fire* follows:

Neither battle nor fiendish pogrom
Fills this great city with sorrow;
Nor does the earth shudder or lightening rend the heavens,
No clouds darken, no cannon's roar shatters the air.
Only hell's fire engulfs these slave stalls
And Mammon devours our sons and daughters.
Wrapped in scarlet flames, they drop to death from his maw.
And death receives them all.
Sisters mine, oh my sisters; brethren
Hear my sorrow:
See where the dead are hidden in dark corners,
Where life is choked from those who labor.
Oh, woe is me, and woe is the world
On this Sabbath
When an avalanche of red blood and fire
Pours forth from the god of gold on high
As now my tears stream forth unceasingly.

Damned be the rich!
Damned be the system!
Damned be the world!
Over whom shall we weep first?
Over the burned ones?
Over those beyond recognition?
Over those who have been crippled?
Or driven senseless?
Or smashed?
I weep for them all.
***Now let us light the holy candles***

And mark the sorrow
Of Jewish masses in darkness and poverty.
This is our funeral,
These are our graves,
Our children,
The beautiful, beautiful flowers destroyed,
Our lovely ones burned,
Their ashes buried under a mountain of caskets.
There will come a time
When your time will end, you golden princes. Meanwhile,
Let this haunt your consciences:

Let the burning building, our daughters in flame
Be the nightmare that destroys your sleep,
The poison that embitters your lives,
The horror that kills your joy.
And in the midst of celebrations for your children,
May you be struck blind with fear over the memory of this red avalanche.
Until time erases you.[74]

*Presence of Judaism as a Theology*

Throughout this poem Jewish theological references, while not overt, are present. The most identifiable of these theological references to Jewish doctrines and liturgy is in the closing lines, "And in the midst of celebration for your children, may you be struck blind with fear over the memory of this red avalanche."

In this line, Rosenfeld is reminding the reader that even when life moves forward and celebrations occur, the fire and its victims will be a prominent memory, shadowing one's happiness. Through this imagery, Rosenfeld emphasizes the significance of the fellow laborers' death as a symbol of their suffering, connecting this story to the lives of each reader and reminding them, just as Judaism does, that even in moments of joy, distress remains.

These closing lines reference Jewish liturgy that recalls moments of communal sorrow when celebrating happy occasions. In Jewish tradition, the *Berkat Hamazon* (blessing after the meal) is recited after the meal to thank G-d for the food that has been provided. Within this prayer, a reference to Psalm 137 is said to remember the destruction of the

[74] Stein, Leon. *The Triangle Fire*. Carroll & Graf. New York: 1962. (145-146)

Temple.[75] This same Jewish liturgy is found during the Jewish wedding ceremony as well, as the husband breaks a glass beneath his foot to remember the destruction of the Temple. Through this example, it is comprehensible to see a correlation between Rosenfeld's closing lines and traditional Jewish liturgy.

*Presence of Judaism as an Identity*

Alongside the liturgical Judaic content found in Rosenfeld's poem, there also exists a sense of group affiliation – an emphasis on shared history and people-hood. One example is presented in the first lines of this poem, "Neither battle nor fiendish pogrom...." By introducing the poem with this illustration, Rosenfeld draws a correlation between the tragedies in Jewish history to the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire tragedy that has recently befallen upon the community.

As previously outlined, the majority of *The Forward's* readership came from Eastern Europe and as such, has a strong affiliation to this imagery. This reference to the pogroms of Eastern Europe serves to remind the Jewish community why they came to be in America and brings them together by referencing this newest tragedy in the context of their community and people-hood. In this way, even those Jews who have disassociated themselves from religion find this circumstance to be part of a shared plight.

Other examples within this poem also emphasize a shared Jewish history. "Of Jewish masses in darkness and poverty. This is our funeral, these are our graves, our children."

[75] Psalm 137, "By the rivers of Babylon."

In these lines, Rosenfeld attempts to emphasize that the victims of this fire were from within the Jewish labor community. It is interesting to note that this statement does not simply identify these victims as laborers, but as *Jewish* laborers. And as such, their tragedy is a Jewish one, not simply a tragedy of the labor community. In response to this awareness, there is an emphasis on the Jewish affiliation and identity to link the reader to the victims of the fire. Through these examples, one can see that Rosenfeld's attempted to connect the reader to the tragedy of the fire through Jewish communal affiliation.

*Presence of Judaism as Way of Life*

And finally, the third definition of Judaism as a lifestyle will be used to determine the role of traditional Judaism in influencing the Jewish labor movement. Within Rosenfeld's poem, numerous references connect the reader's sentiments, the tragedy of the situation and the community's responsibility to Jewish rituals, customs and traditions.

To begin with Rosenfeld's title, "Requiem" denotes this poem as a sacred work. In Jewish tradition, a requiem is composed for funeral; in this case, it is composed for the victims of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire. The use of this title puts the poem in a particular context, explaining to the reader that this writing will not be simply factual commentary but a humanistic, sympathetic plea written to help the community mourn. Writing in this style is a replication of Jewish funeral practices.

A second example of this poem referencing Jewish customs and rituals is seen in the line, "Now let us light the holy candles and mark the sorrow of Jewish masses in darkness and

poverty." In this phrase, Rosenfeld is encouraging the mourner to perform a ritual to mark the tragedy of the fire. Through this line, one recognizes the reference to the Jewish tradition of observing a *Yahrzeit* (remembrance) by lighting a candle to commemorate one's death. The Jewish custom of lighting a *Yahrzeit* candle, while not required by Jewish law, is deeply ingrained in Jewish custom and has been a common practice within the community. Through this language use, Rosenfeld is offering a way of mourning style that embodies Jewish characteristics and also unifies them as a community of shared rituals and practices. Noteworthy is his combination of this Jewish practice – lighting a remembrance candle for the victims with the "sorrow of the Jewish masses in darkness and poverty," that directly addresses the hardship of the community's daily labor, not just the victims.

*Findings*

*The Forward's* intention was to share with its readers important news and community happenings as the pertained to daily life and labor issues. Rosenfeld's work within this paper can therefore be seen as a representation of this Jewish labor voice. The poetic expression of communal mourning that covered the entire front page of *The Forward* tells us today that this tragedy is one that greatly affected the Jewish labor community. The use of poetry rather than a detailed account of this tragedy emphasizes how the Jewish labor movement found it important to express heartfelt sympathy, forms of remembrance and communal mourning. This style allows us to better understand both the audience and the intention of the author.

By analyzing the extent to which Rosenfeld's "Requiem: The Triangle Fire Victims," holds Jewish attributes, it is clear to see that Jewish theology, shared history and lifestyle are present throughout this work. Through this text, there is evidence that the community utilized some aspects of Judaism when finding ways to memorialize this tragedy. However, it is important to note that many of these Jewish characteristics are not overtly Jewish, but guised in the larger messages of the labor movement – of brotherhood and community activism.

## *The Bintel Briefs*

The significant role played by *The Forward* in teaching trade unionism has been previously outlined, proving its influence as an acclimation guidebook into American society. Of particular relevance was *The Forward's* 'street news.' Through articles of individuals' struggles and achievements, the newspaper readers' opened their "hearts and [*The Forward*] quickly gain[ed] their respect and confidence."[76] This proved important for sharing their messages about trade unionism.

One such feature run daily in *The Forward* was entitled the *Bintel Briefs*, or "bundle of letters." First published in 1906, the Bintel Briefs providing an opportunity for *The Forward* editor, Abraham Cahan, to respond to the numerous letters sent in by readers. These letters were an assortment of questions about marriage, work, family, immigration issues and ethical dilemmas and served to chronicle the lives of the Jewish community

[76] Metzker, Isaac. *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward.* Doubleday and Company, Inc. New York: 1971. (11)

during this time. Each letter printed in the paper accompanied Cahan's response to the quandary presented. In his 1929 memoirs, Cahan wrote of the Bintel Briefs, stating,

> "People often need the opportunity to be able to pour our their heavy-laden hearts. Among our immigrant masses this was very marked. Hundreds of thousands of people, torn from their homes and their dear ones, were lonely souls who thirsted for expression, who wanted to hear an opinion, who wanted advice in solving their weighty problems. The 'Bintel Briefs' created just this opportunity for them."[77]

The column quickly became popular and soon after its inception, *The Forward* office began receiving hundreds of Bintel Brief letters a year. "It ha[d] even become a special occupation for certain people to write letters for those who cannot write. There also appeared small signs with the inscription, 'Here letters are written to the Bintel Brief,' with the price ranging from 25 to 50 cents."[78]

The intention of the Bintel Briefs was to answer readers' questions on subjects other than union activism, socialist theory or labor issues, for these issues were addressed in the remaining sections of the paper. However, many labor dilemmas seeped into this column, as issues of job, salary, union activism and providing for one's family were leading issues for this impoverished immigrant population. For this reason, the Bintel Briefs are a useful literary source for identifying the extent to which Jewish theology, identity and lifestyle is used to further the labor message within the community.

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[77] Metzker, Isaac. (11)
[78] Ibid. (13)

In order to examine the content of the Bintel Briefs, a selection of letters have been identified and analyzed. These letters were translated into English and compiled by Isaac Metzker in a book entitled, *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward.* Metzker's selection of letters was based on his desire to "choose those which depict the true story of the immigrants, uprooted from the Old World, who came here determined to build a new life."[79] Sixty-four of the letters from Metzker's book of translations were published between the years 1906 and 1915.

It is important to note that a limitation of this study is the language barrier of the Bintel Brief publication, as they are originally written in Yiddish. The sixty-four letters of the Bintel Brief, written between 1906 and 1915 and translated into English by Metzker, were the only ones found by this study's researcher. While these letters do address a diverse array of issues of *The Forward's* readership, because of the language barrier, it is unclear the extent to which this is the case.

Of the letters published between the years 1906 and 1915, many address issues of labor. Such matters include: unemployment, union local challenges, debates of 'free-thinkers' (meaning: trade union and socialist believers) and anti-Semitism in the workplace among others. Many letters mention the workplace or labor hardships, however, a distinction has been made to focus only on those letters that directly ask labor-related questions. Letters that do *not* directly address these issues are not included in this study. For example, one

[79] Ibid. (17)

letter begins by stating, "I am a girl from Galicia and in the shop where I work I sit near a Russian Jew with whom I was always on good terms." This letter is not categorized as one that addresses labor issues. For, as the situation unfolds, it is clear that while the setting is in a workshop, the question posed is about the relationship between Jews of Galician and Russian decent. The following chart depicts the percentage of letters that specifically ask labor-related questions.

| **Bintel Brief Letters Between the Year's 1880 and 1920** | |
|---|---|
| Total Number of Bintel Brief Letters | 64 |
| Number of Letters Addressing Labor Issues | 28 |
| **Total Percentage** | 43.75% |

Within the 28 letters that address labor issues, the researcher identified the presence of Judaism as a theology, identity and lifestyle within the letters and their response. The findings were as follows:

| **Bintel Brief Letters Holding Jewish Attributes** | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Jewish Attribute** | **Number** | **Percentage** |
| Theology | 13 | 46.43% |
| Identity | 14 | 50.00% |
| Way of Life | 23 | 82.14% |

As is evident from the chart above, the majority of the letters obtained more than one element of Jewish influence. In many cases, all three – references to Jewish theology, affiliation to Jewish communal identity and Jewish traditions and customs were present. All of the twenty-eight letters contained at least one of the three definitions of Judaism.

*Presence of Judaism as a Theology*

Throughout the Bintel Brief letters that directly address trade unionism or labor issues, there is a noteworthy presence of Judaism as a theology. One such letter, printed in 1906 demonstrates this point. It discusses the problems faced by a man who is a peddler by trade and has difficulty selling his goods because he is upholding the Jewish law to have a beard. "Because of the beard, he gets beaten up by the hoodlums." In this situation, although the letter-writer recognizes that his overtly 'Jewish' look is causing problems for his business and health, "he doesn't want to shave off his beard, [for] it's not fitting for a man to do so." For, in Leviticus 19:27 it states, "Ye shall not round the corners of thy heads, neither shall thou mar the corners of thy beard." In this instance, the individual must decide if he will go against the sacred text of Jewish theology in order to avoid being a victim of anti-Semitism.

Alongside this letter is the printed response by *The Forward.* "As for the beard, we feel that if the man is religious and the beard is dear to him because the Jewish law does not allow him to shave it off, it's up to him to decide. But if he is not religious, and the beard interferes with his earnings, it should be sacrificed." This answer recognizes the role that tradition plays in one's life and demonstrates the nature of the Jewish labor movement to allow tradition to seep into labor practices. The reply to this letter understands Jewish law and responses in a way that allows for some flexibility between labor and religion.

This letter serves an example of the difficult balance between modern practice and traditional beliefs. It is evident that the letter's writer is unsure how to merge these two ideals. This juxtaposition between modernity and tradition is addressed in other Bintel Brief letters as well. Further, the printing of this letter in this pro-union, pro-socialist publication identifies the issue as one in direct correlation to *The Forward's* overarching mission and goals.[80] Recognizing its readership is concerned with such issues, *The Forward* has provided an answer that respects believers while addressing the practicalities of daily life in America.

A Bintel Brief letter from 1915 also exemplifies Jewish theological qualities. This letter speaks of an employee who was wrongfully received an overpayment by his boss. Against his colleagues' recommendation, this worker returned the money to his place of employment, his garment shop. Upon returning of the funds, "some of the workers laughed at me. They were of the opinion that I shouldn't have given back the money."[81] However, the laborer believed that he should only take that which is owed to him by an agreed-upon rate. In this letter, the ideological challenge of theft – against an 'unworthy' other – is presented. The writer's morals follow Jewish law and the Ten Commandments. For in Exodus 20:13 it states, "Thou shall not steal. Thou shall not bear false witness against his neighbor."

Although some believe the laborer had the right to keep the funds, for he is mistreated and underappreciated in the workplace, *The Forward* responds to this letter by saying,

[80] Ibid. (43)
[81] Ibid. (133)

"Workers who fight for their rights condemn stealing. Their entire fight is actually against robbery and theft." In this way, *The Forward* has re-envisioned the Jewish law against thievery into a pillar of labor movement ideology. Even when fighting for what one believes, it is necessary to treat others fairly and equitably.

These two examples present evidence of a Jewish theological voice found within the labor movement message. While the message is often reshaped to embody trade union characteristics, its underlying principles remain clear.

*Presence of Judaism as an Identity*

Alongside the presence of Jewish theological values and beliefs, there is evidence in the Bintel Brief letters of Judaism as a shared history and a group identity. In one letter from 1907, a writer discusses the hardships he faces in the workplace. A machinist by trade, this writer "suffers a great deal, just because I am a Jew... [for] my trade is run mainly by Gentiles." He continues to describe occurrences where he was abused, attacked and tormented. Recognizing these acts as anti-Semitism, he asks for advice in how to deal with this situation. *The Forward* responds by stating, "The Jewish machinist is advised to appeal to the United Hebrew Trades and ask them to intercede for him and bring up charges before the Machinist Union about this persecution. ... It is noted that people will have to work long and hard before this senseless racial hatred can be completely uprooted."[82]

[82] Metzker, Isaac. (64)

This letter presents one of many examples of workplace anti-Semitism. The regularity of these discriminatory acts correlates to the presence of Jewish identity used as a foundation of the Jewish labor movement. *The Forward* advised the writer to first approach UHT, reminding its readership that UHT is the *Jewish* voice within trade unionism, prepared to handle *Jewish* issues, including anti-Semitism. *The Forward's* response also identifies this mistreatment as racial hatred. Through this statement, they are recognizing Judaism as one's race, or underlying identity. Consequently, regardless of what one believes, he will be seen a Jew in the eyes of his oppressors and therefore is forever linked to the Jewish people.

Interesting to note is that *The Forward's* response does not address the issue as an overtly "Jewish" one. Although it does recommend that the writer approach UHT, the closing lines states, "people will have to work long and hard before this senseless racial hatred can be completely uprooted." Within this statement, *The Forward* is recognizing the necessity of having UHT as a Jewish labor union to provide support for Jewish workers, however it is simultaneously detaching from Jewish affiliation or recognizing this as a Jewish issue. In this response is an underlying message to reach towards universalism with generic statements like, "people will have to work" instead of the Jewish community and "racial hatred" instead of anti-Semitism.

Another example demonstrating that Jewish identity is a characteristic of the Jewish labor movement is seen in a 1906 Bintel Brief letter. In this instance, the writer shares his personal history growing up in Bialystok. A militant activist in the Bund and the

Socialist-Revolutionary party, he moved to America after fearing he would get drafted in the Russian army. Although he has lived a good life in this country for two years, he states, "my heart will not remain silent within me over the blood of my brothers being spilled in Russia. I am restless because of the pogroms that took place in Bialystok."[83] Although he knows he should fulfill his duty by bringing the rest of his family to America, he struggles, for his personal desire is to return to Russia at the forefront of the "revolutionary battlefields."[84] So he turns to *The Forward* for advice.

The answer provided recognizes his desire to return to Russia, yet encourages him to remain in America. There is mention of an Assistance Movement beginning within the local community and *The Forward* recommends him to channel his energy toward this effort. "He should bring his parents and sister here, and become active in the local movement."

The printing of this letter in the Bintel Briefs confirms that the Jewish labor movement recognizes and affiliates itself with the pogroms against the Eastern European Jewish community. *The Forward* sympathizes with the letter-writer, agreeing that had he not left Russia, his choice to fight on the revolution's frontlines to be an admirable one. However, since the writer is now in America, they do not recommend he step backwards towards his homeland, but instead to join a local organization fighting for the issues of which he feels so passionate. They encourage this individual to become active in local socialist efforts. This exemplifies how the Jewish community feels a sense of shared

[83] Metzker, Isaac. (52)
[84] Ibid. (52)

history with their Eastern European brethren. Further, it encourages group affiliation to the local socialist movement efforts.

In both examples, there is a sense of affiliation to the Jewish people and shared responsibility towards this community. Not only is this apparent in the Bintel Brief letters written, but also in *The Forward's* responses of encouragement and support of this communal identification.

*Presence of Judaism as a Way of Life*

The Jewish labor movement also infused Judaism as a lifestyle into their overarching messages, evident in the Bintel Briefs letters. In 1908, a letter was written to *The Forward* asking, "whether a socialist and freethinker should observe *yohrzeit?*" The writer explains that a dispute has arisen between friends over whether it is right of individual to pay a pious man to say *Kaddish* on his mother's *yohrzeit.* "Can we recognize the beautiful human emotion of honoring the dead, especially when it concerns one so near as a mother? ... If so, should the expression of the honor be in keeping with the desires of the honored?"[85] In this case, the writer, as a socialist freethinker, questions if it is appropriate to honor one's death in the traditional Jewish custom if he does not theologically believe in Judaism.

*The Forward* responds by saying, "Honoring a departed one who was cherished... is a gracious sentiment. ... Socialists and freethinkers observe the anniversaries of their great

[85] Metzker, Isaac. (74-75)

leaders... We can understand the psychology of a freethinker who feels that hiring someone else is not as much against his own convictions as to say *Kaddish* himself."[86] In this answer is the previously mentioned debate emerging within the community between modern universalistic thought and traditional rituals and customs. What is striking about this response is that *The Forward* clearly understands the individual's motivations for observing this communal ritual for himself, the pious man and the deceased parent. By embracing of each of these levels of Jewish identity, belief and affiliation, *The Forward* engages a wider network in its efforts to building a Jewish labor movement.

A second example found within the Bintel Briefs that embodies Judaism as a lifestyle is found in a letter dating 1906. In this letter, the writer describes that while he arrived in America as a *shokhet* (kosher butcher), he became a shirt maker. Eventually, he and his two brothers became neckband manufacturers with a sizeable trade. As business grew, he began employing workers, but "paid little attention to them since we were so involved with making our fortune."[87] The writer continues by saying, "In time I began reading your newspaper [including] the 'Bintel Briefs'... As I read more and more about the troubles [of the community], my conscious awoke and I began to think, 'Robber, cold-blooded robber.'" The letter continues by unfolding the writer's "evil deeds" against his employees, for example, "the clock in our shop gets 'fixed' twice a day; the hands are moved back and forth." He also expresses his grief in that his brothers do not share these sentiments of remorse at their actions. Recognizing his mistakes, he asks *The Forward* for advice in changing his ways as well as how to speak with his brothers.

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[86] Metzker, Isaac. (75)
[87] Metzker, Isaac. (61)

*The Forward* response is one of joy, "We are proud and happy that through *The Forward* and the 'Bintel Brief' the conscience of this letter writer was aroused... he must not muffle the voice of his conscious. He will lose nothing, but will gain more."[88] Within this letter, there is a sense of community responsibility. As a Jew, the writer recognizes and associates himself with his fellow Jews and chooses to express this association by following the communal custom of reading *The Forward.* It is this behavior that distinguishes the letter-writer from other manufacturers. And once he performs this communal ritual to read a socialist labor newspaper, he recognizes that he is part of the community and therefore is responsible to it. *The Forward's* response is one of joy, for their ultimate goal, that of sharing the messages of the labor movement with a wider audience is realized.

Many letters written to the Bintel Briefs embrace Judaism as a lifestyle. *Forward* recognizes that its targeted community follows these rituals and customs. Rather than denying these truths, these letters provide evidence that the Jewish labor movement is understanding of these characteristics of the community and uses these attributes to further their goals of organizing its members.

### *The Protocol of Peace*

The "Uprising of 20,000," the wide-scale strike within the garment industry, began as a result of continuous employee maltreatment. This industry-wide strike was in response to

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[88] Ibid. (61)

years of disagreements and small-scale strikes in individual shops. After months of striking, both manufacturers and laborers sought an end to this disruption in employment. Leaders from both sides came together for negotiations.

On September 2, 1910, cloak maker union leadership and employers signed the Protocol of Peace, an agreement providing the industry with negotiation guidelines for unions and employers. The signing of this document was a defining moment in American trade unionism and was viewed as a hallmark of labor: management negotiations.[89] Further, it proved to positively impact the Jewish community. Therefore, the Protocol of Peace provides a third example demonstrating the appearance of Jewish attributes found within the Jewish labor movement.

The Protocol's intention was to address issues that had arisen from the strike, namely, low and irregular wages, disregard for holidays, discrimination in the workplace and blacklisting of union members. It outlined industry regulations, including minimum wage requirements, as well as expectations to be upheld by both employers and employees. This document also provided specific arrangements to be carried out during future industry conflicts including negotiation strategies and filing of grievances.

One such example is the Protocol's creation of a Board of Arbitration. This Board was designed to hear grievances arising from either side. "To such board shall be submitted any differences hereafter arising between the parties hereto, or between any of the

[89] Feingold, Henry. (105)

members of the manufacturers and any of the members of the union."[90] And unlike any other industry board of its time, it was comprised of three representatives: an individual from the manufacturers, union leader and a public spokesperson. This proved significant, for it acknowledged both unions and the public as stakeholders of the industry.[91]

The Protocol was a mutually beneficial written agreement. For employers, it promised an end to the strikes that both disrupted the productivity of the shops and discounted the reputation of its owners. It also provided manufacturers with an equal playing field – ensuring that all other shops were competing on the same terms, in the same manner. For employees, the drafting and signing of the Protocol also proved an important feat. They recognized that their goals of obtaining better working conditions and fair treatment could best be solved with a partnership of common interests. By signing the Protocol, unions were recognized as key players in the industry. Their agreement to stop striking was a small sacrifice for their presence at the peaceful negotiation table.

*Presence of Judaism as an Identity*

Within the Protocol, one finds evidence of Jewish influence. This can be somewhat accredited to its authorship. The three principle contributors to this written document, Julius Henry Cohen, Louis Marshall and Louis Brandeis, were all Jewish.[92] Although they were each part of the Jewish community, these men came to together as representatives of both employees *and* employers. Cohen and Brandeis were well-known

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[90] Cohen, Julius Henry. *Law and Order in the Industry.* The Macmillan Company. New York: 1916. (247)
[91] Cohen, Martin A. (197)
[92] Cohen, Julius Henry. (20)

and significant leaders within the Jewish labor movement. Marshall was the representative of the manufacturers and contributed greatly to its framing. Interestingly, in the end, "his work on behalf of the industry won the praise of many Jewish union leaders."[93]

With many Jews were involved in both the garment industry and the trade union movement, it not surprising to see this representation playing out on the leadership level. And aside from these drafters, other key leaders in its development and implementation were of Jewish descent, including Morris Hillquit and Abraham Cahan. They represented their respective unions and socialist organizations by sitting on Protocol Boards and also shared the agreement with the public by publishing it in their respective newspapers.

Each of these afore mentioned leaders saw himself as a Jew and as part of a collective Jewish community. This fact had some degree of influence over his leadership style, yet no conclusions can be made determining the extent to which their shared Jewish history and ethnicity played a role in their collective efforts. However, their Jewish identity is worth mentioning, for this important milestone in labor relations was written and executed by Jewish leaders.

*Presence of Judaism as a Way of Life*

A second way in which the Protocol of Peace held Jewish attributes is more directly comprehensible. As written in the seventh stipulation of the Protocol of Peace: "No

[93] Cohen, Martin A. (161)

employee shall be permitted to work more than six days in each week, those observing Saturday to be permitted to work Sunday in lieu thereof."[94] This statement, as one of only nineteen conditions of the Protocol, proves there was a significant Jewish presence in the industry, at the bargaining table and in the overall trade union movement.

However, more importantly, this statement signifies recognition for the Jewish custom of observing *Shabbat*, or Saturday, as the day of rest. There is no theological reference made to explain this, rather it is taken as a fact that some workers prefer their day off as Saturday instead of Sunday. The inclusion of this law is meaningful, for it provides an example of how the Jewish labor movement accommodated and supported its membership. Rather than simplifying labor laws and declaring only one day off, Sunday, they took into consideration the needs of the community they were serving. These union leaders came to the bargaining table and refused to compromise on this important issue.

From the drafting of this document to the written phrasing, there is evidence of a Jewish presence. Unlike the previous two examples of Morris Rosenfeld's "Requiem" and the Bintel Briefs, the Protocol of Peace does not include any specific Jewish theological references or characteristics. Yet, through an in-depth analysis of its drafting and phrasing, characteristics of Judaism appear.

[94] Cohen, Julius Henry. (244)

# CHAPTER 4
# CONCLUSIONS DRAWN

The Jewish labor movement was a leading organizer and unifier of the Jewish community at the turn of the twentieth century. This was due, in part, to the Jewish religious and cultural qualities it upheld, for these characteristics played an integral role in legitimizing labor movement activism within this immigrant population.

This influence was examined through an analysis of Jewish labor literature. In order to identify the extent to which Jewish qualities were present in this movement, three definitions of Judaism were used: Judaism as a theology, an identity and as a way of life. Through these three classifications, this study was able to extract evidence confirming the presence of Judaism in the movement. Biblical teachings were used to justify trade unionism. Shared communal history was acknowledged and continuous affiliation to one's Jewish identity encouraged. And finally, Jewish traditions and customs were recognized by labor leaders as well as found within legal documents. It is clear from the literature that Jewish attributes were present in the movement's underlying message. Through this evidence, this study is able to conclude that identification with Judaism played a role in the success of the Jewish labor movement.

Yet while reliable conclusions can be drawn from these three core examples, additional research should be conducted to further examine the role Judaism played in legitimizing this movement. One limitation of this study was the language barrier, as most of the literature of the Jewish labor movement was written in Yiddish and has yet to be

translated into English. Future research should examine these writings, for it would provide a wealth of knowledge and a larger base of material from which to analyze. A second suggestion for future research would be to examine union bylaws and constitutions to identify any Jewish characteristics present. An examination of how the Jewish labor movement came to be a leading organizer of the community is worthy of further research and analysis and the aforementioned suggestions could be helpful in this regard.

The Jewish labor movement affected the overall structure and organization of the American Jewish community. It enriched the lives of its followers at the turn of the twentieth century by merging American unionism with traditional Judaism. This finding is relevant, for each generation builds upon the foundation provided by its predecessors. In many ways, its qualities still embody what passes for distinct Jewish culture today. Therefore, we must acknowledge and appreciate the Jewish labor movement's contributions to the American Jewish community.

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