

Zhitlovsky: Philosopher of Jewish Secularism

By MAX ROSENFELD

THE work of Chaim Zhitlovsky should long ago have been available in English. That it is not is symptomatic of the gap in cultural continuity which developed in the United States between the Jewish immigrant generation and its children. Part of the reason for this failure is traceable to Zhitlovsky's own theory of Yiddish as the primary symbol of modern Jewishness. But the ideas expressed in his work far transcend the limits of language or of his own principled Yiddishism.

From 1888 to 1943, for the Yiddish-speaking intellectual and the literate Jewish worker, first in Russia and then in the U.S.A., Chaim Zhitlovsky was teacher, goad, trail-blazer, storm-center, visionary, idol. Throughout his long public career, he was linked with people and movements that struggled for human progress.

His works are a thoughtful and carefully reasoned fusion of social and national ideas. And he strove constantly to give his ideas a living form. He was among the very first to argue for the establishment of Jewish secular schools. His public lectures were legendary. His essays now fill a dozen volumes and most of them, I think, would be of interest to modern Jews, especially to those of us concerned with secular Jewishness.

Reality has come to mock some of his ideas. But to study his works is to receive a thorough grounding in all the problems which have occupied Jewish thinkers for the last hundred years—and which challenge us still. "He was not so much the leader of his generation as its guide," says Itche Goldberg, "a pathfinder who stood at the crossroads during one of the most decisive moments in the history of his people. In this lies the guarantee of his durability."

Chaim Zhitlovsky was born April 19, 1865 near Vitebsk in Byelorussia. While still in his early teens he became active in the Russian revolutionary movement. In 1885 he organized a Jewish Socialist Revolutionary group called *T'shuas Yisroel* (Salvation of Israel), whose aim primarily was to fight simultaneously against the "Return

to Zion" movement and for the idea of progressive Jewish nationalism on socialist foundations.

In 1888 he had to leave Russia "for political reasons." He moved to Berlin, which he also had to leave for similar reasons. He then went to Switzerland, where he studied at the Zurich and Berne universities and received his doctorate in 1892, his dissertation being on Abraham Ibn Daud. (c.1110—c.1180; Spanish Jewish philosopher and historian). It was around this time, too, that he helped found the Russian Socialist-Revolutionary Party.

In 1905 he returned to Russia where he participated actively in political life. His successful candidacy to the Duma was invalidated by the government. In 1907 he came to the U.S.A. and launched a campaign for the ideas of socialist Jewish nationalism. In 1908 he helped organize the Czernowitz Conference, an important international meeting which proclaimed Yiddish as a national language. The same year he founded *Neilebn*, a periodical for which he wrote a continuing series of essays on Jewish and general philosophical problems.

In 1910 he published a two-volume work, the first attempt in Yiddish to present a systematic history of philosophy. For the rest of his life he remained active on all the theoretical and practical fronts which stirred the Jewish progressive community. When he was fatally stricken on May 6, 1943, he was in Canada on a lecture tour under the auspices of the Yiddisher Kultur Farband (YKUF).

EXAMINING HIS WORK, WE FIND THAT IN A SERIES OF ESSAYS COMPLETED in 1932, *Meine Ani Maamins* (My Credo, YKUF, 1953), Zhitlovsky deals with the following major subjects: Religion or Nation? A Religious Nation or a Secular One? Our own country, Diaspora Nationalism, or a Cultural Center? Zionism or Territorialism. He sets forth the following account (here telescoped and paraphrased) of the emergence of these "modern Jewish problems."

Our modern Jewish problems began to arise in all their seriousness only in the last 150 years. The problems are concerned with the essence of our Jewish existence in the world; with the reasons for our suffering in the Diaspora; with the outlook for our future; with the methods of holding together a people outside its own country; with the way or ways toward complete emancipation of the Jewish people.

They were not problems at all for our ancestors, who believed: We are a people to whom the one true religion was revealed from on high and this religion is the single attribute of our national sub-

stance. There can be no continued Jewish existence without a Jewish religious belief. Our people has its own country, *Eretz Yisroel*, from which we were driven because of our sins. In Exile we must cleanse ourselves of these sins. When we have really done so, miraculous salvation will come through the Lord God and we will be brought back to the Land of Israel.

From this uncomplicated view of our situation, says Zhitlovsky, the old Jewish world drew the practical tasks which occupied Jewish thought: How to maintain ourselves in Exile as a People, how to avoid angering God and how to cleanse ourselves of sin. The answers were sought in an ever stricter piety, so that the sum of the *mitzvos* became a fence around Jewish life to protect it from contact with the "sinful" Gentile world.

This firmly-established view, Zhitlovsky notes, was shaken at the end of the 18th century in the minds of progressive Jews, especially in Western Europe, by two major factors. First, the development of atheism and agnosticism began to get the upper hand over the dominance of the Church. Second, the study of Nature, as she is, became the queen of science and philosophy. In this new progressive world of thought, there was apparently no place for the Jewish religion or Jewish national aspirations, since the latter were based solely on the former.

Free thought everywhere demanded the secularization of the concept of the State. It was not necessary, in order to be a citizen of the state, to believe in any particular religion. Religion was a private matter. Full equality of the Jews was now placed on the agenda of European public opinion. (The sceptical moods of the Jewish intelligentsia would not have affected the thought-processes of the masses of Jews had it not been for the real changes then taking place in political and socio-economic life generally and in the matter of civil rights in particular.)

At this point a disturbing question arose. It appeared that the Jews were not only a religious group but also a people with national aspirations. Yet the Fatherland demanded the undivided loyalty of its citizens.

THESE TWO MAIN CAUSES, ZHITLOVSKY INDICATES, THE BANKRUPTCY of the belief in a supernatural liberation and the Return to Zion now made unnecessary by the imminent Jewish Emancipation in the Diaspora, created the first cracks in the previously unified system of Jewish thought. The first sharp modern Jewish problem resulted: What are we—a religion or a nation? What is the real essence of our

Jewish existence in the world—our Jewish faith or our identity as a people?

The solution to this problem was believed to have been found by the progressive section of our people in Central and Western Europe in the views of the so-called *Aufklärer* (Enlighteners) who followed Moses Mendelsohn ideologically and chronologically. Judaism, they argued, is a religion which is just as universal as Christianity or Mohammedanism. It has nothing to do with belonging to a particular people. The ancient Jewish view that Jewish nationalism is a necessary part of the Jewish faith had outlived its time.

Modern Jewry, this view held, had long ceased to be a people, because a people or a nation must live in its own country. We are therefore no longer Jews in the national sense; we are Frenchmen, Germans, Poles "of the Mosaic faith." This idea required that Jews give up every Jewish difference which was not "universal-religious" and demanded absolute assimilation with the non-Jewish environment in language, culture, way of life and love of country.

This new position in Jewish thought, especially in Germany, soon led to a sad result. Scarcely had the Emancipation gotten under way when the most progressive, most talented sons and daughters of our people left the Jewish fold.

In Eastern Europe the new idea met strong resistance, chiefly because Jewish life there was of an outspoken national character. Intellectually (Talmudic and Cabalistic study), religiously (Hasidism), economically (separation from non-Jewish world); juridically (Jewish autonomy), linguistically (Yiddish)—all these and other manifestations made the Jews unmistakably a *nationality*, ready to struggle for its national existence.

The Haskala (enlightenment) movement did however attempt to overthrow this bastion of "conservative nationalism." Its efforts continued for about 30 years (1830-1860). The bearers of the Haskala idea came to the Jews with the assurance that assimilation is the inevitable fate of our people, but that we should go forth to meet it gladly because it would bring liberation and emancipation from all the sufferings of Jewish life: (1) It would banish anti-Semitism. (2) It would enable us to attain a higher level of human culture. (3) It would raise the individual Jew to a higher moral level.

FOR THE PROGRESSIVE JEWISH INTELLECTUAL IN EASTERN EUROPE A CLEAR path was thus opened—assimilation, emancipation, civilization. In this "trinity," Zhitlovsky shows, he sought complete Jewish liberation. At the same time this meant the full and complete negation of the

old Jewish world, not only of its fantastic dreams of a super-natural redeemer, but of the national foundations of its life and of its national hopes. Thus in Eastern Europe too an answer was found to our first modern problem—religion or nation. The answer was the same: Not nation but religion.

And here too this answer was not destined for longevity.

In the 1880s the bankruptcy of this theory became evident. It was not, says Dr. Zhitlovsky, the pogroms in Russia or the anti-Semitism of Bismarck in Germany that changed the views of the Jewish intellectuals; it was the obvious bankruptcy of the emancipation theory. First: Assimilation had promised a weakening of anti-Semitism. But thanks to assimilation, anti-Semitism was strengthened. Second: Assimilation had promised the raising of the cultural level of the Jewish masses. Thanks to assimilation, which drained off our most creative forces, cultural life among the Jews became a "stagnant swamp." Third: Assimilation had promised that the individual Jew would now be able to "straighten his back." In actuality, however, Jews lost their human dignity to an even greater extent.

The mistake of the progressive-assimilationist approach lay not in its separation of religion and nation. That was a necessary progressive process—secularization—the idea that religion is a private matter for each individual, not a general requirement for the entire national body. The fatal error of this approach lay in its negation of Jewish national existence.

The new answer, Zhitlovsky explains, then became: We Jews are a secular nation, for whom religious belief is just as private a matter as for every other people in the world; the Jewish people struggles for its existence and for its free progressive development just as do all other peoples.

But this new answer already had within it a good number of new problems. If the Jewish religion has ceased to be the "cement" which holds the Jews together—then what other force will take over this function? Three answers came simultaneously: (1) Territorialism, the necessity for our own country; (2) Diaspora Nationalism: we must build our national progressive life in the diaspora countries on the basis of *national rights* in our own language; (3) Cultural Nationalism: we must be a secular-progressive people, but the adhesive force must be our own progressive national idea which shall have a territorial center to provide spiritual sustenance for the diaspora countries. The latter will continue to exist. (Zhitlovsky identified himself with the second position.)

These three ideas struggled for hegemony in Jewish life up to

World War II. Zhitlovsky died in 1943 and the fact of the State of Israel would no doubt have caused a reconsideration of his views. But the existence of Israel does not change the situation completely. A complex of problems still exists (witness the American-Israel Dialogues arranged by the American Jewish Congress).

IN ZHITLOVSKY'S INSISTENCE THAT THE JEWS OF CZARIST RUSSIA MUST fight for national rights as well as individual civil rights, there is a startling similarity to the present Negro struggle in the U.S.A. The Jews of Czarist Russia needed special attention to their economic and cultural needs as a "deprived" people, said Zhitlovsky, in his first published article, "A Jew to Jews," 1892, written in Russian. His critics replied that this was a *workers'* problem, not a Jewish problem!

In the same article he addressed himself to the nihilist attitudes of the young Jewish radicals in Russia. "For the view which was concentrated on the future of socialism, where 'there are no Judeans and no Hellenes,' the transition period disappeared—the period when the 'Judeans' and the 'Hellenes' must work out an agreement to live together in one and the same state—(and in such a multilingual state as Russia, besides!)—so that no one's interests would be hurt. Our Jewish revolutionaries forget that when they cease being 'Judeans' they do not become 'just people' but members of the Great Russian nation whose Russifying tendency toward other nationalities is not such a good thing that we should assist it, knowingly or unknowingly."

The true significance of inter-nationalism, said Zhitlovsky, is in the hyphen!

Back in the 1880's, the critic Shmuel Niger points out, Zhitlovsky first proposed that we fight not only for equal civil rights but for the right to jobs and education. And the right to education to Chaim Zhitlovsky meant the right to national schools, supported by the government. "No one but Zhitlovsky even dreamed of such a thing. . . . He carried this idea of a Jewish school around with him like a treasure; he guarded it, nourished it, deepened it, preached it. . . . He helped to educate the new Jewish intelligentsia who built the new Jewish schools. He taught them to rid themselves of such historical idea-associations as 'nationalism-reaction,' 'socialism-assimilation.' He accustomed them to a new idea-association—social-liberation—national-rebirth. . . .

"Not only did he remove the *herem* (ban) which the older generation of leaders had placed on anything connected with the cultivation of progressive-national Jewish values, he endeared these values

to us. So when these Jewish radicals later had to think about the education of their own children this change which had come about in their thinking proved extremely useful." (S. Niger, *In Kampf far a Neier Dertsiung*—the Struggle for a New Education—1940.)

IN THE U.S.A. ZHITLOVSKY, SETTLING HERE IN 1908, TOOK HIS IDEAS FOR the establishment of secular Yiddish schools to the floor of Jewish organizations and fought for them. The minutes of conventions of Jewish organizations make it abundantly clear that he was a stubborn goad on this subject year in and year out until practical results were achieved.

"The delivery-table on which the *shules* were, in principle, finally born, was the 5th convention of the *Poale Tsion* party, Oct., 1910, in Montreal. Dr. Chaim Zhitlovsky . . . although not yet a member of the *Poale Tsion*, took an active part in the adoption of the resolution" (Joel Entin, "The New Jewish Education," article in *Yiddisher Natsionaler Arbeiter Farband, 1910-1946*, N.Y. 1946).

At the 1915 convention of the *Arbeiter Ring*, where there was still a strong opposition to the idea, Dr. Zhitlovsky "delivered his famous address concerning the importance and necessity of establishing Yiddish progressive children's schools in America" (Moishe Bacal, *Yiddishe Kultur*, May, 1953).

On the theoretical front, Dr. Zhitlovsky wrote and lectured ceaselessly and insistently, debating with others—and with himself—in his attempt to achieve clarity, to dispel prejudices. "What is Jewish secular culture?" he asks in an article in *Oifn Sheidveg* (At the Crossroads), Aug., 1939. "Jewish secular culture in its modern form is Yiddish. It is not the first form of secular Jewish culture in our history. But it has brought a new feature into Jewish life. Previously, belonging to the Jewish people was associated with belonging to the Jewish faith. Leaving the Jewish faith meant leaving the Jewish people. Today, any Jew who lives with his people in the Yiddish language sphere, whether he believes in the Jewish religion or whether he is an atheist, belongs to the Jewish people. When a Jew satisfies his spiritual-cultural needs in Yiddish—when he reads a Yiddish newspaper, or attends a Yiddish lecture, or sends his child to a Yiddish secular school, when he holds a conversation in Yiddish—he is without doubt a Jew, a member of the Jewish people."

Quixotically, Zhitlovsky opposed the use of English in the U.S.A. as a vehicle for Jewish culture. In a brief but vigorous essay written as late as 1931, he states his case succinctly:

(1) The world character of the Jewish people requires a cul-

tural means that will bind together all sections of the people wherever they live. Yiddish can do this. English cannot. (2) Jewish culture in English will not be *all-sided*; it will deal only with those matters which concern the Jew as a Jew, but not the Jew as a man. (3) For the same reason, the masses will not be drawn to it either. It will be limited to "rabbis, religious and community leaders and maybe even those students who are not accepted into the non-Jewish fraternities. . . . We absolutely cannot expect a *progressive* Jewish mass culture" in English. "Let the matter be clear for everyone. There are only two paths for our Jewish cultural life in this country: either the national-progressive path or the Judaistic-assimilationist." The first requires Yiddish. Jewish culture in English, he argued, will bring the second.

DR. ZHITLOVSKY NOWHERE ADMITS THE POSSIBILITY OF A NON-ASSIMILATIONIST culture in English, although he did foresee the possibility that the "knife" of assimilation will be sufficiently dulled to cease being a serious threat to Jewish survival. Jewish life in the U.S.A., however, did not take the course that Dr. Zhitlovsky indicated. Language assimilation did not bring with it an automatic blurring of Jewish identity. The American Jewish community is more Jewishly organized than ever before. There is no outspoken assimilationist "propaganda" at work today in American Jewry. This is a phenomenon which Dr. Zhitlovsky did not foresee. Nor could he have foreseen—although he actually expressed a fear of it in 1935—that something "catastrophic" might happen to the Yiddish-speaking Jews of the world.

His views on secularism will bear frequent repetition. "With many of our people secularism has become a synonym for anti-religion. It is nothing of the sort. In general public life secularism simply means that religion is a private matter for each individual and anti-religion is also a private matter. In the educational and cultural sphere secularism means that we exclude anything which comes in the name of supernatural revelation, of Divine Authority, and which requires of man that he follow the will of that authority, either to find favor with it or to avoid punishment by it. That and that alone is secularism."

THEN WHAT IS THE CONTENT OF JEWISH CULTURE, SECULAR OR OTHERWISE? "The life of the Jewish people in its past insofar as it lies in the memory of the generations; its present, with all its struggles and conflicts . . . ; its future, as it is striven for by various Jewish move-

ments—that will always be the chief content of Jewish cultural expression.”

In the same essay, in which he speaks as a socialist and urges socialists to struggle for hegemony in the Jewish community, he examines the formula “socialist in content, national in form” and finds it wanting. For a Marxist, he insists, socialism itself is a form, and to say that the content of a people’s culture must be socialism means to condemn it to live forever in the “basement” of the social structure, where everything is only a means to “external utility.” Zhitlovsky’s formulation was: “universal-humanist content in a national form” (*algemeyn-mentshlecher inhalt in a natsionaler form*).

“For Karl Marx,” Zhitlovsky writes, “socialism is a particular social form of producing and distributing material goods. All social forms of production, as well as the legal-political forms, which include . . . the methods of production and distribution, Marx regards as the ‘realm of necessity,’ where everything is a means to an ‘external utility.’ And this realm is only the basis, the foundation, the basement of a society’s culture. Upon this basis rises the ‘realm of freedom,’ which contains the forces of human development. These forces (science, philosophy, religion, art) carry their purposes within themselves; they are not intent on serving any external end. In every era, products of such forces appear. Often they are more or less distorted by the particular social form in which they are contained, but in most cases, even in these distorted manifestations, we can uncover and restore the purely human *kernel* which lies inside the historical shell, just as we can easily separate the individual-moral and social-ethical ideals of the great Jewish prophets from their theological raiment.”

In order to arrive at this view, Zhitlovsky had to cut through a system of thought which itself had once had a justified reason for being and which he himself recognized as perhaps an inevitable step in a process of advancing ideas. In the 1880’s and 1890’s the radically-minded young generation of immigrant Jews in the U.S.A., under the influence of the Russian revolutionary movement and Russian enlightenment literature, while “divided on the question of the distant future and the roads to it” were however “one body and one soul in their position on the Jewish past and on all the most important bases of traditional Jewish life. *This position was one of absolute negation.* [My emphasis, M. R.] . . . The Jewish question occupied no minor place in the list of those basic themes which determined the path of the young Jewish radicals. But they had one answer to the question . . . a clear, dogmatic answer: the

separation of mankind into nations and religions is moribund, condemned to death. With that, everything was said. Every mention of a separate national Jewish existence (which is, by the way, unthinkable without the Jewish religion) is already a strengthening of the reactionary forces and thereby a hindrance to the solution of the question” (Chaim Zhitlovsky, on Dr. Hillel Solataroff, 1923, in *Yiddische Kultur*, No. 8, 1953).

THIS TENDENCY MAY BE ILLUSTRATED HERE BY SEVERAL EXAMPLES: AT the 7th convention of the Jewish Socialist Society of America in Dec., 1895, a banner in the meeting-hall read: “We Are Not Jews, But Yiddish-speaking Proletarians” (*Mir zeinen Keine Juden, Zondern Jiddish-shprechende Proletarier*).

At the 8th convention of the same organization, Dec. 24, 1897, a banner read: “We Are Jewish Socialists, But Not Socialist Jews” (*Mir zeinen Judische sozialistn, ober kein sozialistische juden.*)

The *Arbeiter Tzeitung*, Dec. 5, 1890, proclaimed: “We have no Jewish problem in America. The only Jewish question we recognize is the problem of how to prevent such a Jewish question from arising.”

In June 1915, at the 15th annual convention of the *Arbeiter Ring* (Workmen’s Circle), a resolution was introduced by Dr. Zhitlovsky and Naphtali Finerman calling upon the Educational Committee of the organization “to give its attention to the education of the young generation through free socialist Sunday Schools, Jewish and English.” One of the most prominent delegates, Dr. Silverberg, spoke against the resolution, demanding that the convention “establish once and for all that the *Arbeiter Ring* is not a Jewish institution.” The resolution to establish schools was defeated, 52 to 35. (These citations from *Yiddisher Natsionaler Arbeiter Farband*, 1946, article by P. Gingold.)

At times, while reading Zhitlovsky, one gets the eerie feeling of being lost in a never-never land, so changed is the world today from the world in which he wrote. But then you come upon an article like “The National-Poetic Rebirth of the Jewish Religion” and you simply stand in awe of his ability to see so far beyond the dogmas of his own time. This work, written in 1911, should be required reading today for every teacher in a secular Jewish school and for every worker in the secular Jewish vineyard, no matter what the language of instruction.

We have not yet understood it, much less applied it. Some secularists will never accept it. It will certainly not sit well with the “village

atheist." A certain degree of sophistication is required to apply its principles to Jewish tradition and above all it presupposes a thorough knowledge of that tradition. But modern secular Jewish education, in my opinion, will make no appreciable strides until it really takes to heart the ideas set forth by Zhitlovsky in that essay.

Among other things, it contains an extended discussion of the Jewish holidays, and of certain Jewish traditional concepts, and indicates the approach that should be used in judging their human and ethical value. Perhaps a way can be found, muses Dr. Zhitlovsky, to infuse the old forms and rituals with a new content. This does not require a program with clearly-formulated principles; it requires a mood, a feeling, an approach.

"Take the first and most important Jewish holiday, *Pesach* (Passover). According to the findings of modern research, we must conclude that the holiday is much older than the Jewish people; that it is an ancient Semitic spring festival whose origins are lost in the dense haze of the past. . . . But Jewish tradition associated the rebirth of nature with the rebirth of the Jewish people, with its liberation from Egyptian slavery. A whole web of wild accretions—the crossing of the Red Sea, the Ten Plagues—childishly naive miracles—has grown up around the sacred human kernel which lies inside the Passover legend.

"Stripped of all the natural and historical impossibilities, the story tells us that a people, languishing for generations in slavery, found the courage to break out of its yoke, wander in a desert wilderness, suffer hunger and thirst, hover again and again at the brink of disappearance, face death and despair, but in the end, inspired by a compelling progressive ideal, attained its goal and entered the Promised Land. What do all those divine miracles mean against that one, simple, human, shinningly-beautiful fact? . . . All of humanity would do well to celebrate the Jewish Passover—shall we forget it?" (In *Meine Ani Maamins*, already cited.)

Elsewhere he wrote: "The past explains how we became what we are. . . . But it also strengthens our pride and our respect for ourselves. And there is truly that in our past of which to be proud. . . . Here I only want to observe that we cannot blame Moses for not having read Darwin, or Joshua for not being an expert on Copernicus. In order to evaluate any cultural product of the past one must be able to indentify with the soul of that period, breathe its very atmosphere. . . . Where did it lead, to progress in the important phases of human life or to reaction? And the reforms, the progress, the reaction, must be measured not with the yardstick of today but

of those ancient circumstances" (*Jew and Man*, 2nd lecture, 1910).

Yes, Chaim Zhitlovsky can still be our teacher.

"I strove to bring into Jewish culture the spirit of research, of examination, of discontent, of contradiction. . . . My dreams are stated in my works. Place them upon your bookshelves. Whatever suits you, take for yourself. The rest can remain in the eternal Jewish archives. . . ."

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