

CHAPTER 4

"WHAT ARE WE?":

JEWISHNESS BETWEEN RACE AND RELIGION

ACCULTURATED JEWS of the Progressive Era largely agreed about the importance of clarifying their status as white in American society, even as many remained reticent about thoroughly adopting the dominant culture's brand of whiteness. They were far less certain, however, about the extent to which acceptance as white required them to redefine what it meant to be Jewish. For most Jews, describing themselves as a "race" did not represent a desire to dissociate themselves from the white mainstream. But as white Americans began to see Jews as a racial group with an uncertain relationship to whiteness, many Jews began to wonder whether they could continue to describe themselves in racial terms and still claim membership in the "Great Caucasian family." As a result, the question of whether Jews ought to fashion themselves as a race or merely a religious denomination became one of the most hotly debated issues of early-twentieth-century Jewish communal discourse.

The climate of tension surrounding the issue of Jewish racial self-definition in the early twentieth century stood in sharp contrast to the ease with which Jews had been able to define themselves as a race in previous decades. Before their whiteness became suspect, Jews often found in race a comforting means of self-understanding, one that provided a sense of security as they continued toward their goal of greater social integration. Now, with their place in America's racial constellation increasingly in doubt, many Jews began to question the viability of race as a means of self-description. Yet despite the increasing danger of the racial label after the turn of the century, American Jews did not part easily with their racial self-conception. While strong debate emerged among Jews during these years over the racial definition of Jewishness, what is most striking is the extent to which a broad spectrum of Jews, ranging from staunch accommodationists to devoted Zionists, were torn between a continued attachment to Jewish racial identity and the desire to be seen as white. Faced with these conflicting imperatives, most Jews of the period were unable to settle on any one clear definition of the term "Jew."

The notion that American Jews of the Progressive Era were incapable of crafting a consistent self-definition is somewhat out of step with historical accounts that point to the turn of the century as the height of a Jewish

"renaissance," a period of emerging self-confidence and cultural flowering for the American Jewish community.¹ The answer to this seeming paradox is that Jews' posture of self-confidence actually masked a deep sense of insecurity. Like Americans of the Progressive Era in general, American Jews embraced optimistic language of progress and revival as a means of soothing their anxieties about change. In the face of growing concern about the problem of self-definition, Jews largely tried to downplay the contradictions between Jewishness and whiteness during this period. Despite their best efforts to control the disorder of their times, however, many American Jews remained ill at ease with the strictures placed on them by the dichotomy between blacks and whites.

The Increasing Liabilities of Race

By the end of the nineteenth century, race had become central to the way both Jews and non-Jews in the United States understood Jewish group difference, making it almost impossible to define Jewishness without resorting to racial language. As a tool for negotiating Jews' conflicting impulses for distinctiveness and inclusion, however, race began to lose its efficacy during this period. Many Jews had relied on racial language since the 1870s to stabilize what it meant to be Jewish amidst shifting social boundaries, as well as to assure their standing in the national culture by underscoring their contributions to civilization. The increasing concerns white Americans had about race, and their need to try to clarify the position of Jews in the American racial hierarchy, however, began to reveal how race could be as much an obstacle as an aid in balancing Jewish and American identities. If American images of the Jew remained ambivalent, often combining high praise with suspicion and condemnation, questions about Jewish racial status were becoming common enough to alert Jews to the ways their racial self-definition could be turned against them. Moreover, those commentators who did continue to praise Jewish racial traits—like Nathaniel Shaler, Theodore Roosevelt, and William Howard Taft—did so as a means of arguing for the physical absorption of Jews into American society. Under these circumstances, race ceased to serve as a successful vehicle to set limits on assimilation and to assert Jewish contributions to American life, as it had during the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Instead, due to white America's emergent obsession with shoring up its racial boundaries, Jewish racial particularity had become either the basis for anti-Jewish prejudice or a rationale for urging the "fusion" of Jews with non-Jewish society.

In addition to increasing pressures placed upon them by American society, Jews also found it difficult to sustain the racial self-definition as

the social profile of their own community shifted dramatically. By the turn of the century, the mass immigration of Eastern European Jews made it harder for already acculturated Jews to control the way the public perceived Jewish racial difference. Not only did the new arrivals increase the visibility of Jews as a distinctive group, but they also held a much more expansive understanding of Jewishness that was not tailored to the demands of the American setting. Increasingly uncertain of their ability to protect their image or defend their group distinctiveness, a growing number of Jewish spokesmen began to avoid the subject of racial identity and encouraged Jews to abandon the well-worn practice of racial self-definition.

A dramatic decline in racial discourse among acculturated Jews was evident by the late 1890s, precisely during those years when concern about Jewish racial character was on the rise. During the Spanish-American War, when national discourse was highly focused on discussions of racial hierarchy, Isaac Mayer Wise carried on an unrelenting campaign in the *American Israelite* against the notion that Jews were distinct in race from other white Americans. "Whatever the ancestral derivation of a family may be," he reasoned in 1898, "if it lived continually in the United States, its members after one or at most two generations can only be classed generically as of the American race."² Wise argued that the term "Anglo-Saxon"—often heard during the war—did not apply to a narrow racial type but was broad enough to encompass all those who had cast their lot with the British or Americans in their project to advance civilization. As a result, he argued, "there is no reason why a Jewish American or Englishman, whatever may have been the nationality of his parents, should hesitate to proclaim himself as of the Anglo-Saxon race."³ If Wise's statements capture the mood of the period, even more revealing of the pressures felt by Jews at the turn of the century were the changing attitudes of spokesmen like Rabbi Emil G. Hirsch, who had been adamant in the mid-1890s that the Jews constituted a race. In the space of only a few years, Hirsch had totally reversed his position, first reverting to calling the Jews a nation and later abandoning all but religious expressions of Jewish particularity.⁴

The increasingly defensive stance taken by American Jews during this period was signified by the emergence of a new communal leadership, dominated by laymen prominent in law, business, academia, and philanthropy and characterized by a sensitivity to the political problems facing the community. While rabbis often had trouble disentangling notions of Jewish chosenness and ethical mission from Jewish race and peoplehood, these leaders knew the urgency of denying Jewish racial difference. The prominent attorneys Simon Wolf and Louis Marshall, the banker and philanthropist Jacob H. Schiff and the scholar Cyrus Adler were among

those who believed that Jews ought never to articulate an identity that conflicted with the demands of American national culture, regardless of how they privately understood themselves. While in Jewish publications a leader such as Wolf sometimes continued to refer to the Jews as a race, to the non-Jewish world he carefully termed them "American citizens of Jewish faith."⁵ Adler, who later collected and published the papers of his colleague Schiff, stated that the philanthropist frequently declared himself a "faith-Jew" rather than a "race-Jew," a distinction to which Adler himself also subscribed.⁶ When Louis Marshall was questioned on the matter, he responded that he entirely concurred with Schiff, who regarded Judaism as "a faith, and not as a race." According to Marshall, there were, "ethnologically . . . as many types of Jews as there are countries in which they have lived," since "climate, environment, economic conditions, intermarriage, food, and a thousand other influences operate as causes of differentiation between Jews of one country and those of another." Jews, he argued, were "united by the bonds of religion and none other."⁷

Apart from a fleeting reference to intermarriage, Marshall—like Wise before him—pointed exclusively to environmental factors in arguing that American Jews no longer bore the marks of a distinct race. According to this view, Jews simply lost their racial status after living in the United States for a certain period of time. "When a man once becomes a citizen," Marshall explained, he ceases to be a "Hebrew" and his identity "becomes merged in his Americanism."⁸ What is striking about these statements is the degree to which they ignored widely accepted understandings about what assimilation required of Jews. Many non-Jewish commentators classed "Hebrews" among the best candidates for Americanization, but almost all would have argued that the process necessitated thorough physical intermixture with other whites, and not merely a prolonged exposure and adaptation to the American environment.

Viewed in this light, the statements of Marshall and Wise must not be taken as a total rejection of the idea of Jewish racial particularity. Neither ever directly disputed the widespread belief in a distinct Jewish racial identity. Instead, their aim was to divert attention away from the importance of such a distinction. When Marshall argued that immigrants ceased to be "Hebrews" in America, he was not implying that they underwent some sort of miraculous physical transformation. Rather, he was arguing that racial factors marking them off as distinct in their countries of origin ceased to play a significant role once they became American citizens. Several Jewish spokesmen of the period made the similar argument that in America, the ability of Jews to be counted as white made any narrower racial identity irrelevant. In 1910, Rabbi Sigmund Hecht of Los Angeles averred that while Europeans differentiated between Aryans and Semites, in the United States these groupings were treated as insignificant subdivi-

sions among Caucasians.⁹ Wise argued similarly in 1899 that "the Caucasians form one race," adding that any effort to go beyond the "five great divisions of the human family" based on color was "rot, pure and simple."¹⁰ While such arguments made the case that Jews were racial insiders in America, they also cut against the notion that Jews needed to be physically absorbed in order to become an integral part of white America. Ironically, by denying the significance of Jewish racial identity in America, spokesmen like Hecht, Wise, and Marshall were also trying to undermine demands for Jewish assimilation, safeguarding—albeit by a circuitous route—the very racial integrity and social solidarity that they claimed were inconsequential.

Convinced that this policy of Jewish invisibility was the best way to both avert questions about the Jews' whiteness and forestall calls for assimilation, several prominent Jewish leaders at the turn of the century embarked on campaigns to obscure all references to the Jews as a distinct race. Jewish defense agencies such as the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, founded in 1913, took special interest in fighting racialized images of the Jew onstage, on screen, and in the literature of the period.¹¹ On the local level, groups like Chicago's Anti-Stage Jew Ridicule Committee, established in 1914, pressured theater owners and managers to limit "racial" portrayals of Jews and promoted legislation to restrict certain characterizations of Jews onstage. By World War I, such efforts had largely succeeded in banishing the stage Jew from the American theater.¹² Activists also tried to obscure signs of racial distinctiveness within the Jewish community, especially among the recently arrived immigrant population. At a time when cultural differences were seen to be markers of race, distinctions of dress, language, and custom all threatened to highlight Jewish racial difference. Besides encouraging general Americanization in manners and appearance, however, establishment Jews also tried to dissuade immigrants from forming "Hebrew political clubs" and "Hebrew workmen's clubs," two common forms of immigrant organization that were thought to suggest that Jews had "racial" interests different from those of other white Americans.¹³

By far, however, the most disagreeable form of immigrant organization in the eyes of acculturated Jews was the Zionist variety.¹⁴ The focus of Zionism on Palestine—and for a short time, Uganda—as the proper home for the oppressed Jew offended the communal elite because it associated Jews with uncivilized lands. Kaufmann Kohler, for example, labeled Zionism an "oriental" movement and called it "a retreat before the foe by way of East Africa or Asia."¹⁵ Many acculturated Jews were similarly concerned that Zionism would bring the Jews' whiteness into question. In 1903, a visiting rabbi in New Orleans delivered an anti-Zionist tirade in which he interspersed "negro dialect" with his denunciations of Zionist

"cowards, traitors [and] Jew-haters."¹⁶ Maurice Fishberg, a Russian-born physician who was employed by the communal elite at the United Hebrew Charities and was an adviser to Jacob Schiff, also tried to dissuade immigrants from Zionist activity for fear that it would link them to African Americans. "If Jewish nationalism is spread among the masses," argued Fishberg, "one may expect in short time that one will deal with Jews just as one now deals with the negro."¹⁷

Ultimately, despite Jewish leaders' manifold attempts to make the Jews invisible in American racial culture, their efforts were unrealistic. As long as Jews existed as a distinct group, in a social as well as religious sense, most non-Jewish Americans were unable to suppress their ambivalence about Jewish racial status. Even those who had a positive view of Jewish racial qualities were unable to see any solution short of complete racial amalgamation that would clarify the Jews' ambiguous relationship to whiteness. This, however, was a solution that most Jews were unwilling to accept. By trying to divert attention away from their perceived racial qualities rather than pursue the kind of complete physical assimilation prescribed by their non-Jewish neighbors, American Jews demonstrated that they, too, were unable to completely part with the notion of a Jewish race, despite its growing liabilities.

The Continuing Pull of Race

The difficulty American Jews had in parting with the racial self-definition stemmed from the fact that racial identity continued to have a strong emotional appeal for them. While race began to have adverse consequences for their acceptance in American society at the turn of the century, Jews remained susceptible to the use of racial language in articulating their deeply held Jewish commitments. In fact, many of the pressures pushing Jews to narrow the definition of Jewishness were also simultaneously creating increased feelings of "racial" solidarity. The immigration of Eastern European Jews, for example, sparked a complex mix of emotions among the acculturated Jewish community, creating feelings not only of embarrassment and repulsion but also of attraction and kinship. Likewise, while aspersions cast on the Jews' racial status could push them to deny their racial bonds, they could also inspire the assertion of racial pride.

Among acculturated American Jews, the group most willing to assert these feelings of racial solidarity after the turn of the century was the small but significant minority involved in the Zionist movement. In 1898, the year after the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, Temple Emanuel's rabbi, Gustav Gottheil, his son, Columbia University professor Richard Gottheil, and Rabbi Stephen S. Wise formed the Federation of Ameri-

can Zionists (FAZ).¹⁸ Like other acculturated Jews, they were determined to respond to the increasingly uncertain status of their group in American society. But unlike most other Jewish leaders, they felt they could best promote a positive image of the Jews by highlighting, rather than obscuring, their strength and character as a race. While Zionists primarily defined the Jews as a nation, and aimed at the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, race emerged as an important part of their ideology. Because they had no existing country on which to focus their energies, and even the exact location of the future Jewish homeland remained a matter of debate, Zionists often appealed to ties of "flesh and . . . blood" in making the case for Jewish nationalism. In responding to arguments that Zionism was impractical, they looked to race as a tangible, scientifically accepted means of proving the potentiality of Jews for nation building. According to Richard Gottheil, the founding president of the FAZ, Jews were "a race that can do everything but fail."¹⁹

Although from the beginning the American Zionist movement was a cooperative effort between native-born Jews and more recent Jewish immigrants, racial discourse was employed most frequently by the acculturated Zionists, who were more familiar with racial ideology. Since many of the founding American Zionists were Reform rabbis, they sometimes drew on the intellectual heritage of racial theories that had been worked out during the previous century by David Einhorn and Bernhard Felsenthal.²⁰ Yet while these nineteenth-century Reformers saw race as a force that would protect and distinguish Jews as they carried out their mission among the nations, Zionist leaders at the beginning of the twentieth century often used it to assert and justify a degree of Jewish independence from the non-Jewish world. Those like Rabbi Gustav Gottheil, who had personally experienced the indignity of being turned away from an exclusive hotel, and his son Richard, who regularly witnessed anti-Jewish discrimination at Columbia University, came to believe that Jewish moral qualities could be developed only if Jews were free from the demeaning pressures of social conformity.²¹ As the younger Gottheil explained in a statement of Zionist principles in 1898: "With a home of his own, [the Jew] will no longer feel himself a pariah among the nations, he will nowhere hide his own peculiarities—peculiarities to which he has a right as much as anyone—but will see that those peculiarities carry with them a message which will force for them the admiration of the world."²²

During the early years of the twentieth century, racial language became a staple of the Zionist organ, the *Maccabaeon*, which published defenses of Jewish racial identity and criticized Jewish leaders who denied the racial component of Jewishness.²³ As a result of such outspokenness on the part of Zionists, Jewish racial identity became a matter of great contention between them and the more accommodationist communal leaders such as

Schiff, Wolf, and Marshall. While one party saw the trumpeting of racial distinctiveness as a strategy capable of redeeming the name of the Jews, the other saw it as a practice that threatened to increase non-Jewish suspicion and uncertainty. To the Zionists, the denial of Jewish racial identity was tantamount to cringing before the gentiles. To the Jewish establishment, the racial "chauvinism" of the Zionists only added ammunition to the arsenal of the antisemites. As David Philipson, a leading Reform rabbi, declared, "race Jews" were the "feeder[s] of anti-Semitism" because by defining Jewishness in terms of blood, they "make evident that the Jew is not to be contrasted with Christian but with the Anglo-Saxon, the Teuton or the Slav!"²⁴ So divisive was the issue of race in the Jewish community that, by 1910, Israel Friedlaender, a historian at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, could call it the "shibboleth according to which the various Jewish parties are distinguished from one another."²⁵

Yet despite the charged nature of racial politics among American Jews, it would be a mistake to view the Jewish community as completely polarized on the issue of race. Because the denial of racial identity was often a diversionary tactic rather than a reflection of their true feelings, establishment Jews sometimes found it difficult to avoid references to the "Jewish race." Often community leaders confronted this problem in discussing their ties to the incoming Eastern European Jewish immigrants, which were hard to express in purely religious terms. When Henry Alexander, a prominent member of the Atlanta Jewish community, addressed a rally in support of Russian refugees in 1903, he reminded his audience that the new immigrants carried the "unsullied blood of priests and prophets" in their veins.²⁶ Likewise, when Jacob Schiff, Oscar Straus, and Cyrus Sulzburger met with Russian envoy Sergius de Witte in 1905 to press the case of Russian Jewry, they voiced concern for their "brethren-in-race."²⁷

These were not the only gaps in the establishment's effort to discard "race" as a term for Jewish self-description. Even one of the longest-established institutions of the acculturated Jewish community, the Reform Movement, found it difficult to banish "race" from its lexicon. Kaufmann Kohler, who had succeeded Isaac Mayer Wise as the president of Hebrew Union College, may have objected strongly to the political version of Jewishness promoted by Zionists, but he continued throughout his career to describe Jews in racial terms. "Ethnologically, the Jews certainly represent a race, since both their religion and history ever kept them apart from the rest of the people of the country they inhabit," Kohler wrote in 1903.²⁸ As late as 1918, in his magisterial *Jewish Theology*, Kohler argued that "religion and race form an inseparable whole in Judaism."²⁹ Sharing Kohler's racial view, some of his Reform colleagues remained reluctant to bring converts into the Jewish fold, despite the official doctrine that Judaism was a universal faith.³⁰

The extent to which acculturated Jews failed to live up to the purely religious definition of Jewishness forwarded by the communal elite was most obvious in their social and cultural activities. Several observers spoke of the large class of "race Jews" of Central European background who—despite all detachment from Jewish religious life—socialized mainly with Jews, insisted that their children marry Jews, and were buried in Jewish cemeteries. While Reform rabbis and communal leaders often chastised the Eastern European immigrants for organizing "Hebrew" political clubs, these organizations were also founded by "uptown" Jews.³¹ Similarly, despite the efforts of Jewish activists to make Jews invisible in popular culture, acculturated Jews were not adverse to praising sympathetic stage portrayals of the Jewish "race" or lauding the accomplishments of famous "racial" Jews.³² The *Jewish Encyclopedia*, published between 1901 and 1906 by Funk and Wagnalls and edited by a distinguished group of Jewish scholars, included innumerable entries on figures such as Benjmain Disraeli and Sarah Bernhardt, who did not practice Judaism but were seen as exemplars of Jewish racial traits. As one of the editors, Joseph Jacobs, later explained, despite the tendency of the communal elite to speak of Jews as a religious group, no one could exclude the likes of Disraeli from the "galaxy of Jewish worthies."³³

While the most accommodationist of acculturated Jews could not totally reject the racial definition of Jewishness, a similar ambivalence characterized those on the other end of the ideological spectrum who asserted Jewish racial identity more vigorously but could not free themselves from concern for Jews' racial standing in the non-Jewish world. Zionists, who saw race as an essential building block of Jewish nationhood, were highly aware of the need to avoid casting Jews in the role of racial outsiders and, as a result, often tried to downplay the physical dimensions of race while stressing its spiritual and psychological aspects. This approach was most notably pursued by the group of "cultural Zionists" affiliated with the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, who tended to see the Jews, in historian Israel Friedlaender's formulation, as a "race, or nation, whose distinguishing feature and whose reason for existence is religious."³⁴ Louis Brandeis, who headed the Zionist movement in the United States from 1914 to 1921, offered a more secular approach to the same problem. As he explained in one of his early Zionist addresses, Jews were held together as much by their "conscious community of sentiments, common experiences, [and] common qualities" as by their "common race."³⁵

The downplaying of the physical aspects of Jewish racial identity by American Zionists went hand in hand with a policy of clarifying that Jews were still part of the white family of races despite their racial individuality. Caspar Levia, a professor at Hebrew Union College (HUC) who penned a defense of Zionism in 1899, hoped to legitimize Jewish racial particular-

ity while also relieving doubts about the Jew's whiteness. Describing Jews as one of many "Aryan" races, he justified their continued separateness from other whites by arguing that intermarriage with non-Jews would undermine their ethical mission to the world, just as whites' civilizing mission would be undermined by intermarrying with Africans.³⁶ Such disclaimers were a regular feature of Zionist writings about race during the early twentieth century. "That we Jews are not a race in the sense of the black or yellow race is self-evident," wrote Max Margolis, another HUC professor active in the Zionist movement. While pointing out significant peculiarities in Jewish hair, eyes, and facial features, Margolis stressed that "if the color of skin be had in view, we belong to the whites."³⁷

Ultimately, it was not easy to distinguish between acculturated Jews who feared the implications of racial language and those who persisted in using race as an emotionally satisfying means of self-definition. Differing very little in their background, lifestyle, social connections, level of religious commitment, or their concern about acceptance in white American society, both accommodationists and members of the Zionist minority felt many of the same pressures. Neither can there be any great distinction made between the success of their two strategies. The Zionists may have enjoyed a psychological advantage due to their refusal to suppress their deep attachment to the Jewish "race." The assertion of racial particularity did not serve them particularly well, however, in a society increasingly skeptical of unassimilated alien races, something the establishment leaders readily understood. Although it is impossible to explain definitively why a particular person may have chosen one path or the other, both views represented an effort to control the definition of Jewishness in a tumultuous arena where perceptions of Jewish racial difference had untold consequences for the Jewish community.³⁸

Eastern European Immigrants and Race

If it is impossible to organize the positions of acculturated Jews on racial identity into neat ideological groupings, it is easier to draw a distinction between the impact of the race question on the acculturated Jewish community and its effect on the newly arrived Eastern European Jewish immigrants. While acculturated Jews, regardless of their ideological position, felt conflicting pressures and ambivalence about Jewish racial identity that arose from the challenges of assimilation, Eastern European Jewish immigrants came to the task of self-definition with an entirely different perspective. Just as they remained relatively isolated from pressures to identify with whiteness, recent immigrants did not feel the need to craft a self-definition that answered the expectations of white American society.

In fact, since immigrant Jews had only recently emerged from an atmosphere where Jewishness was an all-encompassing identity, it was not easy for them to define themselves through the use of discrete categories such as race or religion. According to sociologist Isaac B. Berkson, who studied immigrant adaptation to America, "Jewish tradition and with it the Jewish masses speak neither in terms of 'race' or 'religion.' Both of these terms are imported from the Western World and are foreign to the Jewish spirit as terms descripti[ve] of Jewishness."³⁹ A survey of the Yiddish press and popular literature confirms that most immigrants, even after a number of years in America, continued to speak of *dos yidishe folk* (the Jewish people) rather than *di yidishe rase* (the Jewish race).

Isolation from pressures to define themselves according to American racial categories, however, did not mean that Eastern European Jewish immigrants were insensitive to the attempts of more acculturated Jews to disassociate themselves from the newcomers by disclaiming any "racial" ties with them. When Senator Simon Guggenheim objected to the U.S. Immigration Commission's practice of categorizing incoming Jews racially as "Hebrews," Avrom Liessin, a writer for the *Forverts*, denounced the senator's argument as nothing more than an attempt to distance himself from the new immigrants. Liessin dismissed as "simply comic" Guggenheim's assertion that "Jews only differ from other peoples in matters of religion," arguing instead that the "present European Jew is surely more similar to the Asiatic Jew of 2,000 years ago than the present-day Englishmen is to the inhabitants of England of 2,000 years ago."⁴⁰ When the rabbi of Harlem's prestigious Temple Israel criticized "race Jews" among the Russian immigrants for forwarding a nonreligious definition of the Jews, immigrant journalist Bernard Richards shot back that it was the Reform rabbinate, with its lack of appreciation for Jewish blood ties, whose definition was deficient.⁴¹ In Chicago, the *Yidisher kurier* also expressed its exasperation with prominent "theorists" who tried to argue the Jews out of existence. According to the *Kurier*, the Jewish establishment continuously engaged in "word-play," defining abstract categories such as race or nationality according to certain criteria, only to demonstrate how the Jews failed to meet them. "How would these theorists feel if in a discussion it was proved, perhaps with a little exaggerated logic, that they, the theorists, were not men?" asked the editors of the *Kurier*, to whom the deep ties between Jews were self-evident, no matter what one called them.⁴²

Though most immigrant Jews were unfamiliar with the terminology of race, this was not true of the small group of intellectuals at the helm of the American Jewish labor movement. Adhering to various shades of socialism, immigrant intellectuals advocated internationalism and shunned any identification with Jewish group loyalties. "We are not Jews,

we are Yiddish-speaking socialists," was their slogan.⁴³ The use of the immigrant's language and the organization of unions along Jewish lines were not seen as an endorsement of Jewish particularity but as temporary means through which Jews would eventually be weaned away from their specifically Jewish identity. On the other hand, socialist intellectuals were well versed in science, including racial theory, which made it hard for them to ignore contemporary wisdom about Jewish racial difference. Editor and journalist Philip Krantz, who popularized ethnology for a Yiddish-reading audience, included a discussion of the Semitic race in his book-length survey of world cultures.⁴⁴ If their scientific outlook meant that they could not deny Jewish racial identity altogether, however, socialist writers often tried to challenge its importance. In one of his propagandistic pamphlets, for example, Krantz conceded the existence of a Jewish race but cast doubt on its purity, hoping to undercut arguments for Jewish national solidarity.⁴⁵ Ultimately, however, such statements cannot be taken as total disavowals of Jewish particularism. Living in a social environment in which Jewish particularity was taken for granted, and in which the main aim was to become more American, it was very easy to embrace a universalist platform.

After the Kishineff pogrom in 1903, a growing number of Eastern European Jewish intellectuals who were moved by the tragedy began to combine their socialism with Jewish nationalism. In the United States, many of them turned to racial language to express their secular brand of Jewish identity. Yiddish writer and socialist veteran Morris Winchevsky, for example, referred to the "historical physiognomy" and "facial distinctiveness" of various racial groups, including the Jews. While America encouraged the melting down of immigrant races, wrote Winchevsky, "such national suicide would be simply impossible for us." The Jewish "race" was much stronger than others, he explained, and would not "sink into the concoction" as easily.⁴⁶ By 1909, some of these immigrants were finding encouragement for their views in the FAZ, and one of the bases of this influence was the new Yiddish Zionist organ, *Dos Yidishe folk* (The Jewish people). Bernard Richards and Abraham Goldberg, two stalwarts of the immigrant Zionist movement, contributed articles to the paper forwarding explicitly racist views of Jewish identity.⁴⁷ Interestingly, however, because the immigrant radicals had little contact with non-Jewish society, they did not feel the same pressure to moderate their use of racial language as the more acculturated Zionists did.

All in all, Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, including the few who were conversant with racial terminology, remained largely untouched in the years before World War I by the pressures forcing more acculturated Jews to struggle with the concept of race and how it was applied to them. To the extent that immigrants began to seize a voice in Jewish communal

affairs, however, their opinions on the racial question did have an impact on broader Jewish discussions of racial identity. Because immigrant commentators often saw the issue of Jewish self-definition in a way unclouded by the difficulties faced by more acculturated Jews, their insights sometimes served to challenge their Americanized counterparts and reveal the contradictions of American Jewish identity. But as we shall see in the next three sections, which explore some of the major issues on which discussions of Jewish racial identity focused during the early twentieth century, there was little that could help resolve the hopelessly ambivalent feelings most American Jews had about self-definition.

Intermarriage and the "Melting Pot"

Few social phenomena expressed the commitment of acculturated Jews to a racial self-understanding during the early twentieth century as did their avoidance of intermarriage.⁴⁸ Despite increasing pressure to downplay racial commitments, most Jews of this period continued, as they had in the nineteenth century, to treat marriage as a key factor in Jewish racial preservation and as the line at which social interaction with non-Jews was to be drawn. According to a study carried out in New York between 1908 and 1912, the intermarriage rate among Jews was only 1.17 percent, compared to a rate of nearly 17 percent among Italians and 33 percent among non-Jewish Germans. Only the city's African Americans had a lower rate of intermarriage than Jews.⁴⁹ As Jewish socialite Esther J. Ruskay explained, when Jews and non-Jews did intermarry during this period it "raised such a storm of criticism and disapproval for all parties concerned than any tendencies in this direction [were] kept in healthful check."⁵⁰

The strength of opinion against intermarriage among acculturated American Jews was apparent in 1905, when the young Yiddish journalist and settlement worker Rose Pastor wed the non-Jewish millionaire John Phelps Stokes. The marriage made front-page news in New York and was hailed by the general press as a sign of universal brotherhood and a precursor to racial amalgamation. But despite the enthusiasm of the American public, Jews responded with skepticism expressed in pointed racial language. "The world at large does not care one iota whether their souls blend, or whether he is imbued with a Jewish spirit and she with a Christian spirit," editorialized the *Hebrew Standard*. In the paper's view, the Jews were not created to "blend" with other peoples. Universal brotherhood would only come if the "Jewish race was to be preserved separate and distinct," so that it could perform its religious mission to the world.⁵¹

While episodes like the Pastor-Stokes union remained rare, intermarriage nonetheless became a matter of frequent discussion among Jews

during the early twentieth century. It was not a rise in the number of intermarriages that inspired the growing discussion, however, but the increased difficulty American Jews faced in justifying their preference for endogamy. As the Pastor-Stokes affair revealed, though Jews were generally wary of intermarriage, non-Jewish commentators often saw it as the only method by which Jews could become an integral part of white society. As a result, they usually interpreted Jewish reluctance to intermarry as a major stumbling block to the creation of a homogenous white "American race." But because most Jews were not prepared to surrender Jewish separateness to the extent of supporting intermarriage, they grew uncomfortable about the tendency of non-Jewish commentators to make national belonging conditional on biological "fusion." They especially feared that their refusal to intermarry would be seen as a form of racial "clannishness" and would be credited as a source of anti-Jewish sentiment. Jews of this period, therefore, began to reexamine the issue of intermarriage and to search for ways of reconciling their distaste for exogamy with their desire to be accepted by their non-Jewish counterparts.

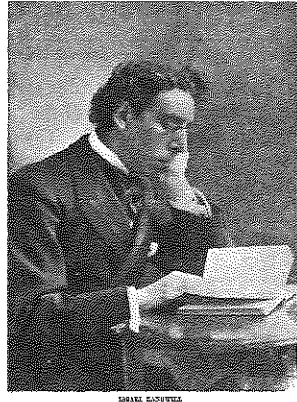
In 1908 and 1909, this challenge was brought into particularly sharp focus by the appearance of a number of stage dramas dealing with the topic of intermarriage and usually forwarding the notion that it was indispensable to the building of the American nation.⁵² This theme was most notably explored in *The Melting Pot*, a play written—ironically—by the Anglo-Jewish author Israel Zangwill, which first appeared before American audiences in the fall of 1908. Advertised as a "Drama of the Amalgamation of the Races," Zangwill's play detailed the marriage of David Quixano and Vera Revendal, a Jew and a non-Jew who both came to America from the Russian city of Kishineff, the scene of the worst anti-Jewish pogrom of the twentieth century. Despite the fact that the play was overly sentimental, and was criticized by the *New York Times* as "cheap and tawdry," the drama struck a chord with many Americans, even drawing praise from President Theodore Roosevelt because of its emphasis on America as the place where old prejudices would be submerged and the peoples of Europe would be unified into a new, more potent race.⁵³ Zangwill's play also commanded attention among American Jews, who felt compelled to respond to its suggestion that racial amalgamation was a prerequisite to becoming true Americans.

Under pressure to demonstrate that they were not trying to maintain racial boundaries between themselves and other white Americans, a few Jewish commentators, like St. Louis rabbi Samuel Sale, responded to Zangwill's play by agreeing that Jews needed to give up their strict opposition to intermarriage. To Sale, opening the doors of marriage to all those who shared Jews' moral and ethical standards was a sign of Judaism's broad humanity, while insistence on racial purity befitted only "savage

tribes."⁵⁴ George Fox, a leader of B'nai B'rith, argued that Jews did themselves a disservice in stressing the importance of race over moral character, a stance that was out of step with America's progressive values.⁵⁵ Despite such sentiments, however, the overwhelming majority of American Jews denied Zangwill's assertion that intermarriage was the only way Jews could take their full place in American society. As the play toured the country, the columns of Jewish newspapers were filled with articles and rabbis' sermons critical of the play's advocacy of intermarriage.⁵⁶ Even the liberal Cincinnati rabbi David Philipson argued that "the schools are to be the melting pot of America, and not intermarriage."⁵⁷ When a non-Jewish contributor to the *Chicago Israelite* suggested that intermarriage and absorption were the answers to the "Jewish Problem," editor Tobias Schanfarber passionately responded that such a "wholesale suicide" would be an "infamous way of ending the life of a people which has given to the world the highest conception of God and of man, and has pointed out the highest ideal of their mutual relation."⁵⁸

Schanfarber's retort invoked long-held assumptions about Jewish racial purity and its connection to the Jewish religious mission. Yet his avoidance of the term "race" in favor of the less precise term "people" indicates that even the champions of endogamous marriage were increasingly feeling pressure to downplay their racial motivations. In fact, while most of the Jewish writers responding to Zangwill's play rejected intermarriage, many argued that their objection was based on religious, rather than racial, concerns. According to this view, Jews had as much right to protect their religious integrity as groups like Quakers, Baptists, Episcopalians, and Roman Catholics, who were equally suspect of marriages out of the "faith."⁵⁹ By focusing on religion instead of race, Jews felt they could express their opposition to intermarriage without inviting the charge that they were resisting the process of assimilation. This did not mean, however, that their emotional attachment to Jewish racial identity vanished. On the contrary, they discovered that the best way to serve their impulse for racial distinctiveness was to remove it as a matter of public debate by asserting the religious argument instead.

Defending endogamy on religious instead of racial grounds may have had strategic value, but religion ultimately proved a much less powerful tool than race for demarcating the boundaries between Jewish and non-Jewish societies. Once marital preferences were credited to belief and ideology rather than to innate physical and moral characteristics, it was not a far leap to the suggestion that liberal Jews might share religious sensibilities with non-Jews, making them appropriate marriage partners. Yet that was an idea many American Jews were not prepared to accept. Rabbi Mendel Silber, for example, argued that Jewish women were racially endowed to be "priestess[es] of the home" and could not be replaced by



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The Melting Pot

A STORY OF THE AMALGAMATION OF THE RACES

Bearing the Indorsement of Nathan Straus, Leon Zolotkoff, E. G. Hirsch, Jacob H. Schiff, Stephen S. Wise, Tobias Schanfarber, and Other Leading Jews of America.

10. *The Melting Pot*, 1908. To counter the image of their group as a "clannish" racial minority, a number of "leading Jews of America" endorsed Israel Zangwill's play about the blending of immigrant heritages in America, despite their misgivings about its assimilationist message. (Courtesy *Jewish Exponent*, Philadelphia)

non-Jewish women regardless of their religious outlook.⁶⁰ When Emil G. Hirsch, the noted Chicago rabbi, delivered a sermon suggesting that marriages between like-minded Jews and non-Jews might be more successful than those between Reform and Orthodox Jews, many in the community felt he had gone too far.⁶¹ The Yiddish and Zionist papers took special pleasure in attacking Hirsch and others who tried to reduce the question of intermarriage to a purely religious one, asserting that the Reform leadership recognized the power of Jewish racial identity, but went to ridiculous lengths to hide their true feelings and ingratiate themselves with the non-Jewish public.⁶² Still, Hirsch's statements revealed how the need to conform to non-Jewish expectations weighed heavily on Jewish spokesmen, making it difficult for them to categorically reject intermarriage. This is probably why a number of "Leading Jews of America"—Hirsch, Nathan Straus, Jacob H. Schiff, Stephen S. Wise, Tobias Schanfarber, and even the Eastern European Zionist leader Leon Zolotkoff—felt it necessary to lend their names to an endorsement of Zangwill's *Melting Pot*, even though many of them disagreed with the play's main assertion.⁶³

The high level of contradiction inherent in the attitudes of American Jews toward intermarriage was readily apparent in 1909, when the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) examined the topic in detail at its annual meeting. Commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the death of David Einhorn, the gathering saw intense struggle over the pio-

neer rabbi's belief that performance of the Jewish religious mission required the preservation of racial purity.⁶⁴ Many Reform rabbis—including HUC president Kaufmann Kohler—continued to embrace Einhorn's view, and some exerted significant pressure for the CCAR to pass a resolution condemning intermarriages. But there were also a growing number of rabbis reluctant to appear as if they were publicly defending Jewish racial exclusivity. In an attempt to solve this dilemma, conference organizers chose two speakers, Rabbis Ephraim Feldman and Samuel Schulman, who downplayed the Jewish desire for racial distinctiveness and argued that Reform opposition to intermarriage was based purely on religious grounds.⁶⁵ In the end, however, the attendees remained skeptical that this argument could successfully deflect accusations of racial clannishness. As a result, they refused to pass a proposed measure prohibiting rabbis from performing intermarriages, settling instead for a weaker statement that such unions were not viewed favorably by Jewish tradition.⁶⁶

More than perhaps any other single issue, intermarriage provoked discussions that revealed the strong emotional attachment Jews still had to a racial self-understanding during the early twentieth century. Whether they were confident enough to express such sentiments or whether they felt the need to obscure them by changing the subject to religion, Jews struggled to stay out of the "Melting Pot," even as American society encouraged them to cast themselves in. The challenge of intermarriage, however, would prove to be only one of many pressures facing Jews as they attempted to satisfy their dual impulses for integration and distinctiveness.

Protecting Jews' Legal Claim to Whiteness

The intermarriage debate threatened to cast Jews as a clannish minority that did not desire to assimilate into white American society. As embarrassing as such an image may have been, however, it paled in comparison to concerns that Jewish racial identity might adversely affect Jewish legal status in the United States. In 1909, Jewish communal leaders became worried over the increasing tendency of government officials to classify Jews racially as "Hebrews." Officials never directly classified Jews as non-white, and referred to them in at least one government publication of the period as a subgroup of the "Caucasian race." Yet many Jews feared that the government's adoption of the "Hebrew" classification might be a first step toward their eventual exclusion from the rights of white American citizens. Not only was a congressional commission gathering racial statistics on incoming Southern and Eastern Europeans in order to bolster their case for immigration restriction, but the Census Bureau was planning to expand the racial classification on the 1910 census to include European

immigrant "races" such as the Jews. Even the public schools in Philadelphia began requiring students to complete questionnaires regarding their racial background, and teachers returned the sheets to Jewish students for correction when they identified their parents merely as "American."⁶⁷

Among the gravest issues of government policy confronting Jewish leaders in 1909 was the decision of the Department of Commerce and Labor, which controlled immigration affairs, to classify Syrians as "Mongolians." Historically, the United States had limited naturalization to "free white persons," although after the Civil War, free persons of African descent were also made eligible. Other foreign groups who were deemed nonwhite, however, were not admitted. The ruling that Syrians were not white sparked fears that Jews, associated in the popular mind with Middle Eastern peoples, would be similarly classified beyond the color line. Earlier, when anti-Japanese rioting in San Francisco sparked a movement for the restriction of "Asiatic" immigration, the Jewish columnist George Selikovitch joked in the *Reform Advocate* that the government might "refus[e] to grant citizen-papers [to Jews] on the ground that we are of Asiatic extraction like the Chinese and Japanese."⁶⁸ But several months later, when court clerks in certain Western states refused naturalization to Syrians because of their "Mongolian" blood, Selikovitch was astonished to discover that his prediction had not been far from the mark.⁶⁹ Selikovitch's fears were echoed by the Jewish communal elite. Cyrus Adler of the American Jewish Committee wrote to his colleague Mayer Sulzburger expressing fear that once the Syrians and Japanese had been placed beyond the pale of whiteness, "it will not be a very far step to declare the Jews Asiatic."⁷⁰

As a result of such fears, Jewish communal leaders launched an attack on the government's efforts to classify Jews as a distinct race. The American Jewish Committee successfully lobbied Congress and the Census Bureau to remove the new racial category from the census forms.⁷¹ In 1910, Jewish leaders also began to take action to prevent a narrowing of those eligible for naturalization. Several courts had already denied the government's assertion that Syrians and other "Asiatics" were not eligible for citizenship because of race, but several bills appeared in Congress later that year trying to revive the exclusionary measure. In response, a Jewish congressman from New York, Henry Goldfogle, ushered a bill through the House of Representatives proposing that "Asiatics who are Armenians, Syrians or Jews" not be barred from becoming naturalized citizens. While Goldfogle's intention had been merely to protect the citizenship rights of Jews and other affected groups, Louis Marshall, the attorney acting for the American Jewish Committee, saw the congressman's bill as a disastrous blunder because its wording gave credence to the notion that Jews were Asiatic and not white. In Marshall's words, the bill, if passed

by the Senate, "would place upon the statute books the objectionable suggestion that an Asiatic Jew is not a free white person [and] would also lead to the possible claim that, inasmuch as all Jews are in a sense of Asiatic origin . . . the right of Jews to become naturalized citizens has, in the past, been a matter of doubt."⁷² Marshall quickly appealed to several senators to postpone action on Goldfogle's bill, arguing that that the entire matter might soon be settled by the Circuit Court of Appeals, before which he was arguing a related case on behalf of some Syrian clients. The Court unanimously accepted Marshall's argument against the restrictive definition of "free white persons," and the matter was settled without Jewish racial status becoming a matter of debate on the Senate floor.⁷³

Despite their successes on the census and naturalization issues, Jewish leaders remained concerned about the policies of the Bureau of Immigration, which had seemed to spur all the various efforts to classify Jews according to race. As a result, they concentrated after 1909 on reversing the bureau's classification of Jews as "Hebrews."⁷⁴ The leader in this fight was Simon Wolf, the veteran Washington attorney who had long represented the interests of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in the capital city.⁷⁵ Wolf had been concerned about the practice of tabulating Jews according to race ever since it was initiated in 1899 by the commissioner of Immigration, Terence V. Powderly. That year, at a conference between Jewish leaders and immigration officials at Ellis Island, Wolf urged Powderly to abandon the new classification, but failed to receive the support of the other Jewish representatives, who felt the policy was a helpful means of gathering data on incoming Jews. Wolf, however, remained wary of the racial classification of Jews and in 1903 renewed his efforts to abolish it. That year he wrote a letter of protest to Powderly's successor, Frank P. Sargent, alleging that Jews had been singled out by the Bureau of Immigration as the only religious sect registered in the immigration records. "We do not ask any favors not accorded to other faiths," wrote Wolf. "If all sects are to be registered, we certainly would not object, but if the Jew only is to be singled out, then we most decidedly protest."⁷⁶

By turning the issue to one of religious liberty, Wolf ignored the true reason for the bureau's classification while claiming that his request was "in accordance with the spirit and genius of our American institutions."⁷⁷ When the officials replied that they classified all immigrants according to race, and that they were interested in Jews as a *racial* rather than a religious group, Wolf set out to gather written opinions on the question of Jewish racial identity from leading Jews that might be used in convincing the Bureau of Immigration to reconsider. Much to Wolf's dismay, however, many of the leaders failed to support his position, holding that the bureau was correct in counting the Jews as a distinct race.⁷⁸ In addition,

Philip Cowen, the editor of the *American Hebrew* and one of those who had been involved in the initial discussions of immigration policy with Powderly, fired off an editorial arguing that racial classification ought to be retained as a matter of pride, since the statistics reflected well on Jews and demonstrated the superiority of Jewish immigrants to their Polish and Slavic counterparts.⁷⁹ Apparently unable to gain a consensus among Jewish leaders or to create a sense of urgency concerning racial classification, Wolf remained quiet on the issue for several years.

By 1909, however, increasing fears among Jews about immigrant classification had resurrected Wolf's cause and gained him a significant following among Jewish leaders. Wolf successfully created a coalition of groups including the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, B'nai B'rith, and the American Jewish Committee to oppose the racial classification system, and enlisted a number of rabbis and prominent Jews across the country to stage rallies and speak out against it. Simon Guggenheim, scion of the wealthy Jewish industrialist family and senator from Colorado, became a strong advocate of Wolf's position in Congress.⁸⁰ In addition to such positive public support, Wolf was fortunate to enlist the services of Max J. Kohler, the son of rabbi Kaufmann Kohler and a young immigration lawyer, who had considerable experience opposing the discriminatory practices of immigration officials. Kohler prepared a detailed brief listing several reasons why the government was unjustified in classifying Jewish immigrants by race.⁸¹ By late 1909, the campaign against Jewish racial classification had succeeded in gaining the attention of the U.S. Immigration Commission, an arm of Congress that invited Wolf, Kohler, and Judge Julian Mack of the American Jewish Committee to testify on the matter in a special session.

Despite Wolf's influential backing, his arguments utterly failed to impress the commission, which included Vermont senator William Paul Dillingham and his Massachusetts colleague, Henry Cabot Lodge, among other officials. In his opening statement, Wolf repeated his standard charge that the government was classifying Jewish immigrants by faith, which he argued was out of spirit with constitutional guarantees of religious liberty. Throughout his testimony, Wolf not only skirted the issue of Jewish racial identity—arguing, for example, that Russian persecution of Jews was purely for religious reasons—but refused to give any validity to racial distinctions among immigrants, holding that Poles should be classified as Russians and the Irish as British. Because Wolf denied racial divisions that almost all Americans took for granted, his testimony struck the commissioners as highly self-serving and selective in its treatment of the facts. When they pressed him on the issue by posing a particularly pointed question, he avoided answering by changing the subject. Ultimately, he was not able to sustain a logical argument, as was revealed

Dictionary of Races or Peoples.

73

Gypsy.

Auerbach says that 52 per cent of the Gypsies of Hungary are ignorant of the Romany tongue. Inter-marriage with other peoples is becoming more frequent. Through loss of language, the assumption of a sedentary life, and inter-marriage, Gypsies are decreasing in numbers and seem everywhere doomed to extinction by absorption.

The total population of Gypsies in the world is variously estimated at from 700,000 to 850,000, of whom three-fourths are in Europe. There are 200,000 in Roumania, 100,000 each in Hungary and the Balkan Peninsula, 50,000 each in Spain, Russia, and Servia, and 50,000 in Germany and Italy combined. The number in the British Isles is variously estimated at from 5,000 to 20,000. There are thought to be 100,000 in Asia and 25,000 in Africa. Only a few thousand are found in the Americas. They are included among "Other peoples" in immigration statistics. They are supposed to have first come to this country in the beginning of the eighteenth century. Simson says that many were banished from the British Isles to America in colonial times and that many more were sent to serve in the British army during the Revolution. He found a number of settled Gypsies in the Eastern States, and suggests that many of the keepers of small tin shops and peddlers of tin, as well as many of the fortune tellers of the great cities of the United States, are in reality of Gypsy descent.

H.

11. *Dictionary of Races and Peoples*, 1911. The U.S. government published this handbook to help immigration officials categorize the diverse array of "racial" groups entering the country during the early twentieth century. The *Dictionary* described Jews as a "Caucasian" race, but many Jewish leaders feared that the classification of immigrants as "Hebrews" would put their whiteness into question.

Hebrew.

HAWAIIAN or SANDWICH ISLANDER. An individual member of the northernmost Polynesian people subject to the United States. (See *Pacific Islander*.) Not counted among immigrants on arriving in the United States.

HAYTIAN. (See *West Indian*.)

HEBREW, JEWISH, or ISRAELITE. The race or people that originally spoke the Hebrew language; primarily of Semitic origin. Scattered throughout Europe, especially in Russia, yet preserving their own individuality to a marked degree. Linguistically, the nearest relatives of the ancient Hebrew are the Syriac (see *Syrian*), Assyrian, and Arabic languages of the Semitic-Hamitic family (see). The latter constitutes one of the four great divisions of the Caucasian race. While the Hebrew is not so nearly a dead language as the related Syrian, Aramaic, or the ancient Assyrian, its use in most Jewish communities is confined mainly to religious exercises. The Jews have adopted the languages of the peoples with whom they have long been associated. More speak Yiddish, called in Europe "Judeo-German," than any other language, since the largest modern population of Jews borders on eastern Germany and has been longest under German influence.

Physically the Hebrew is a mixed race, like all our immigrant races or peoples, although to a less degree than most. This has been fairly well dem-

when Lodge questioned him about the racial identity of the late British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli:

Senator Lodge. . . . How would you classify Benjamin Disraeli? Was he a Jew? . . .

Mr. Wolf. He was born of Jewish parents, and subsequently, at a certain age, was baptized.

Senator Lodge. He was baptized as a Christian. He then ceased to be a Jew.

Mr. Wolf. Yes; religiously he ceased to be a Jew.

Senator Lodge. Ah! Religiously. He was very proud of the fact that he was a Jew and always spoke of himself in that way. Did the fact that he changed his religion alter his race?

Mr. Wolf. It did not alter the fact that he was born a Jew; not at all; and I know the Jewish people throughout the world have claimed him, Heine, Boerne, and others, who were born of their blood . . . but they ceased to be Jews from the standpoint of religion.⁸²

Unimpressed with the lack of consistency in Wolf's statement, the commission followed up the hearing with some research of its own, revealing that Jews in general were conflicted on the matter of racial identity. It cited the *Jewish Encyclopedia* and several other Jewish publications as confirmation of the widespread use of the term "race" among Jews for self-description. Finding Wolf and his colleagues unjustified in their objections, the commission recommended the continuation of the policy of racial classification.⁸³

In the wake of the hearing, Jews sympathetic to a racial view of Jewishness denounced Wolf for what they saw as an abandonment of Jewish pride before the commission, and took advantage of his poor performance to argue that his case had no defensible foundation. One rabbi wrote to the *Jewish Exponent* of Philadelphia that Senator Lodge was a better Jew than Wolf, because he did not try to deny the existence of the Jewish race.⁸⁴ Zionists especially attacked Wolf's efforts, arguing that if anything could stimulate anti-Jewish sentiment, it was not the affirmation of racial identity but the "shifting, unmanly and undignified pretense of representatives of a people, who against fact and history, and against their own private convictions, disown the racial and national birthright."⁸⁵ Such criticisms were sufficient to dampen the enthusiasm of many of Wolf's supporters. The American Jewish Committee, for example, under pressure from some of its members, decided to take no further part in the campaign to eliminate government racial classification of the Jews.⁸⁶ Others expressed the view that while Wolf had the proper motive in trying to prevent anti-Jewish discrimination, he had gone too far in his denial of Jewish racial identity. Although a few scholars claimed that there was no Jewish race in the technical sense, wrote the *Jewish Exponent*, "the vast

preponderance of Jewish opinion . . . holds to the old view that there is."⁸⁷ Even Wolf himself admitted privately that "his whole contention in this matter has been not to deny the Jews' racial affinities as much as to deny the right of the government to discriminate."⁸⁸ In the end, however, the main accomplishment of his campaign was to demonstrate the inability of Jews to reconcile their unshakable racial self-image with their desire for full acceptance in white American society.

Confronting Jewish Racial Origins

In defending endogamous marriage and opposing the government's racial classification schemes, American Jews often relied on diversionary tactics. By trying to change the topic from race to religion, they aimed to protect their status as white Americans without having to directly deny their cherished "racial affinities." As Simon Wolf's appearance before the Immigration Commission demonstrated, however, such tactics fell flat in the face of direct questions about Jewish racial identity. This was precisely the problem American Jews confronted as questions began to arise among scholars and scientists about Jewish racial origins. In clarifying their place in American life, Jews had to have a coherent explanation as to how they fit into the larger story of human racial development. Yet the story of Jewish origins to which most Jews of the period subscribed had significant potential to mark them as racial outsiders in white America.

During the nineteenth century the claim of "Semitic" origin had become something of a badge of honor for American Jews, allowing them to trace their heritage back to the dawn of civilization and take credit for laying the ethical foundations of Western society. By the early twentieth century, however, some Jews had become alarmed at the tendency of scientists, scholars, and popular commentators to attribute an African origin to the Semites. This theory was first elaborated in the United States in 1890 by Daniel G. Brinton, an archaeologist and language specialist at the University of Pennsylvania. Brinton's view quickly gained authority in scholarly circles, with even his Jewish colleague, Semitic scholar Morris Jastrow, accepting the notion that Semites had originated in Africa.⁸⁹ When race scientist William Z. Ripley published *The Races of Europe* in 1899, he adopted Brinton's view and helped spread it to a larger audience.⁹⁰

The theories of these scholars did not, in and of themselves, cast aspersions on the racial status of modern-day Jews, whose connection to the ancient Semites was a matter of debate in academic circles. Ripley, for example, argued that modern Jews, although tied historically to the Semites, were the products of significant intermixture with Europeans and retained almost no trace of Semitic descent.⁹¹ The linkage between Jews

and Semites, however, remained strongly ingrained in the popular mind, and Jews most of all held fast to the notion of their Semitic descent.⁹² Thus, despite the qualifications offered by scholars, Jews remained highly sensitive to any suggestion of a link between Africa and the Semitic past.

This sensitivity was exacerbated after the turn of the century, when Jews, ancient Israelites, and Semites were all linked to Africa with increasing frequency. Jewish readers of the *Public*, a liberal Chicago newspaper, for example, responded with anger when a writer speculated on the biblical verse concerning Moses's marriage to a "Cushite woman," arguing that the great Jewish lawgiver had "married a Negro."⁹³ In 1911, Charles Waldstein, an American-born Cambridge archaeologist, stormed out of the Universal Races Congress in London when he learned that the Jews were to be grouped with the African and Asiatic races in the congress's ceremonies.⁹⁴ When Jacques Faitlovich, the French-Jewish explorer, arrived in America during the same period asking for aid for the Falashas, a black African tribe he described as being of pure Jewish descent, he was rebuffed by American Jewish leaders.⁹⁵

With the growing focus on Semites as an African racial type, some Jews began to retreat from their boastful claims of Semitic origin. Martin A. Meyer, a Reform rabbi in San Francisco and a scholar of Semitic studies, felt it necessary in 1909 to declare that American Jews shared more in common with non-Jewish Americans than they did with "the Arab of the desert, the true representative of the Semitic world of yore," or even with the Jews of the Middle East. "To be sure, the Jews who came out of the desert to settle Canaan were Semites, like the Arabs of today," wrote Meyer, "[but] the blood of Israel was rapidly diluted." Due to Jewish proselytizing among non-Jews that had been prevalent until the Middle Ages, he explained, the Jews "grafted prunings from all the peoples and cultures of the world" on to the original Semitic stock. "Today but little of that original Semitic blood will be found in the veins of any of us."⁹⁶ Another Reform rabbi, Samuel Sale, argued against the notion of Semitic descent with even greater fervor. "We may go on prating about the purity and unity of our race," wrote Sale, "but . . . we can not get away from the bald fact, based on anatomical measurements, that only about five percent of all the Jews bear the characteristic mark of their Semitic origin on their body."⁹⁷ Most American Jews, however, were not as willing as Meyer and Sale to dismiss the traditional story of Jewish origins. Even Meyer himself, while arguing against classifying Jews as Semites, could not help but speak prosaically about the "Semitic genius that gave the world the Bible" and the "Semitic soberness, a deeply rooted racial characteristic, that caused the sane and healthy development of the religion of the world today."⁹⁸ Such a romanticized view suggests that the notion of Jewish descent from the

ancient Semites retained considerable emotional attraction for Jews, including those who were working hard to discredit the connection.⁹⁹

Though dedication to the story of Semitic origins remained strong among many Jews, Jewish leaders did begin to see the importance of establishing their claim to whiteness scientifically. At the height of the controversy over immigrant classification in 1909, Jewish notables exchanged letters expressing concern about the increasing reliance of government policy on the work of race scientists, whom they feared were dangerously close to pronouncing the Jews a non-white race. While they had confidence that they could continue to dispute the racial classification of Jews on a political level, they were less certain of their ability to contest the authoritative voice of racial science. As Cyrus Adler of the American Jewish Committee wrote to his colleague Mayer Sulzburger, Jewish leaders needed to enlist the help of an anthropologist in order to get "a very strongly worded declaration as to the practical identity of the white race," one that would presumably leave no doubt as to the whiteness of Jews.¹⁰⁰

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, Columbia University Professor Franz Boas was the best known anthropologist of Jewish origin in the United States. Boas shared the concern of the Jewish communal elite about racial nativism, but his preference to identify as a German American rather than as a Jew prevented him from engaging too directly in Jewish defense efforts during these years.¹⁰¹ Instead, Boas worked to discredit the centrality of race in evaluating human capabilities, arguing that differences between groups—including those between blacks and whites—were heavily influenced by environmental factors.¹⁰² Because these ideas contradicted the overwhelming consensus about the importance of racial differences in the United States, however, they offered little to Jewish leaders hoping to win acceptance for their group in white America. As a scholar who was well integrated into the non-Jewish world, Boas could freely advance such oppositional theories. But for Jews struggling to overcome their uncertain racial status, it was much harder to build their case for inclusion on ideas that undermined the basic assumptions of the larger society. To soothe white Americans' doubts about the "Jewish race," they would have to affirm the basic distinction between black and white.

The scientist who took up this challenge was Maurice Fishberg, one of the leading scholars of Jewish physical anthropology at the turn of the century, and the only American to devote himself significantly to such research. Fishberg was born in the Ukrainian town of Kamenets-Podolsk in 1872. After his arrival in the United States, he gained entry to the Medical College of New York University, graduating as a medical doctor in 1897. His first major position was as medical examiner for the United Hebrew Charities, where he represented the interests of the communal

elite in keeping the immigrant population healthy.¹⁰³ By 1901, he had also become concerned with deflecting accusations that Jewish immigrants were prone to disease and were a menace to national health. As he became more deeply involved in such defense work, he realized he would have to tackle the larger issue of Jewish racial identity in order to answer the nativists effectively.¹⁰⁴ While it is unclear whether Fishberg's research on Jewish anthropology was undertaken due to a direct request by communal officials, his concerns stemmed largely from their influence, since he was both an adviser to Jacob H. Schiff and an employee, at the United Hebrew Charities, of Mayer Sulzburger's cousin Cyrus.¹⁰⁵

Despite Fishberg's early realization that the race question was central to Jewish defense work, he did not part easily with the notion that Jews were an exceptionally pure racial type. After taking skull measurements on five hundred of his patients at the United Hebrew Charities, he concluded that Jews demonstrated a "homogeneity of the cranial type [that] has not been observed in any other civilized race."¹⁰⁶ He also accepted uncritically the notion of Jews' Semitic descent, but tried to recast the story of Jewish origins and break the well-accepted link between the Semites and Africa. Because his measurements revealed that Jews conformed mainly to the brachycephalic (or round-headed) type, he argued that the Semites must not have originated in Africa, where the dolichocephalic (or long-headed) type prevailed. Suggesting instead a theory that placed the cradle of the Semites in the "the mountainous regions of the Caucasus," Fishberg concluded that "the African origin of the ancient Hebrew, and even of the Semites generally, is not an established fact."¹⁰⁷

Ultimately, however, Fishberg remained unsatisfied with his explanation of Jewish racial origins, primarily because the link between Semites and Africa was too well accepted to be dismissed so easily. After 1903, in order to find a better solution, he began to look more deeply into William Z. Ripley's argument that American and European Jews were not of pure Semitic descent, but were the products of extensive racial intermixture that had obliterated all traces of their Semitic origins. Ripley, writing in 1899, had made this assertion based on statistical data gathered by other researchers, and had not taken any anthropological measurements on Jews himself.¹⁰⁸ Fishberg, hoping to solve the question of Jewish origins and their relationship to Africa once and for all, set out to gather the proof he needed to substantiate Ripley's theory.

Fishberg concentrated his research in two main areas. First, he made an extensive study of Jewish pigmentation. Relying on the American racial orthodoxy that a race's coloring does not change significantly as a result of climate—that blacks cannot become white by changing their environment—he reasoned that the relatively light skin, hair, and eye color of many modern Jews precluded the possibility that they were of pure Se-



FIG. 134.
AMERICAN JEW.



FIG. 135.
AMERICAN JEW.

12 and 13. Jewish racial types from Maurice Fishberg, *The Jews: A Study of Race and Environment*, 1911. Fishberg, a Jewish physician and physical anthropologist, used these photographs to argue that American Jews (above) were the products of racial intermixture with white Europeans and had no meaningful connection to Jews in North Africa, who resembled the original "Semitic" type (opposite).

mitic or African descent.¹⁰⁹ Second, as the result of skull measurements he took at the schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in North Africa between 1903 and 1906, Fishberg was able to compare the cranial features of Middle Eastern Jews with those of his original sample from the United Hebrew Charities in New York. He concluded that each group was more closely related to the non-Jewish population among whom they lived than they were to each other. While the African Jews had intermingled with and taken on the qualities of their African neighbors over the centuries, the European and American Jews had mixed with and taken on the qualities of European whites. In fact, he wrote, European Jews had been so dramatically transformed through intermarriage that they retained "no relation at all" with the Semitic or African type, and could not claim Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as their physical ancestors.¹¹⁰

Given his findings that European Jews were essentially no different physically than the non-Jewish Europeans among whom they lived, Fishberg was able to argue that any minor differences in appearance or behavior had been artificially cultivated by the environment. If Jews had a distinctive posture and facial expression, engaged in certain trades and

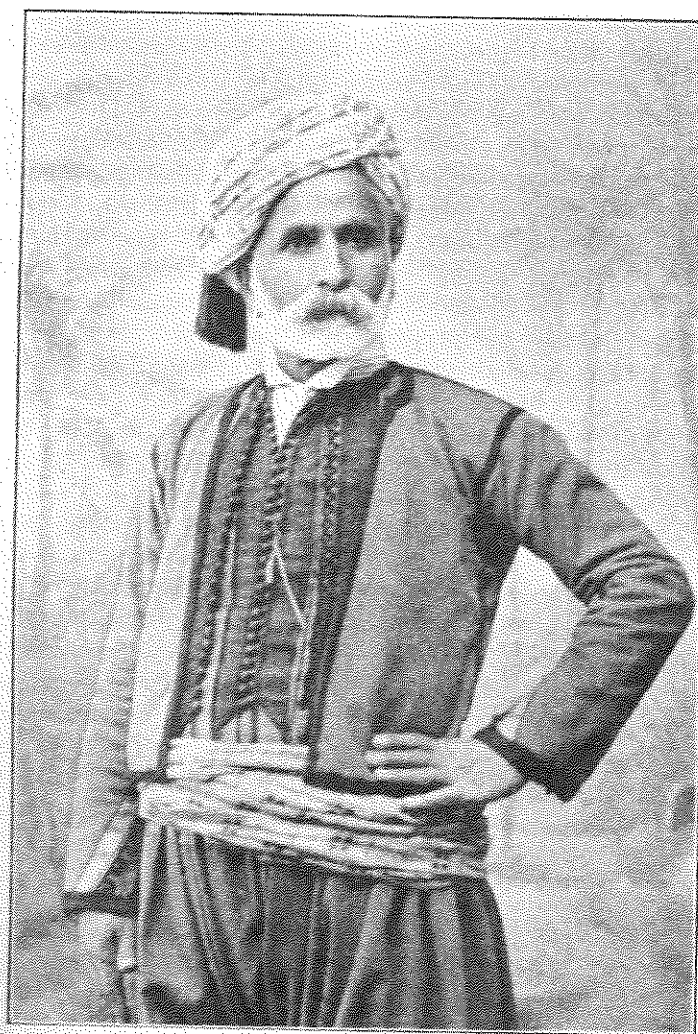


Fig. 100.—TUNISIAN JEW.

12 and 13. *cont'd*

professions, and demonstrated other particular social traits, these were merely the results of centuries of persecution and social isolation, a theme Fishberg elaborated upon in his 1911 book, *The Jews: A Study of Race and Environment*. If this aspect of his argument resembled the approach of Franz Boas, however, Fishberg departed from Boas's model in identi-

fying the black-white divide as the point at which environment ceased to explain group difference. Pointing to African Americans and other non-white races as groups who *did* bear immutable differences in headform and pigmentation, he was able to argue that Jews had no such traits that would keep them from assimilating into the white American population.¹¹¹ "It is clear that certain strata of the population cannot assimilate merely by adopting the language, religion, customs and habits of the dominant race," he explained in a subsequent article. "Negroes in the United States cannot be rendered white merely by speaking English [or] becoming Christians." Yet "the Jews, as whites, are by no means debarred from assimilating with their fellow men of other faiths."¹¹²

In denying any far-reaching racial distinctiveness and identifying Jews with other American whites, Fishberg had provided a scientific basis for the claims of Jewish leaders. Unlike other Jewish spokesmen, however, he pursued his conclusions with a rigid scientific consistency that was unable to make room for any lingering attachment to the notion of a Jewish race. In fact, because he had made the argument for the temporary, artificial nature of Jewish difference so rigorously, he discounted not only Jewish racial distinctiveness but almost every form of Jewish particularity. Given what he saw as the superficiality of Jewish difference, Fishberg anticipated the ultimate failure of Zionism and predicted that Jews would not even persist as a distinct religious denomination, but would in short time assimilate completely into the American population. "The fact that the differences between Jews and Christians are not everywhere racial, due to anatomical or physiological peculiarities, but are solely the result of the social and political environment," he wrote in the introduction to *The Jews*, "explains our optimism as regards the ultimate obliteration of all distinctions between Jews and Christians in Europe and America."¹¹³

By taking the denial of Jewish racial difference to its logical conclusion, Fishberg failed at satisfying the contradictory needs of American Jews, most of whom ultimately wanted to be accepted in white America without giving up their own distinctive racial identity. This failure was apparent in the almost universal condemnation the book received in Jewish circles. Zionists attacked the work most strenuously, using their organ, the *Maccabean*, to counter Fishberg's findings with scientific data of their own.¹¹⁴ One did not have to be a Zionist, however, to find Fishberg's prediction of ultimate Jewish effacement disturbing. The editor of the San Francisco *Emanu-El*, a Reform-minded journal, was bothered by Fishberg's argument that Jews were not a "race, creed or nation" but simply a "social phenomenon," a finding that exhibited a "complete lack of appreciation of the positive side of Jewish life and thought." Despite the success with which Fishberg refuted antisemitic race theories, the editor wrote, his book was "neither satisfactory nor assuring to the man who wills to be a

Jew."¹¹⁵ Horace Wolf, a Reform rabbi in Chicago, scoffed at Fishberg's argument that the term "Jewish race" was a scientific misnomer. "What do we care that the laboratory masters have dubbed us in error," he asked, "so long as our lives reflect our implicit belief in the continued existence of the Jewish people?"¹¹⁶

The Fishberg episode revealed more clearly than any other the inability of American Jews to find stable, emotionally satisfying terms for self-definition in a society insistent on dividing the world into black and white. If Jews found that race was an increasing liability and threatened to lump them with nonwhites, they also found themselves unable to break the emotional commitment they had to a racial self-understanding. The result was a constant struggle with these two powerful impulses for inclusion and distinctiveness, one that led many acculturated Jews to assert their status as a religious group in public while privately clinging to a much broader racial understanding of Jewishness. In 1910, addressing the question "What Are We?" for a Jewish reading audience, historian Max Margolis summed up the collective frustration of American Jews by concluding that the Jews were "a great anomaly which cannot be classified according to accepted rules of definition."¹¹⁷ In finding satisfactory terms for Jewish self-definition, complained another Jewish writer the same year, "we succeed to about the same extent as the man who sets out to square the circle or to prove that twice two are five. We have set up what has come to be a veritable system of compromises ludicrous and illogical in themselves, but useful only for the lack of something better and because they enable us to muddle through somehow."¹¹⁸

Like those non-Jewish whites who preferred to subvert the Jews' racial distinctiveness rather than come to terms with it, Jews persisted with this "system of compromises" through World War I. Despite the obstacles Jewish racial identity seemed to pose to full membership in American society, Jews, like their non-Jewish counterparts, were sufficiently buoyed by the optimism of the Progressive Era to believe that these contradictions would work themselves out in time. But as World War I ushered in a new intense period of social change, Americans became even more concerned about Jewish distinctiveness and the forces of modernity that it represented. As Jews became an increasing focus of national anxiety during the interwar years, they would have to face up to the contradictions between Jewish racial status and whiteness in ways that they had previously been able to avoid.