

---

## BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTEs RENDUS

Arnold, Abraham. *Judaism: Myth, Legend, History and Custom. From the Religious to the Secular*. Montreal and Toronto: Robert Davies, 1995. 300pp.

This book's title should have read "Why I am a Secular Jew" for that message is its main import. Abraham J. Arnold has lived and worked in all four major Canadian centres—Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal and Winnipeg—and has had full opportunity to witness how Judaism is practised in Canada. Here he presents his case for secular Judaism (or Jewishness, if you will). This does not mean there are no gaps in the exposition, for it is not always easy to determine where the spiritual ends and where the secular begins in the complex 3000 year history of the Jews.

Modern Jewish secularism came with the Haskala, the teachings of Moses Mendelssohn. It further developed with Reform in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and two movements in the twentieth century—Zionism and Socialism. Each of these had its own linguistic helpmeet—Hebrew for the former and Yiddish for the latter, though there were sub-movements such as Poalei Zion that tried to bridge the ideologies.

There are two locales where circumstances were and are propitious to fostering a thriving secular Jewish culture. One was in Poland between the two wars where there was a flourishing Yiddish press, concerts, a Yiddish theatre, literary schools, publishers, films a vigorous and healthy culture in Yiddish against a backdrop of Jewish religion. The other is today's Israel where a Jew can live his life in a Biblical back-

ground using the revived Hebrew language for all normal and practical purposes without pursuing any religious regimen.

The author, however, wishes to describe and prescribe a Jewish secularism in the Diaspora and in English and this, as he knows, proves to be more difficult. One's Jewish affiliation is still popularly and officially defined as a religion and the problem is how to direct one's life in a Jewish pattern without acknowledging a personal Higher Deity. (Actually, the Canadian census does acknowledge this distinction by counting Jews twice, once as an ethnic group and once as a religious denomination—and the two figures are not identical.)

But how does one express one's secularism? The answer is complex. Does Reconstructionism of the school of Mordecai Kaplan count? After all, it is non-supernatural in its tenets. Can feminism in the synagogue (women counted in the *minyan*, wearing a *tallis*, etc.). apply as a move toward secularism or is this purely a reform introduced by believers for believers? Is Rabbi Sherwin Wine's *nusach*—a denial of divinity but couched in "ecclesiastical" style—applicable? Rabbi Wine is quoted throughout the book. Does that mean he is a secularist? Or does his use of synagogue terminology, even the use of the title "rabbi", disqualify him?

Arnold has listed the various degrees and levels of Jewish secularism and humanism but even his varieties cannot begin to account for all. This reviewer knows an individual who attends an Orthodox *shtiebl* every Shabbat morning, fasts on Yom Kippur but restricts his kashrut observance to avoiding the more obviously *treife* items; he lights a candle on *yortsayt*, and attends an early morning *minyan* to recite Kaddish. He is in doubt about the existence of a personal Deity but finds the new-fangled phraseology of the improved prayer books quite unacceptable. He would, however, be the first to admit that the prayers referring to an omnipotent Deity rendering justice to all are not credible intellectually. This man prefers the blessing *shelo osani isha*, for "not having created me a woman" to the various egalitarian revisions, because in his view they are "ahis-

torical” and it is a sense of history and tradition that brings him to *shul*. The reviewer also knew a Yiddish poet who fasted not on Yom Kippur but on the Ninth of Av because, unlike Yom Kippur, which deals with the individual, *Tishe b’Av* marks a national tragedy of the Jewish people. Where do these two stand on the spectrum of Jewish secularity?

The author deals with Chaim Zhitlovsky who “wrote the book” on secular Jewishness. In fact he is a poor role-model for a patron saint of Jewish national consciousness. Like the Zionists, he too believed in restructuring the Jewish economy and resettling Jews on the land, but unlike Zionists such as Yosef-Chaim Brenner or A.D. Gordon, Zhitlovsky never left the writer’s comfortable nook or the major urban centres. His “back to the land” was for others. And his own family experience does not bespeak Jewish continuity. Zhitlovsky was twice married, both times to non-Jewish spouses, fathering six children, none of whom remained in the Jewish fold by any definition, secular or spiritual. One was identified as a Catholic priest living in Switzerland!

A question Mr. Arnold could have asked is ‘What has happened to the Yiddish school movement which up to the end of World War II was the cherished apple of the eye of the Workmen’s Circle?’ Where are the schools of the Sholem Aleykhem Institute, the UJPO and other *vetlekh*e agencies? Why is it that in Toronto the Peretz School has for years failed to register the minimum number of pupils required by the Board of Jewish Education, that in Winnipeg the famed Peretz Shule, one of the earliest Yiddish day schools in North America, is now part of the Talmud Torah and was in trouble when last heard of? The Labour Zionist Farband has saved the day in Toronto by its Hillel Hebrew Day School—and the name tells all. All this while religious day schools of all kinds, but especially Orthodox, are bursting at their seams. It might be helpful if some researcher were to examine the history of the Yiddish supplementary schools in Canada and the USA to find out why these institutions which pioneered the notion of

Jewish secularism (*yidische vetlekhkayt*) have not fulfilled their promise.

The reviewer asks these questions and makes these comments, not to disparage the work of Mr. Arnold, but to express gratitude to him for squarely placing the issue of secularism on the community agenda and to remind its champions that this matter merits further serious attention, study, and earnest discussion.

**Ben Kayfetz**  
**Toronto**

Bauer, Julien. *Les Minorités au Québec*. Montréal: Collection Boréal Express, 1994. 127pp.

This short volume traces changes in governmental attitudes toward minority groups within Québec on the federal, provincial, and municipal levels, particularly in the past half century. As Bauer states, his work is not intended as an exhaustive account of all of Québec's minority groups. It is, rather, an analysis of minority politics and the position of minorities in Québec society. In so doing, he hopes to guide readers to a better understanding of situations often presented in "contradictory," if not "biased" ways (p. 10). The book's six chapters explore various aspects of minority and immigrant experience including the consequences of immigration policies, the application of human rights legislation to minorities, access to government services such as education, and the development of the policies of "Multiculturalism" in addition to other new approaches taken by governments in the past few decades.

Examining various pieces of legislation and charters of rights, Bauer sees Québec society as divided into three groups: descendants of the "Founding Peoples," either French or English; aboriginal peoples; and the various ethnic and cultural communities who do not fit into either of the first two categories. Bauer notes that, from the outset, the status and rights of