

ONE

INTRODUCTION

Postwar American Jewry Reconsidered

In the fall of 1962, a contributor to *Women's League Outlook*, the magazine of the women's branch of the Conservative movement in American Judaism, rhapsodized about the wide adoption of Israeli folk dance among American Jewish youth. She wrote:

Visit any group of young Jewish girls and boys, from Bangor, Maine to Corpus Christi, Texas, from Vancouver, Canada to San Diego, California—the length and breadth of the country, and see how those children dance a hora and sing Israeli songs. . . . We, the middle aged folk of today, had nothing like it in our youth. As Jews, we lost our identity in . . . the jitterbug. A special Jewish dance for the young? Unthinkable, when we were young, except at Jewish weddings.¹

To the author, American Jewish youth's championing of Israeli folk dance signaled a willingness to appear different from the surrounding American culture. She chided those nostalgic for the immigrant Jewish culture of yesteryear, writing, "We don't have to feel sorry for our children. . . . [T]hey are building up a much richer and much prouder life as Jews" than the previous generation had done.² The field of dance, from the author's perspective, was a powerful incubator for postwar Jewish life. Israeli folk dance both shaped and reflected a new kind of American Jewish dignity; Zionism and Israel, her essay suggested, were most significant to American Jews as guarantors of a vibrant American Jewish culture rather than as

vehicles for political liberation, the protection of persecuted Jews, or the revitalization of the Jewish religion.

Bringing Zion Home shines a spotlight on the phenomenon described above—broadly speaking, the extensive promotion and consumption of Israel in the American Jewish cultural realm. In this book, I address a question that historians have not yet fully answered: How, exactly, *did* Israel surface in American Jewish culture in the immediate postwar decades, and what does this reveal about the nature of postwar American Jewish culture more generally? Examining the fields of publishing, the arts (dance, fine art, and music), and material and consumer culture, all together, I contend that Israel served as an increasingly significant touchstone in the American Jewish imagination in the two decades after Israel's founding.

Most specifically, I argue that many American Jews encountered Israel in the early postwar decades primarily through their roles as cultural impresarios, tastemakers, and consumers.³ They became active organizers of and participants in Israel-related cultural practices, including writing and reading about Israel; teaching and performing Israeli folk dances; promoting and consuming Israeli fashions and objects; and arranging and attending exhibitions of Israeli art and concerts by Israeli musicians. I find that a diverse and growing spectrum of actors—including journalists, Jewish educators, Zionist and synagogue youth, Hadassah members, business entrepreneurs, collectors, and arts foundations, to name a few—envisioned the cultural sphere as the front line in the campaign to win the hearts and minds of postwar Americans, Jews and non-Jews, to the cause of Israel. In so doing, these actors remade American Jewish culture in the postwar era.

With this study, I hope to elaborate, enrich, and nuance a story that we often think we already know. Over time, a kind of shorthand has emerged to describe the American Jewish relationship to Israel in the first decades of the postwar era. This narrative prominently features massive outpourings of support for Israel among American Jews during 1948 and 1967, during Israel's pivotal wars with its Arab neighbors. Scholars of postwar American Jewry are right to draw attention to the substantial and unprecedented contributions of American Jews, primarily in financial and political terms, on Israel's behalf in 1948 and, even more so, in 1967. While it is natural for historians to be drawn to "momentous events such as the birth of . . . Israel and, along with it, the role played by the American Zionist movement in the birthing process," as historian Rafael Medoff has acknowledged, this has led to relative neglect of other sorts of engagements with Israel in less "dramatic" moments.⁴

So, too, has popular memory of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and its aftermath implicitly shaped our understanding of American Jewish imaginings of Israel in the earlier postwar decades. According to this narrative, American

Jewry, fearing a second Holocaust in 1967 as Israel faced off against the surrounding Arab nations, embraced the Jewish state unapologetically in a moment of mass catharsis and reoriented their communal agenda to reflect Israel's now central importance to them.⁵ In this light, the period between 1948 and 1967 appears as a doldrums, undistinguished by bold political actions or astonishing philanthropic largesse. The problem with this story is that it undervalues Israel's impact on American Jewish culture—high culture, popular culture, and material culture—in these years. In neglecting the cultural sphere, as such, we are in danger of missing a prime arena in which American Jewry first explored its relationship with the state of Israel.

To focus squarely upon American Jewish culture as a field of inquiry does not mean, however, that “culture” existed as a thing apart, an enlightened realm unsullied by political or economic realities. To be sure, many of the actors who appear in this book described their cultural engagements with Israel as deliberately nonpolitical in nature. Focusing attention on Israeli art and fashion, for example, helped some American Jews mediate potentially awkward political entanglements with the Jewish state at a time when the United States was weighing the advantages and disadvantages of an alliance with Israel. The boundary dividing cultural and political transactions in this field, however, was fluid, and the book seeks to navigate the explicit and implicit relationship between culture and politics among postwar American Jews, particularly in relation to Israel.

In anticipation of Israel's tenth anniversary in 1958, for example, a group of prominent American citizens calling itself the American Committee for Israel's Tenth Anniversary Celebration spearheaded the planning of commemorative events in the United States. The American Committee encouraged local communities to organize musical concerts featuring the work of Israeli composers, arrange exhibitions of Israeli art at local museums, sponsor presentations of books about Israel at libraries and schools, and create window displays “saluting Israel” at local department stores, among other things.⁶ The organizers of the 1958 celebrations framed such cultural programs as an accessible, noncontroversial means of bringing Israel into the American public sphere—of spotlighting Israel's achievements in a “non-political, non-partisan setting,” in the words of the American Committee.⁷

The term *non-political* bears scrutiny, however. Herbert H. Lehman, the general chairman of the American Committee for Israel's Tenth Anniversary Celebration as well as a retired U.S. senator and former governor of New York, was eager to cast the Jewish state as an American partner in the Cold War. In seeming contradiction to the American government's more sustained attention to postwar Europe and Asia as prime theaters for battling communism, Lehman—still a consummate politician—insisted that Israel was central to America's strategic interests. He argued that “[t]he peace of

mankind and the preservation of freedom and of civilization itself hangs on the forces at work and the events which are taking place in the Middle East.” Lehman promised that, in the commemorative year then unfolding, the American Committee would call attention specifically to the “danger of continued Communist success in breeding unrest and conflict in the area.”⁸

For Lehman, and presumably for his fellow members of the American Committee (including organizational leaders, clergy, politicians, artists, journalists and educators, both Jewish and non-Jewish), Israel presented a clear contrast to the destabilizing forces at work in the Middle East. The Jewish state was a dynamic symbol of “man’s capacity to create and build, despite danger and adversity, given the will and the passion for creation—and for freedom,” as Lehman put it, linking creative aptitude and achievement, broadly speaking, with political freedom.⁹ The American Committee endeavored to disseminate this idea by means of special cultural and religious events to be planned and observed by a wide swath of the Jewish and Christian populations in the United States. Rabbi Irving Miller, chairman of the group’s Committee on Community Organization, stressed that the celebrations should be “all-American, involving all facets of community life . . . in hundreds of communities large and small.”¹⁰ The point, it appears, was to generate a sense of broad consensus, deploying Israel-positive messages largely in educational and cultural forums rather than in explicitly political arenas. Yet for Herbert Lehman and his fellow members of the American Committee, as for many of Israel’s American Jewish advocates (as we shall see), culture and politics were intimately intertwined.

Although the occasion of Israel’s ten-year anniversary afforded a heightened public platform for Israel-themed cultural and educational programming in the United States, the activities championed by the American Committee were not rare, isolated experiments. By the time of Israel’s tenth anniversary in 1958, Israel-focused cultural activities had already become quite familiar to many American Jews, a phenomenon that only intensified in the course of the 1960s. Yet, even in light of existing scholarship on American Jews and Israel between 1948 and 1967, lacunae in this cultural history still exist. In their important surveys of American Jewish history, scholars such as Edward S. Shapiro, Jonathan D. Sarna, and Gerald Sorin, among others, have noted that postwar American Jews were, at the very least, enthusiastic supporters of Israel who created communal networks, spaces, and times for primarily philanthropic engagements with the Jewish state.¹¹ To the extent that such surveys address the cultural sphere, however, they frame Israel as a subconscious influence on American Jewish culture at most, something to be mentioned in passing.

Shapiro, for example, has written that, until the crisis of the 1967 war, “not even [American Jews] themselves realized just how important Israel

had been to them,” and he points to the popularity of Leon Uris’s *Exodus* and Otto Preminger’s film adaptation of that book as “clues” that, in fact, American Jews had developed an intense emotional bond with Israel in the preceding two decades.¹² Sarna has looked at the 1950s as a period of “incubation,” regarding the impact of both the Holocaust and Israel, in contrast to the period after the Six-Day War, when these themes “moved on to the center stage of public life.” Before 1967, according to Sarna, Israel had a “subtle” influence on American Jewish life by means of such practices as the sale of Israeli goods in synagogue gift shops and the “spread of Israeli dances among young people.”¹³ Meanwhile, Stephen J. Whitfield has written that, in the late 1950s (and specifically at the time of *Exodus*’s publication), “American Jewish interest in Israel was slight . . . levels of philanthropy and tourism were—by later standards—low, and . . . ethnicity was suppressed or disdained as an embarrassing residue of the immigrant past.”¹⁴ My exploration of American Jewish culture in the first postwar decades challenges the notion that Israel was, for American Jews, merely an afterthought.

I have premised *Bringing Zion Home*, as a historical project, on the notion that it is worth investigating specifically cultural engagements—i.e., the adoption of Israeli folk dance, to name one prominent example—delineating the processes by which these practices took hold and assessing their influence. This is the first book-length study of these explicitly cultural practices. To be sure, there has been much significant scholarship on aspects of the relationship, since 1948, between the United States, American Jewry, and Israel. These include examinations of Israel’s place in the thinking of postwar Jewish leaders and intellectuals and studies of the organizational sphere that American Jews created in order to raise funds and advocate for Israel, for example.¹⁵ Few scholars have fully tackled the subject of Israel’s significance in this period in the wide-ranging “cultural realm” per se, however—that is, in the arts and in popular and material culture.

Three books do merit particular attention as noteworthy forays into the question of Israel’s role in postwar American Jewish culture. Historian Deborah Dash Moore devotes a chapter to the subject in her pioneering work on postwar American Jewry, *To The Golden Cities: Pursuing the American Jewish Dream in Miami and L.A.* She argues for the importance of Los Angeles and Miami Jews in positioning Israel—especially via Hollywood films and Israel Bond campaigns—as an object of nearly universal American Jewish veneration. Providing substantive details about these Jews’ Israel-related practices in the first postwar decades, Moore contends that, for these path-breaking Jewish communities, an “imagined Israel displaced New York as the source of authentic Jewish culture.”¹⁶

Meanwhile, in *Eye on Israel: How America Came to View Israel as an Ally*, Michelle Mart mines representations of Israel in mass media, popular

fiction, and film, arguing that the unambiguously heroic depictions of the Jewish state found within them satisfied the muscular political and cultural agenda of Cold War America.¹⁷ Though Mart pays close attention to how American Jews and Israelis were represented in popular media in this period, she is largely uninterested in developments within the American Jewish community, leaving room for further work on this subject. Most recently, in his book *Our Exodus: Leon Uris and the Americanization of Israel's Founding Story*, M. M. Silver has focused upon Uris's bestseller as a masterly public relations coup for post-1948 Zionism, the first truly compelling Zionist narrative of Jewish history for a mass audience. Silver argues that by "projecting his own personal problems and existential dilemmas" onto the story of Israel's founding, Uris transformed recent history into an Americanized fable of "Judeo-Christian union in a post-Holocaust melting pot."¹⁸ However, although Silver concedes that *Exodus* "did not emerge ex nihilo," he presents few examples of American Jews' engagements with Israel in the cultural realm.¹⁹ Even with these important contributions to the historical record, then, there is still much to learn about Israel's place in American Jewish culture.

AMERICAN JEWRY AND ISRAEL AFTER 1948

By the close of the 1940s, the internecine battles over Zionism that had plagued and stymied the organized American Jewish community in the interwar period and the World War II years seemed, for most, a distant memory. In response to the acute crisis of Israel's War of Independence, American Jews forged, in the words of one historian, "a unity of purpose on a scale unprecedented in the modern history of the Jews."²⁰ American Jewry proved instrumental—in terms of both money and influence—to Israel's emergence on the world stage as a full-fledged nation. Indeed, Israel quickly became a philanthropic common cause among American Jews, to the extent that Israel's leaders now bypassed American Zionist organizations altogether, focusing fundraising appeals on the vast population of supporters in the American Jewish community not formally affiliated with Zionist groups.

Israel appeared to have many sympathizers in the American public sphere. Pro-Israel sentiment was expressed in "resolutions passed by state governments, rhetoric of members of Congress, political platforms, and speeches of leading politicians from both major parties," even before Israel's independence, revealing "an enormous groundswell of support" for the Jewish state, as Peter L. Hahn has shown.²¹ President Harry Truman, whose foreign policy approach to Israel was somewhat inconsistent, was personally sympathetic to Israel's needs, a position rooted in his Protestant Christian religious convictions and sense of moral responsibility toward the

Jewish state in the wake of the Holocaust.²² In Congress, the granting of a \$221.5 million loan package between 1949 and 1952 constituted a significant gesture of goodwill in the first years of Israel's existence, a practice that continued well after the first postwar decades. The American press was filled with enthusiastic reports and positive editorials on the subject of Israel, describing the country as a land of hardy pioneers and as a place of redemption for the surviving remnant of European Jewry. Favorable attitudes toward Israel in the elite press—specifically, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*—even surpassed the degree of support for Israel in the American public at large.²³

American supporters of Israel, Jewish and non-Jewish, often argued that there was a natural congruence between the national characters of America and Israel, a common love of freedom and democracy and a shared generosity of spirit and resources. In this formulation, analogous myths and historical sagas pointed to a deeper harmony of interests that formed the basis of a special relationship between America and Israel. These themes, and the deeply felt faith in American pluralism that informed them, had strengthened the various strands of American Zionism before 1948, from the pragmatic Progressive-era version endorsed by Louis Brandeis to the spiritual and cultural Zionism of rabbi-intellectuals such as Solomon Schechter and Mordecai Kaplan as well as the small but influential moderate wing of Labor Zionism in the United States.²⁴

In the context of a postwar America facing new geopolitical challenges, the likeness took on new nuances. Many explicitly or tacitly agreed with Jacob Blaustein, president of the historically non-Zionist American Jewish Committee, who intoned that “with our aid, Israel, like our own United States, can become a positive force for democracy and for international peace and order.”²⁵ No mere rhetorical flourish, this statement encapsulated exactly how many of Israel's American supporters (including Herbert Lehman of the American Committee for Israel's Tenth Anniversary Celebration) understood that nation's strategic value in the Cold War era—as “both a haven for the persecuted and a doughty democracy surrounded by and threatened with destruction by totalitarian Arab regimes allied . . . with an expansionist Soviet Union,” in historian Arthur Goren's analysis.²⁶

Yet it is easy to forget that, at the time, the nature of American Jewry's long-term relationship to Israel was unclear and potentially problematic. The emergence of Israel was a unique event, without precedent within the American Jewish experience. Aside from a small population of European émigrés and Holocaust survivors, postwar American Jews no longer constituted an immigrant community. America was home, a land freely chosen by immigrant parents and grandparents, most of whom had arrived from Central and Eastern Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries seeking better economic opportunities and relief from persecution. The ties, real and symbolic, that connected American Jews to the lands of their close ancestors were fast receding into communal memory. Suddenly, third-generation American Jews were faced with the reality of a new nation-state, one that declared itself the true homeland of world Jewry, the end to two millennia of exile.

Moreover, Israel's status among American political elites was in fact far from clear. While this is not a book of diplomatic history, it is worth bearing in mind how shifts in the political discourse and in American Jews' access or lack of access to the highest echelons of government power may have shaped their approach to, and renderings of, Israel. Though members of the U.S. Congress and the American public expressed sympathy for the Jewish state, the White House and State Department continued to debate whether Israel was a strategic asset or a liability in the Middle East. In 1956, Israel provoked the ire of the Eisenhower administration by covertly arranging and then executing an aggressive military campaign, with the help of France and Britain, to halt Egypt's nationalization of the Suez Canal. In the waning years of the 1950s, the United States' relationship with Israel was tentative at times and generally inconsistent; as the American government weighed Arab nations and Israel as potential allies against the Soviet Union, American Jewish leaders made the case for Israel's strategic value and its security needs while wielding little actual influence with the Eisenhower administration.²⁷

This scenario changed, to some extent, with the administration of John F. Kennedy, the first American president to articulate the notion of a "special relationship" between the United States and Israel.²⁸ Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, both of whom courted Jews as a prime Democratic constituency, expressed steadfast American support for Israel's continuing independence. In contrast to Kennedy, however, Johnson had positioned himself as an outspoken friend of Israel early in his career, and it was under Johnson's administration, especially after 1967, that the ties between the United States and Israel evolved into a clear patron-client relationship. Yet in terms of foreign policy, both Kennedy and Johnson sought, above all, to guarantee America's strategic interests in the Middle East and in the Cold War generally.²⁹ In sum, for much of the period under consideration, American Jews could safely assume the good will of much of the American public toward Israel while being less sure that their vision of appropriate U.S.-Israel relations always cohered with that of the government.

In these circumstances, Israel's true import, in terms of sustained influence on American Jewish life, was impossible to predict. While the establishment of Israel "clearly marked a turning point in Jewish history," as the *American Jewish Year Book* announced in its review of the year 1947-48, "the significance and long-range implications of this event could not . . . be fully

appraised” while matters were still so fresh and so volatile.³⁰ Larger questions loomed about Israel’s impact on American Jewish life.³¹ On the one hand, widespread support for and sympathy with the Jewish state heralded a new, enhanced role for Israel within the American Jewish mainstream. In the Jewish organizational sphere, this trend was exemplified by Hadassah, the Women’s Zionist Organization of America, whose pragmatic and popular brand of Zionism helped transform Israel into a fixture of suburban Jewish life in the 1950s. Other sectors of organized American Zionism fared less well, however, experiencing a steep decline not only in membership but also, more critically, in influence.³² Put simply, political Zionism faced an unprecedented crisis of purpose in the United States after 1948. The paradox was immediately apparent: as the American Jewish masses embraced Israel as a nearly universal communal cause and as the Israeli government assumed sovereignty in its political affairs, the leaders of American Zionism found themselves sidelined as activists and intermediaries.³³

It is difficult to say with precision what “counts” as Zionism in this context. For hardline Israeli Zionists such as Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, and some American Zionist intellectuals, to be a Zionist meant putting the state of Israel at the very center of Jewish political, economic, and organizational life.³⁴ Certainly, relatively few American Jews or Jewish organizations fit that description in this period. In the words of one historian, “The conversion of American Jews to full-fledged Jewish nationalism . . . never really materialized.”³⁵ Yet historians sometimes use the term *American Zionism* more broadly, as shorthand for pro-Israel sentiment and behavior among a wider segment of the American Jewish population. In this book, I try to be as specific as possible in designating “card-carrying” Zionists as such and distinguishing hardline Zionists from those whose “love of Israel” was less ideologically precise—a description that fits the great bulk of the American Jewish population in the postwar period, even among those who actively promoted Israel’s interests in the American sphere.

Mainstream American Zionism had, from the beginning, been premised on the notion of the American exception, the idea that the long-term insecurity and periodic persecutions that had characterized Jewish life elsewhere in the Diaspora had dissolved in the light of American freedom and democracy. According to this conception, Israel, like Jewish Palestine before it, was first and foremost a place of refuge and rehabilitation for Jews of other nations, not of America. At the same time, however, American Jews shared a religious, cultural, and political heritage with the people of Israel; the new state of Israel clearly meant something more to American Jews than did any other foreign nation.

Israel *seemed* to be an acceptable object of pride and interest within the context of American culture, but might support for Israel, misconstrued

as political fealty to another nation, ultimately be a liability? The notion of a “dual loyalty” divided between America and Israel continued to hover at the periphery of the national discourse after 1948, occasionally emerging into the light, as in the pages of *Reader's Digest* in 1949 and *Commentary* in 1950.³⁶ Those figures who publicly rejected the dual loyalty charge, such as rabbi and Zionist leader Abba Hillel Silver and Harvard historian Oscar Handlin, argued that the maintenance of bonds between hyphenate Americans and their nations of origin—or affinity—was a valid, healthy facet of American life. Such assertions surely heartened American Jews, but hardly laid the matter to rest: anxiety about the dual loyalty charge fed the rancorous response to David Ben-Gurion's repeated calls for American Jewish immigration to Israel, for example, necessitating the so-called Blaustien–Ben-Gurion Understanding of 1950. (In it, the Israeli prime minister affirmed, in writing, that American Jews' only political loyalty was to the United States.)³⁷

In contrast to the community's hardline Zionists, who did not view Jewish nationalism as inherently compatible with American interests, many American Jews sought to position Israel as a “natural” fit with American interests and values. American Jews' turn to culture, and their engagement with Israel within the cultural realm, cohered well with the American discourse of consensus at mid-century. In this period, as Wendy Wall has argued, elites in the spheres of business, politics, religion, and culture eschewed conflict in the public sphere and developed a shared public lexicon that stressed American virtues such as “freedom” and “diversity” as a source of national unity in the Cold War (even as these elites actually disagreed about what those terms meant).³⁸

Applying Wall's insights to the cultural phenomena at hand, we can begin to trace the ways in which many of Israel's American Jewish supporters insisted that “culture” was a forum for the public good, a site of consensus rather than conflict. If “culture” was, ostensibly, a vehicle for furthering human aspirations, safeguarding individual freedom, and encouraging mutual education, who could argue with that? Certainly, by the late 1960s one could no longer pretend that American culture was a placid, harmonious meeting ground for diverse social and economic groups with sometimes conflicting agendas. By that time, too, American Jews had begun vociferously contesting Jewish communal ideals, goals, and methods, as historian Michael Staub has illustrated.³⁹ Even in the face of increasingly fractious debates about the values and aims of the postwar Jewish community in the course of the 1960s, American Jews did seem, for a time, to shape “culture” into a safe haven from which they could map their relationship with Israel, on the one hand, and with America, on the other.

Whether reading “Israel books,” dancing Israeli folk dances, promoting Israeli goods, or sponsoring presentations of Israeli art and music, American Jews were careful to articulate that their behavior fully aligned with American mores and goals. As true believers in “diversity” as a chief American value—an idea that loomed large in the mid-century discourse of consensus—Israel’s American Jewish impresarios viewed their cultural engagements with Israel as legitimate expressions of American identity. They premised their behavior on the idea that a reasonable degree of cultural difference buttressed democratic claims and maintained cultural vitality, enriching American life even as it aided America’s cause in the larger postwar world.⁴⁰

REASSESSING POSTWAR AMERICAN JEWS AND THEIR CULTURE

The basic social and economic patterns of American Jewry in the first postwar decades are beyond debate: namely, increasing professionalization, affluence, and large-scale suburbanization.⁴¹ In electing to buy houses in the burgeoning suburbs, as a vast and increasing majority of American Jews did in this period, young families left behind the cramped ethnic neighborhoods of their youth and “created a lifestyle and a cultural milieu built around family life, recreation for couples, and the educational and social needs of their children.”⁴² Formal Jewish institutions—especially suburban synagogues, founded by migrating Jews as one-stop social, ethnic, educational, and religious venues—and local Jewish social networks made up of other young families fulfilled these needs for many. Faced with unprecedented opportunities for individual advancement and a new landscape in which to chart their lives, American Jews stood at the threshold of a new era, one that “as a whole was defined by choice,” as historian Hasia Diner has argued.⁴³

Interpreting the ensuing cultural gestalt is a more contentious undertaking. Indeed, the development at the heart of this book—that is, Israel’s emergence as a substantial and nuanced influence on American Jewish culture—has been obscured, in part, by a foggy critical discourse about American Jewish culture in the first postwar decades, a combination of contemporaneous pessimism, popular memory, and later scholarship. American Jews of the postwar period have often been taken to task for their political and social conformity, intellectual and spiritual vacuity, and rank materialism; similar indictments extend to their engagements with Israel in these years, which have commonly been characterized as trivial, trite, and vulgar. As American studies scholar Riv-Ellen Prell has shown, Jewish intellectuals and social scientists writing at the time bemoaned the new suburban milieu

as “a community without a culture,” in contrast to the seemingly organic, unself-consciously Jewish environment of the (now moribund) ethnic urban neighborhood.⁴⁴ Condemnations of Jewish suburbanites and their practices bore the influence of postwar intellectual preoccupations with conformism and mass culture as dangerous societal forces while also revealing specifically American Jewish concerns about authenticity and the viability of Jewish life in a posturban, postimmigrant setting.⁴⁵

Products of suburban Judaism—that is, American Jewish baby boomers—coming of age in (and helping to shape) the political, social, and cultural ferment of the 1960s voiced this critique most forcefully, both at the time and afterward. Indeed, the generational identity of many American Jewish baby boomers has hinged upon the notion of resolute rejection of the allegedly shallow, stultifying Jewish culture of the 1950s. This narrative gained increasing authority as Jewish baby boomers moved into positions of power and became the gatekeepers of communal memory.⁴⁶ Hasia Diner has written compellingly about this phenomenon, making the case that the Jewish activists of the boomer generation, who saw in “their parents’ institutions, practices, and ways of thinking . . . all that was shallow, compromising, and wrong with America and its Jews,” helped shape the mistaken notion that pre-1967 American Jewry was silent on the subject of the Holocaust.⁴⁷ The boomers’ condemnations of the mainstream American Zionism of their suburban childhoods—the accusation that Israel did not enter into postwar Jewish life in meaningful ways—appear to follow a similar logic.

Such voices within the academy, too, have cast the feasibility of postwar American Jewish culture into doubt. In recent years, for example, some scholars have accused postwar American Jewry of cultivating a “culture of retrieval” based on nostalgia for the immigrant milieu and have indicted this cohort for prizing individual achievement and societal integration over Jewish commitments.⁴⁸ Postwar American Jewish culture continues to provoke anxious misgivings among some of the most astute observers of the American Jewish experience.

Rather than engaging in a “discourse of elegy,”⁴⁹ that traces the dissolution of American Jewish life and culture, some scholars have instead analyzed the altered landscape of postwar American Jewish culture in light of its innovative adaptation to new realities. Cultural historian Jeffrey Shandler has written persuasively, for example, of the postwar period as one of “new opportunities” (i.e., an expanded array of public cultural venues) and “new paradigms” for American Jewish culture. On the latter subject, he has described the increasing importance of “culture” in the postwar period as a category for defining and constructing Jewishness, akin to the highly elective nature of religious self-definition rather than to the “ethnic, national, politi-

cal and especially racial identities,” that constituted Jewishness in America before World War II.⁵⁰

In reassessing American Jews’ early encounters with Israel, this study adopts Shandler’s perspective. It argues *against* the idea that culture is, by implicit or explicit definition, “natural” and not constructed. In contrast, I view culture as a sphere of activity that, like politics or philanthropy, may be deliberately created, organizational in nature, and chiefly public in expression. It is perhaps fair to say that, for most American Jews of the postwar era, Jewishness was not “almost as natural as breathing,”⁵¹ as one historian has characterized Jewish identity in the pre–World War II period. This does not mean, however, that Jewish culture ceased to evolve or to matter within the postimmigrant milieu. In analyzing the cultural channels through which Israel entered the lives of many American Jews, this book illustrates, to the contrary, that postwar Jewish culture—selected and selective—became a purposeful group project of increasing import.

THE TURN TOWARD CULTURE

Historical evidence suggests that postwar American Jewish culture was a fertile and growing field as well as an increasingly public endeavor. Just as suburban pioneers deliberately reconceived the synagogue and posed formal affiliation as an answer to the erstwhile, informal “Jewish street,” so too did American Jews construct new and expanded formal cultural arenas in response to the challenges of postwar Jewish life.

The publishing world, for example, was one such site of invention and growth. In the same years that the American Yiddish newspapers, once influential and ubiquitous, faded from prominence, Jewish organizations and intellectuals established major journals of opinion such as *Commentary*, *Midstream*, and *Congress Weekly* as public platforms for assessing and debating American Jewish culture and politics (including American Zionism and relations with Israel).⁵² In the postwar period the Jewish Book Council, founded in 1943, reached growing audiences with its Jewish Book Month programs, while major American libraries set about augmenting and improving their Judaica collections.⁵³ At the same time, Jewish subject matter was becoming increasingly visible in the realm of popular fiction: in 1955, Herman Wouk’s *Marjorie Morningstar*, the story of a young Jewish woman’s coming-of-age in 1930s New York, became a national best-seller. Three years later, Leon Uris’s *Exodus*—which presented the saga of Israel’s birth from the ashes of the Holocaust—achieved even greater popularity.⁵⁴

In this period, too, preeminent Jewish institutions and organizations created new programs and venues as part of their mission to enrich American

Jewish life, secure its longevity, and educate the wider public about Judaism and Jewish culture. The Jewish Theological Seminary beamed programs on Jewish themes over the radio and airwaves during its broadcasts of *The Eternal Light* and oversaw the opening of a refurbished Jewish Museum on Fifth Avenue, New York's museum mile, in 1947.⁵⁵ In 1945, the Jewish Music Council, a new subsidiary of the National Jewish Welfare Board, instituted its Jewish Music Festival as an annual, nationwide event. Fifteen years later, in 1960, the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds established the National Foundation for Jewish Culture as "the central address for the total Jewish cultural enterprise in America."⁵⁶ As historian Stuart Svonkin has noted, even the American Jewish Congress, an organization that then applied itself primarily to protection of civil liberties, began sponsoring cultural events such as book fairs and music festivals as part of an expanded program to "promote a healthy self-knowledge and positive identification of Jews with Judaism."⁵⁷ The postwar period also witnessed a renaissance in synagogue architecture and in the design of Jewish ceremonial art.⁵⁸

This cultural flourishing within the American Jewish community mirrored the broader American moment; by many accounts, the postwar United States was experiencing a surge in cultural life. While the consumption of mass culture—television, popular music, and so on—exploded most forcefully as a national trend, so too did interest in the arts seem to be swelling. In his contemporaneous study of postwar America "at work and play," published in 1959, business economist A. W. Zelomek found increased interest and demand among American audiences in the spheres of literature, music, dance, and art, as measured by growing figures in sales and attendance.⁵⁹ Examining an array of evidence, sociologist Alvin Toffler agreed that America was experiencing "a great expansion in culture consumption."⁶⁰ Americans were not only buying books and attending museums in unprecedented numbers, he argued, but they were also "active amateurs" who made time to paint, play music, and study dance in their everyday lives.⁶¹ August Heckscher, appointed special consultant on the arts to John F. Kennedy in 1962, captured the optimistic strains of this cultural uptick when he wrote that "it is through the enjoyment of art . . . that public happiness is ultimately attained."⁶²

A number of factors shaped this broad cultural revitalization. Rising affluence after years of fiscal sobriety meant that, finally, people were able and eager to spend money—not only on an expanding array of modern, mass-produced goods, but also on tickets to the local symphony and art museum (as well as the sports arena).⁶³ The slightly decreased workweek of the first postwar decades and the widespread adoption of annual paid vacations were crucial, too, in this regard, granting middle-class Americans leisure time heretofore reserved for the moneyed elite.⁶⁴ The culture boom

was also indebted to the surge in education, characterized by exploding matriculation numbers in colleges and universities following the passage of the GI Bill in 1944.⁶⁵

American Jews exhibited these patterns to an even greater extent than their non-Jewish compatriots, positioning this minority population as key cultural producers and consumers.⁶⁶ While the New York intellectuals associated with *The Partisan Review* and *Commentary* were among the most celebrated and influential American Jewish cultural arbiters of the postwar era, growing numbers of rank-and-file American Jews, too, partook of the cultural opportunities at hand. “The burgeoning number of American Jews who attended college in the post–World War II era created a new kind of widely shared literacy, informed by the scope and sensibilities of liberal arts curricula,” a phenomenon that these Jews carried into their postcollege lives as middle-class citizens.⁶⁷

Beyond the magazine offices of New York and the halls of academe, the increasingly affluent and educated American Jewish masses applied themselves with vigor to the acquisition of culture. Alvin Toffler noted in his book *The Culture Consumers* that American Jews—young, well-educated, and financially secure—made up a disproportionately large portion of the new “culture public.”⁶⁸ Jewish women, it seems, were particularly avid culture consumers. Noting that, “many suburban Jews are interested in and thoroughly enjoy the theatre, ballet, the opera, museums—indeed, all forms of art,” sociologist Albert Gordon cast Jewish women as the motivating factor in such behavior.⁶⁹ Likewise, Gordon found Jewish women to be the primary adult readers and learners, particularly in regard to Jewish subject matter, in the suburban Jewish household.⁷⁰ Cultural commentator David Boroff also cited the significance of Jewish women in this role (which, as a reversal of traditional male stewardship of Jewish learning, he considered “a melancholy and inescapable truth”): “They buy the books,” he wrote, “they act as tastemakers, and, with missionary zeal, they get their husbands to read worthwhile books.”⁷¹ So, too, did Jews ensure their children’s exposure to Jewish culture. In suburban Nassau County, for example, synagogue classes embarked on field trips to New York to visit Jewish exhibitions, performances, and other sites at which students could explore aspects of Jewish culture.⁷² As these and earlier examples suggest, American Jewish women and men—pursuing specifically Jewish and more general cultural offerings alike—deliberately shaped “culture” both as a public project and as a personal, familial, and communal preoccupation in the postwar years.

I argue in this book that this cultural impulse was bound up with multiple, interrelated agendas. On the one hand, adopting Israel as a focus for such activity allowed American Jews to create what they felt was an authentically Jewish culture in postwar America, a major desideratum of

the posturban, postimmigrant milieu. On the other, American Jews shaped their stewardship of Israeli culture into a means of polishing their social and cultural status outside the Jewish community and thus of hastening integration into middle-class American life. Equally significant, American Jews felt they were contributing to America's welfare: in these years, influential cultural and political elites positioned "culture" as both an engine of American dominance and as a purveyor of peace in the Cold War. These elites "represented the Cold War as an opportunity to forge intellectual and emotional bonds" with people in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America; it was through the creation of such ties, as Christina Klein has argued, that the U.S. government insisted that the "economic, political, and military integration of the 'free world' [would] be achieved and sustained."⁷³ The State Department and the United States Information Agency worked in tandem to send American art exhibitions, films, musical artists, and dance troupes all over the world; Congress's passage of the International Cultural Exchange and Trade Fair Participation Act in 1956 illustrates how central cultural diplomacy had become as a strategy for winning the Cold War.⁷⁴ To many American Jews, cultural patronage of and exchange with Israel seemed to offer an opportunity for them to advance America's interests abroad, or, at the very least, to proclaim that they were trying to do so.⁷⁵

In this light, it is no wonder that the cultural sphere served American Jews as an appealing locus for exploring their relationship with the new nation of Israel. The chapters that follow detail the key cultural arenas in which American Jews did this. First, I consider Israel's place in the publishing world. I trace the appearance of an ever-growing corpus of "Israel books," particularly nonfiction, intended for popular audiences, which presented American readers with a body of seemingly authoritative (and highly partisan) accounts of Israel's birth and early years. Its authors, from journalists to self-proclaimed housewives, introduced an Israel at once heroic and quotidian to American Jewish audiences and established Israel as a mainstay of the postwar publishing industry.

From here, I move from words to "things"—that is, from books to bodies and objects. I consider the popularization of Israeli folk dance in the postwar United States through the efforts of Jewish educators and choreographers, American Zionist youth, and non-Jewish aficionados of international folk dance, each of which had particular (and sometimes contradictory) goals in mind. This chapter explores how Israeli folk dance provided participants a legitimate means of exploring Jewish difference, both in the American Jewish community and on the public stage, within the context of Cold War cultural politics. Turning next to material and consumer culture, I trace how two American Jewish organizations propagated support for Israeli-made goods—from bathing suits to Hanukkah menorahs—as a means

of aiding Israel, acting as tasteful middle-class consumers, and spreading American-style capitalism and democracy. Though members of Hadassah, synagogue sisterhoods, and the America-Israel Chamber of Commerce and Industry thought of their activities as nonpolitical in nature, I find that, as promoters of Israeli goods, these influential American Jewish organizations increasingly blurred the boundaries between economic, cultural, and political advocacy on Israel's behalf.

In the last chapter, I return to the realm of "high" culture to examine the stewardship and critical reception of Israeli fine art and music. I pay particular attention to the contrasting values and expectations of American Jewish "boosters" of Israeli culture, including (prominently) the America-Israel Cultural Foundation, and those of the critical establishment in the postwar United States, asking, How did each "community" understand the significance of Israel's cultural endeavors? This chapter illuminates how and why some American Jews, fueled by a combination of cultural aspiration, ethnic pride, entrepreneurial savvy, and political commitment, worked diligently to introduce Israeli culture to American audiences in the 1950s and 1960s.

I argue throughout the book that follows that the promotion and consumption of books, dance, fashion, household ornaments, music, and art presented sanctioned, satisfying avenues for American Jews to grapple with Israel's role in American life. So, too, did the cultural realm appear to provide a neutral, mutually beneficent arena in which American Jews might introduce Israel to their non-Jewish neighbors. Through the channels described in this book, American Jews argued for Israel's "natural" place in American Jewish culture—and in American culture more broadly.



It is true that Israel rose to the top of the political and philanthropic agenda of the American Jewish community only in times when Israel faced serious existential threats—chiefly in 1948 and 1967, and, to a lesser extent, during the Suez-Sinai War of 1956. This study challenges the view, however, that Israel "by no means came to preoccupy American Jews in the 1950s," as one prominent historian has written, or that postwar American Jews "did not see Israel as a source of strength or inspiration for their own needs," in the words of another.⁷⁶ It holds with those who cite *Exodus* (the 1958 book and 1960 movie) as a major touchstone in American Jewish culture and a breakthrough moment for Israel's popularity within and beyond that culture. But this book reassesses even that narrative by providing the context for the success of *Exodus*. It argues that what might be termed "the *Exodus* phenomenon"—the rapid mainstreaming of Israel in American Jewish life—

was *not* based upon a single incident but, rather, grew out of a cumulative body of cultural imaginings and practices.

Israel, in contrast to the Holocaust, presented American Jews a vision of Jewish destiny rife with hope and possibility. It offered them a positive opportunity to reimagine and reshape the Jewish present and Jewish future. American Jews explored this opportunity not only in the spheres of political action and philanthropy, as has been well documented, but in the realm of culture. This book argues that, as “culture” grew ever more central to Jewish life and discourse in the early postwar decades, Israel became essential to the creation of that culture. In bringing Zion home, American Jews attempted to secure a place for themselves in the American landscape.