

# The Eclipse of Jewish Cultural Power



CULTURE, TRUE CULTURE, breathes life into societies —launching ideas, sparking conversations, changing minds, expanding horizons, stilling hearts.

That breath feels increasingly shallow in the United States these days. We are living through a cultural crisis. The aes-

thetic impulse and the life of the mind are being subordinated to a rigid progressive orthodoxy that specializes in taking offense. We have allowed, even enabled, the politics of identity and its cousins, “inclusion” and “equity,” to dictate and narrow what our culture is and should be.

The new moral imperative to remain always *woke* is leaving its imprint on every corner of American culture. American history is being rewritten. American liberties and traditions are openly mocked. The Founding Fathers are viewed as irredeemably delinquent. White schoolchildren are taught to live in a state of contrition, no matter their ethnic identity, individual beliefs, or family history. Non-white children are taught that they live in a nation in which

everything has a racial component and there are racist fingerprints everywhere. Media companies, publishing houses, Hollywood studios, art museums, corporate suites — all have been taken hostage by an intolerant, bitter, and humorless insurgency that is illiberal in its aims and hypocritical, even Orwellian, in its claims to inclusiveness.

In this climate of suspicion and accusation, the risks are great. All contributions to the culture are meticulously scrutinized for ideological impurities. Old tweets are resurrected to demonstrate moral unworthiness. Innocently citing an offensive word can swiftly end a distinguished career. Speech in any form can lead to professional or reputational ruin if it merely *sounds* offensive or expresses a heterodox point of view. The price of membership, of acceptance, has become costly. A script must be followed, involving endless one-upmanship in alleging evil and confessing guilt. Self-editing is essential. Allegations of “microaggressions,” or worse, outright racism, are casually invoked. Twitter and other social media act as a crowd-sourced version of a police state, always ready to denounce a heretical thought and extract a self-abasing apology.

Cultural entities that should know better — publishers, producers, and professors who all owe their livelihood to the First Amendment — suddenly find themselves in the censorship business. Book deals are withdrawn by imprints such as Simon & Schuster and Hachette because junior editors feel empowered to start a petition, charge racism, or claim to be “endangered” by a point of view they reject. In any other journalistic era, they would be fired. Today, bizarrely, it’s the employers who fear the wrath of employees only a few years out of college. The *New York Times* apologizes for printing an op-ed from a United States senator — and then sacks and demotes those responsible for doing their jobs. Broadcast journalism replaces objective news-gathering with partisan morality tales. Museums dispense with aesthetics for the sake of social justice. Guest speakers at colleges are shouted down by students who have no appreciation for the meaning of free speech. Faculty members are bullied on campus and chased off campus. Artists are black-

balled for something as innocuous as condemning arson. Even the United States Navy is reading Ibram X. Kendi, the high priest of “antiracist” illiberalism. The culture wars are now scrambling the minds of those who fight our actual wars.

Outside the ivory tower, ideas have real-life consequences. We’re all trapped in the groupthink of critical race theory, intersectionality, and trendy academic/activist flights of fancy that have metastasized into nonsensical, even catastrophic social policies, such as defunding the police or allowing cities to be taken hostage by rioters. Anger and demonization become a behavioral ethic that feeds on its own rage.

America should always be mindful of its appalling history of slavery, segregation, and racism. But institutionalized, “systemic” prejudices were dismantled long ago, even if their legacies remain. Racism still also exists. But the concrete, real progress made in racial equality over the past several decades should not be devalued. The numbers don’t lie; there are causes for real optimism. Why else do countless immigrants and refugees from around the world undertake every risk to live on our side of the border? Surely, they have heard the canard about America’s deep-seated racism. Apparently, they are not buying it. Neither should we.

What kind of a culture can possibly survive so much blame, so much intimidation, so much self-censorship, so much brainwashing? And — to get to the topic at hand — what does it mean for the Jews?



Wherever Jews went in nearly 2,000 years of wandering, they always made their adopted homes more interesting culturally, spiritually, and intellectually. How winningly they took to the countries that would have them. How much they enriched them, in countless ways.

It is especially true of the Jews of America. They arrived as immigrants. But they are indigenous to American culture, which, at least before this impoverished moment, wouldn’t have existed in

its fullest forms without the creative imagination and intellectual energy of Jews.

Beginning in the early 20th century, no area of American cultural life has remained untouched, if not wholly transformed, by Jews. Song, cinema, theater, literature, comedy, journalism, and style; philosophy, social activism, scholarship, commentary, and criticism: As America grew ever more open to embracing difference, as barriers to entry fell, as new cultural forms emerged (wherever ideas were being debated, played with, produced), one could find Jews resurrecting the ghosts of Talmudists past.

Some of this cultural production began by mining the richness of Jewish ideas and traditions, languages, and idioms. It then moved outward, finding new audiences for a Jewish sensibility: creative, wry, ribald, honest about human frailties and the inner resources required to persevere. Sensibilities honed over centuries of standing outside mainstream cultures, looking in, suddenly became the mainstream culture, looking out.

Yiddish theater did much to beget both Broadway and Hollywood. The American songbook was all but written by Irving Berlin, the Gershwin brothers, Stephen Sondheim, Carole King, Bob Dylan, and Paul Simon. A Jew from Tennessee named Adolph Ochs purchased, at the heavily discounted price of \$75,000, a failing newspaper called “the New York Times” and turned it into the most important journalistic institution in the world. The most prestigious award in American letters is named for a Hungarian Jew, Joseph Pulitzer, who also founded the country’s most important school of journalism, at Columbia University. Postwar Jewish writers such as Philip Roth, Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller, Bernard Malamud, Cynthia Ozick, and Saul Bellow reinvented the American novel. Walter Lippmann, Irving Kristol, Irving Howe, Barbara and Jason Epstein, William Shawn, and Norman Podhoretz created magazines and journals that set the terms of American discourse for decades. Jewish comedians dispensed with knock-knock jokes and pratfalls, and pioneered observational and political humor. A

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San Francisco wholesaler named Levi Strauss is responsible for the trousers that define casual American dress, while a man named Ralph Lifshitz—a product of the Manhattan Talmudical Academy and Baruch College—changed his name to Ralph Lauren and invented the preppy New England look. The Hollywood Western was created by former street urchins such as MGM’s Louis B. Mayer, the four Warner brothers, and four of the other six major original Jewish studio chiefs, who grew up sleeping on fire escapes in the summer and who had probably never been on a horse. Comic-book writers took the Jewish experiences of vulnerability, braininess, irreverence, and fantasies about rescuing Jews, and transformed them into America’s superheroes. The overwhelming popularity of this culture demonstrated that Jewish ideas didn’t have to be put into Jewish characters to be universally understood—and universally popular.

This was a generous culture, an inviting one, one that was open to everyone and everything. No idea was alien to it; nothing was beyond discussion; nobody was unwelcome. James Baldwin’s early published stories appeared in the pages of *Commentary*, an organ of the American Jewish Committee. Jewish music and film producers showcased talent of all kinds, wherever they could find it. Allen Ginsburg’s great poem “Howl” brought gay love into mainstream consciousness. Jewish culture was *liberal* culture in the broadest sense of the word: It believed in itself just enough not to believe in anything completely.

It also believed in America, at least what was best in it: its unparalleled freedom, its fairness, its celebration of individual merit, its usual willingness to change when called out on its (many) flaws, its

allowances to let people be people—and to let Jews be Jews. This was a culture in which Jews sat proudly at the table with every other ethnic and racial group, but never demanded to sit at its head.

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Now all this is being lost, deliberately. One might say an entire culture is in the process of being canceled. The ground rules of liberalism have disappeared, and with them, the qualities that made Jews so vital to American culture are vanishing as well.

It isn’t that Jews no longer occupy important positions in American culture, to say nothing of other fields. What’s disappearing from the cultural scene is the Jewish sensibility: its essential broad-mindedness, impish irreverence, openness to difference, and its skill in the art of disagreement.

Today, culture-makers fear being charged with plundering the stories of others, instead of being inspired to tell them. The new woke ground rules are “Stay in your lane. Do not fictionalize the experiences of people who are not you. Do not write (or speak) dialogue in their voices. Stop imagining the lives of others.” One wonders how a culture that demonizes empathy and imagination can survive as any kind of culture at all. It demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of how ideas are brought to life and art is made: Imagination must be free to observe widely, inhabit other worlds, and reassemble their fractured pieces.

We no longer speak of giving everyone an equal chance. Now the call is for “equity”—equal outcomes. We also no longer speak of excellence, at least not as the overriding consideration in cultural endeavors. Instead, the dominant factor is inclusion—not of ideas or perspectives or experiences, only of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender. An artist’s presumed merit these days rarely has much to do with the reach of her imagination or the power of her prose; it’s whether she is “representing” her identity. But art whose chief business is to “represent” rather than create (or, heaven forbid, *defy*)

is inherently derivative, and derivative art is inherently mediocre. Is there any wonder why woke culture is so excruciatingly tedious?

Where does this leave Jews?

Recognizably Jewish stories are now out of vogue, as are so many stories that appear to be about “white” people. The Holocaust is derisively dismissed, in some circles, as “white-on-white crime”; harm that comes to those who appear to benefit from privilege is either no crime at all or one that is deserved. And harm directed specifically at Jews—as we have seen lately in New York and Los Angeles and, of course, throughout Europe—provokes little public outcry at all. Antisemitism still makes up by far the largest percentage of ethnically or religiously based hate crimes, but it’s a statistic that barely registers with an attentive audience outside the parochial world of Jewish organizations.

Ironically, in an era of identity politics, Jewish identity means almost nothing, except insofar as Jews are condemned to accepting their status of “conditional whiteness,” to use the new woke jargon. Nor have Jews been enthusiastically “included” in a Dyke March that expelled marchers flying a Pride flag emblazoned with a Star of David, or in a Women’s March led by admirers of Louis Farrakhan, or in a Black Lives Matter movement that finds its main foreign-policy concern to be opposition to the Jewish state, or on college campuses that are hypersensitive to every alleged micro-aggression and racist dog whistle except the ones that target Jews.

Some Jews, wandering the halls of film and TV studios, publishing houses and media companies, perhaps concerned for their livelihoods, think the best way of dealing with this new culture is to downplay their Jewishness and make a show of their social justice bona fides. They will write checks to social justice organizations and gladly march in a Black Lives Matter rally—but they wouldn’t cross a street to join much smaller marches against the new onslaught of antisemitism, and especially not to join a pro-Israel rally. One Jewish actor, Seth Rogen, has gone out of his way to bash Israel and mock a Jewish woman being abused online for her Zionist views. That is his

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right, though perhaps he should try tweeting similar put-downs at a member of some other ethnic group experiencing online hate. Then he can count the nanoseconds until his career implodes.

What these fellow-traveling Jews don’t seem to understand is that no amount of public support or shows of solidarity with others, however heartfelt, will spare them from the woke furies when they make the smallest misstep. Just think of actress Mayim Bialik, forced to offer a cringing apology for publicly making the Orthodox Jewish case for dressing modestly.

Jewish Americans, especially those in the arts, should be defending the culture that earlier generations of Jews had contributed so much to—and that included them. They will find no home and even fewer friends in this dystopian culture now being built. The stronger the demands for “sensitivity reads,” the less space there will be for original thinking and creativity. The louder the call for “equity,” the more it will exclude the genuinely talented of all backgrounds. The more aggressive the effort to demonize people who have expressed a “bad take,” the more timorous and pallid the overall culture will become. Woke culture is to Jewish culture what kryptonite is to Superman—a character, it bears remembering, created by two Jews named Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster.

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For Jews to attempt to make peace with woke culture is a fool’s errand. Something else is needed: a return to a prouder Jewish sensibility.

Given the outsized influence Jews have had on American culture, we must take a stand to defend the liberal traditions that have guided us and so many others, based on timeless values. Jews have many decades of creative and intellectual sweat equity in the cultural life of this country. It should not be surrendered or squandered.

It is time for Jews to stop apologizing: for being “white,” whether we consider ourselves that or not; for loving Israel and standing up for its rights to self-defense; for being “privileged,” as if Jews were ever given things they didn’t themselves earn. The apology reflex is undignified, dishonest, cowardly, and an insult to the historic and unstinting support Jews have shown for civil and human rights.

It is also time to full-throatedly reject vintage antisemitic labels and libels, no matter whence they come. Condemning Louis Farrakhan and “the Squad” for antisemitic statements and dog whistles must become a litmus test for demonstrating solidarity with Jews. Israel is not an apartheid state. No ethnic cleansing is taking place in Gaza or the West Bank. No Jew with the Holocaust imprinted in his or her memory would ever be involved in mass killing. Palestinian children are not being deliberately targeted by Israelis; they are being sacrificed, willfully, by the death cult that governs them. Israel is not training American law enforcement to choke black male suspects. And, finally, Jews have not stolen land—on the contrary, Israel has voluntarily surrendered more land than any other state to achieve real peace.

These lies must be rebutted. They are already too widely disseminated, too easily excused. To fail to stand up for the truth in a time of more fashionable lies is a betrayal—not just of fellow Jews, but of the moral universe.

The politics of identity are not a suitable replacement for American culture. Art and ideas don’t easily arise from grievance and reprimand. The life-affirming and sublime are necessary, too. Having a fixed identity undermines the promise of American reinvention. The amalgam of hustle and grit that gave the United States its

distinctive cultural richness is what made this country great, not evidence of systemic injustice. Holding some people back rather than lifting everyone up is un-American. It is the antithesis of a liberal culture. Equity by engineered fiat is as stifling as it sounds.

Until such time as true liberalism returns to American cultural life, Jews must find other outlets for our intellectual and cultural commitments. There are places where authentic Jewish culture is thriving, but they lie outside the mainstream. It’s time to refocus our energies, redouble our investments, in particularly Jewish culture: *Jewish Journal*, *Algemeiner*, *Mosaic*, *Tablet*, *Commentary*, *The Jewish Week*, *JNS*, the *Forward*, *Jewish Insider*; Jewish book publishers such as Schocken, Jewish Lights, Fig Tree Books, and Mandel Vilar Press; the Jewish Book Council, the National Yiddish Theater Folksbiene, Jewish museums and archives. Jewish funders and Federations should increase their support for these enterprises, and together we can rebuild a vibrant culture elsewhere.

Someday, ideally soon, the power that progressive politics is exerting over our culture will disappear. Jews will have to help recapture and replenish what has been lost, provided there are still Jews worthy of the task, those able to reclaim the liberal spirit and aesthetic impulse. It will be a mammoth undertaking—the culture war in reverse. The time to start fighting it is now. \*