



GRANDFATHERS AGAINST BAR MITZVAHS:
SECULAR IMMIGRANT JEWS CONFRONT RELIGION
IN 1940S AMERICA

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Abstract

In 1940s America, the daily newspaper *Forverts* served in large part the old guard of Eastern European Jewish immigrants who had long abandoned their Orthodox beliefs and rituals. This article provides an abridged translation of five letters to the editor regarding the quandary of grandchildren's *bar mitzvahs* and the editor's responses written in 1942. These letters show that the return of second and third generation immigrants to religious ceremonies pained the older generation of committed secularists. Furthermore, they illustrate the crucial role the *Forverts* played as an authoritative arbiter for their readers, helping them navigate the ever-changing American Jewish landscape.

Keywords

Forverts, Yiddish, socialism, religion, secularism

Launched in April 1897, the daily *Forverts* (Forward), one of many American Yiddish newspapers, became the main forum of the American Jewish labor movement. Under the stewardship of Abraham Cahan, the *Forverts* historically became the most flourishing Yiddish newspaper, combining socialism with sensationalism and featuring didactic articles that taught its readers to remain 'progressive' in their pursuit of Americanization. In the editorial written on the sixth anniversary of the daily, Cahan explained that the *Forverts* deviated from the tradition of socialist newspapers, which were similar to professional periodicals. He advocated a different model—a *socialists' newspaper*—which also targeted the general public.¹

¹ A. Cahan, 'Forvertsizmus,' *Forverts* 21 April (1903) 4.

Cahan paid much attention to the feedback mechanisms allowing him and his colleagues to monitor their readership's pulse. He 'creatively sought to attract the active participation of his readers,'² particularly through encouraging them to write letters, which appeared in various sections of the newspaper, including the write-in advice column known as the '*Bintl Briv*,' or 'A Bundle of Letters,' started in January 1906. Historians treat the contents of this column with caution, unsure whether letters published as part of the 'bundle' had been edited, altered, or even invented, especially as they do not carry real names.³ By contrast, the section '*Fun folk tsu folk*,' or 'From People to People,' usually featured readers' correspondence without editor's responses, but indicated the readers' names and (often) places of residence.

In the spring of 1905, the *Forverts*, then with a circulation of 51,500, advertised itself in *Ad Sense* (the journal 'devoted to the interests of buyers of advertising'), as 'the only Jewish daily that is also published on Saturday and on Jewish Holidays.'⁴ Indeed, secularism was one of the pillars of its socialist program.

Nonetheless, Cahan always insisted on respectful treatment of religiously observant people. For instance, in 1908, an editorial comment in the '*Bintl Briv*' section advised readers: 'Every man has the right to his religion as the freethinker to his atheism. To parade one's acts that insult the religious feeling of the pious, especially on *Yom Kippur*, the day they hold most holy, is simply inhuman.'⁵ On the eve of *Rosh Hashanah* in 1913, a *Forverts* editorial discouraged its freethinking readers from acting as fanatical atheists.⁶

In April 1942, the *Forverts* celebrated its 45th anniversary. Although the newspaper could no longer boast of a circulation of a quarter-million that it had had in the 1920s, it still sold over 100,000 copies a day.⁷ Many, perhaps the majority, of its readers belonged to secular

² A. Polland, 'May a Freethinker Help a Pious Man?,' *American Jewish History* 93, No. 4 (2007) 375.

³ J. Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write!: A History of the Jewish Mother* (New York 2007) 39.

⁴ *Ad Sense* 18, No. 3 (1905) 368.

⁵ I. Metzker, ed., *A Bintl Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward* (Ballantine Books, New York 1971) 98–99.

⁶ 'Rosheshone un apikoyres,' *Forverts* 3 October (1913) 4.

⁷ *Political Handbook of the World* (New York 1944) 187.

Jewish organizations and political groupings, such as the Workmen's Circle and Jewish Socialist *Verband*, which created a culture-rich environment for Yiddish-speaking immigrants.⁸ These immigrants from eastern Europe grew up in a traditional, thoroughly religious environment, but later became secular Jews, rejecting religion as (according to Marx) 'the opium of the people.' The readers of the *Forverts* strongly identified as 'freethinkers.' For them this was not a reference to personal expression or a claim to individuality but rather a commitment to the socialist worldview that included an abandonment of the rituals and beliefs of Orthodox Judaism. This position was not arrived at out of ignorance of Orthodoxy (many of these immigrants were the product of traditional Jewish education in Europe) but rather an outgrowth of their socialist principles that viewed religion as inherently backward and as an impediment to a free and just society.

As the years proceeded, the veteran readers had become grandfathers and grandmothers, and were faced with new ideological challenges in these roles. The five letters which will be quoted in this article detail one of these challenges, namely: an invitation to the grandson's bar mitzvah.

In that time, popularity of bar mitzvahs, revamped in America into a glamorous (and often tacky) rite, reflected the generational and occupational changes in the Jewish population, as well as their geographic relocation to mixed neighborhoods, whose Christian residents' lives were often punctuated by conspicuous religious rituals. No doubt the phenomenon of '*vi es kristlt zikh azoy yidlt zikh*' (as the Christians do, so do the Jews), contributed to the spread of bar mitzvah ceremonies and, since the early 1920s, bat mitzvah ceremonies.⁹ The influence of the tragic events in Europe was still somewhat inchoate, although since the

⁸ By the mid-1950s, secular readers already belonged to the minority of the *Forverts* audience—see Y. Ros, 'Der "Forverts" un dos religyeze yidntum,' *Forverts* 9 February (1956) 5.

⁹ See S. Schoenfeld, 'Folk Judaism, Elite Judaism and the Role of Bar Mitzvah in the Development of the Synagogue and Jewish School in America,' *Contemporary Jewry* 9, No. 1 (1987) 67–85; J. Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880–1950* (New York 1994) 89–126.

summer of 1942 the American press had printed material documenting the systematic murder of the Jews of Europe.¹⁰

Notwithstanding the growing popularity of bar mitzvah ceremonies among the second and third generations of immigrant Jews, the principled socialists of the first generation (the grandparents of the bar mitzvah boys) remained committed to their ideological abandonment of religious rituals and practices. It therefore deeply troubled them to be invited to attend and possibly play a role in their grandchildren's bar mitzvah ceremonies. They strongly believed that all religious rituals and practices were outdated and should be left to the history books. On the other hand, they loved their children and grandchildren and didn't want to insult them by stubbornly refusing to attend. In desperation, they turned to the trusted editor of the *Forverts* for guidance. Although it may seem strange to a contemporary reader that these grandfathers would turn to the anonymous editor of a newspaper with such personal and emotional concerns, it is important to keep in mind, again, that at this time the *Forverts* had established itself as a respected address for personal queries of all sorts.

The first letter from a grandfather frustrated by the prospect of his grandson's bar mitzvah appeared in the '*Bintl Briv*' section on August 8, 1942:

Esteemed editor of the *Forverts*:

[...] I am a freethinker, one of those whose feet have not entered a 'holy place' in the last thirty years. So god helped that my grandson became thirteen years old and now my family will follow in the common custom of making him a bar mitzvah. If they were only going to make a bar mitzvah party, that would not be such a big deal. Let there be a celebration among Jews! But my wife, may she live a long life, tells me that I should not forget to buy my grandson a present. And what sort of present do you think my wife wants me to purchase for him? She wants me to purchase a prayer shawl and all the other religious paraphernalia!

I have tried to explain to my wife that I love my grandson and will certainly buy him a present. But why should I buy him a prayer shawl, which my wife knows, is contrary to my principles? I believe I could find

¹⁰ See, e.g., R. Hollander, 'We Knew: America's Newspapers Report the Holocaust,' in R.M. Shapiro, ed., *Why Didn't the Press Shout?: American and International Journalism during the Holocaust* (Jersey City 2003) 43.

him something else, which would be a much more suitable birthday present.

I just found out that my daughter arranged to have the bar mitzvah in a synagogue, and that they are planning to make a whole big to-do and they want me, the grandfather, to play a leading role in this production!

The joke is that my son-in law, the bar mitzvah boy's father, is an American-born who can't speak a word of Yiddish, and I don't believe he has ever even been in a synagogue in his life. They also haven't taught my grandson much Yiddish so much so that they are now teaching him to deliver his bar mitzvah speech in English instead of Yiddish.¹¹

This is my dilemma, esteemed editor. Thus, because of this petty thing I come in conflict with my family and everyone else. Again, if I simply go along with the ceremony, I will be making a fool out of myself, that is, I will have become a jester in my old age. Therefore, as a longtime reader of the *Forverts*, I resolved to turn to you with the question. I have made you my judge. [...]

I have only one request, esteemed editor! The bar mitzvah is scheduled to occur on August 15th, so can you please ensure that your response to my letter is published before that date?

In my letter, I gave you my full name and address, but I don't want you to publish them. Instead, sign my letter only—

the Workmen's Circle member from Brooklyn,
J. M.

The newspaper obliged and the letter appeared on time followed by an editor's recommendation, written, as always, from the vantage point of an intellectual freethinker:¹²

Act according to your conscience, as your principles dictate. If you don't want to participate in the ceremony in the synagogue at all, no one should force you to participate. One must absolutely consider one's feelings and convictions. No, dear friend, you don't have to make a fool of yourself. You don't have to become a jester in your old age—if that's how you feel about the subject. There are freethinkers who aren't scared of a synagogue and do attend the bar mitzvahs of very close relatives. They merely stipulate that they should not receive an *aliyah* [an honor of reading from the Torah or reciting a blessing over the reading]. And their wishes are accepted. These freethinkers do not think that they have betrayed their

¹¹ Samples of *bar mitzvah* speeches in English were available, for instance, in *Bar mitzve droshes: a zamlung fun konfirmatsoyns redes in hebreish, yidish un english* (New York 1921).

¹² Cf. S. Cassidy, 'A *Bintel brief*: The Russian Émigré Intellectual Meets the American Mass Media,' *East European Jewish Affairs* 34, No. 1 (2004) 112.

principles because they went to a bar mitzvah ceremony in a synagogue and thus ‘became a jester.’ The same is true when these freethinkers find themselves at a wedding where the reverend conducts the ceremony with all the religious trappings [...].

As for the present itself, your wife doesn’t have to dictate what kind of a present you should buy your grandchild. If you don’t want to buy a ‘prayer shawl and all the other religious paraphernalia,’ buy something which you think is more appropriate for the bar mitzvah boy. And the prayer shawl can be purchased by the grandmother or by the boy’s parents.

We think that your fear is a bit exaggerated. That is, your daughter and your son-in-law don’t want to make you, the grandfather of the bar mitzvah boy, into a laughing stock. They certainly don’t want you to abandon your principles. If you don’t want to be at the synagogue for the ceremony at all, you can still heartily celebrate at the party together with your family and the invited guests.

A month later, on September 11, 1942, the ‘*Bintel Briv*’ column featured a similar letter:

Esteemed editor of the *Forverts*:

[...] Even though I am not from the atheists who go out of their way to sin, still it has been decades since I’ve been to a synagogue. [...] In terms of religion, I’m a freethinker. So, god helped and my grandson also became thirteen years old and his parents made him a bar mitzvah with all the trimmings. This raised the question for me, too, what should I do? If I went to the synagogue service, they would certainly give me an *aliyah*! If I stayed out, that is, sat in my home during the ceremony, this would cause my family great distress, especially as my son-in-law, an American-born, knows hardly anything about Jewishness. According to him, the bar mitzvah for a child is one of the holiest commandments that a Jew must observe.

So, the bar mitzvah was conducted privately in a synagogue, and afterwards there was a party in a hall with many invited guests. I’m not going to say that I felt very comfortable in this strange situation, but I immediately realized that it’s not worth it to make a big deal. Not wanting to make a joke out of my son-in-law’s beliefs and not wanting to embarrass him in front of the congregation, when they called me up for an *aliyah*, I went through the motions of the ritual, which I still remembered from my childhood in the old country.

I have to say the truth that, as a freethinker, I felt qualms of conscience about participating in the religious ceremony. But every dilemma that a person faces [...] must be handled individually and responsibly.

The following day there was a bar mitzvah reception in a hall, with invited guests, and then I took the opportunity—maybe to make up for my sin against my freethinking principles—to deliver a speech which had nothing to do with the celebration of the bar mitzvah, but with other things. It had to do with things that affect the Jewish world, both religious and non-religious. I spoke about the risk that our brethren are in on the other side of the ocean! It could be that at the party I didn't have to mention such tearful topics in order not to disturb the joy of those present. I felt however a responsibility to do so and I made an appeal for support. The significant sum of money, raised after the appeal for the misfortunate, entirely quieted my pained conscience for my sin of going to the synagogue.

The thing that I am most concerned to stress in my writing is that in our life, in the struggle for our existence, a lot of things come up that are unpleasant, things that relate to our principles. You don't have to be so stubborn and refuse to budge from your inner core. But you do have to be aware and allow your conscience to dictate your behavior.

I remain respectfully, your reader,
Shmi Yidl ['Humble Jew']

Judging by the editor's response printed beneath the letter, the '*Shmi Yidl*' hit the nail on the head:

You handled yourself correctly. That's the way a freethinker should act. A freethinker is not going to lose anything when he participates in a religious ceremony, because he doesn't have any fear that they're going to punish him someplace in the next world for making a blessing on the Torah.

Two years later, Isaac Bashevis Singer, aka Y. Varshavsky, noted that American Jewish freethinkers generally had become less intolerant to religious rituals, while the *Forverts* columnist Ben Zion Hofman, aka Tseviyon, emphasized the spread of rituality rather than religiosity.¹³

On October 18, 1942, the '*Bintl Briv*' column introduced one more grandfather burdened with the problem of *bar mitzvah*:

Esteemed editor of the *Forverts*:

[...] We see that the Jewish American-reared generation is closer to religion than the previous Jewish generation who received their instruction

¹³ Y. Varshavsky, 'S'hobn zikh geendert di batsiungen fun nit-religieyzn yid tsu yidische yontoyvim,' *Forverts* 2 October (1944) 4; Tseviyon, 'Yidische interesn,' *Forverts* 8 August (1944) 6.

on the other side of the ocean. The remarkable thing is that usually the younger generation is more attached to freethinking. But here the matter seems to be the opposite.

You'll allow me, a devoted reader of yours, to say that your response to the 'Shmi Yidl' [...] did not please me. I agree with your answer that the grandfather handled himself correctly when he went to the synagogue and allowed himself to be called up to the Torah. [...] What displeased me is the validation you give to a freethinker to abandon his freethinking principles. The upshot is that he must submit to every ignoramus, despite the fact that the ignoramus is completely clueless of Jewish matters.

I disagree with your statement about tolerance. Enough is enough. I want to ask you: Where is it written that tolerance has to be one-sided, from the freethinkers towards the religious, and not the reverse? If every freethinker would be submissive, then we would never have a Galileo to remind us that 'the earth moves'! Consequently, your decision 'not to upset religious feelings' also has to have a limit. Take for example a Jew like me, who is not religious and has a wife who is religious. She goes to synagogue regularly on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Believe me, if I would go with my wife to synagogue on the High Holidays, I would make her extremely happy. Nonetheless, I can't do it, even though I love my wife, because I can't be a hypocrite! In fact, there are a lot of Jews who consider themselves heretics, and they still go to the synagogue on the High Holidays. I don't have any complaints against them. [...] I deal with my problems sitting in my house, and they while sitting in synagogue.

[...] According to what you wrote, it comes out that 'Shmi Yidl' gets points not for attending but for participating in a religious ceremony. However, you would have to admit that there is a difference between 'attending' and 'participating.' [...] My grandson, who will soon be bar mitzvah, is an orphan. So, at the bar mitzvah I will be forced to substitute for his father (my deceased son) and for his grandfather from his mother's side, who is also deceased. [...]

Thirty years ago, when my deceased son was thirteen years old, my wife wanted to make a bar mitzvah in a synagogue. But I was against making a religious ceremony, so instead we had a festive meal in our small apartment for very close relatives. At that time I didn't write to the 'Bintl Briv' because it never occurred to me to do such a thing—to arrange a religious ceremony or a bar mitzvah party! I believe had I put the question to you then, you would have answered it quite differently than you did now, because we obviously now live in a completely different world.

My wife is now more religious than thirty years ago. Our heart aches over the loss of our son, and it pains us to see the orphan, who was not destined to enjoy fatherly fondness after his third birthday. Believe me, I

do not want to cause any pain to my wife, or my close relatives or friends. What are your thoughts, my friend, the editor? You may say: ‘So, what’s the big deal? Is it worth it to make a whole tragedy out of such a small matter? Go to the synagogue, get through the ceremony, and be done with it!’

It could be that you are right, that it is not worth it to make an ordeal, a whole tragedy out of it. Nevertheless, what can I do, although I’m already seventy, I remain exactly as young and fresh in my thoughts as thirty years ago when I refused to make a bar mitzvah for my son. I remain fervently committed to my principles and convictions. [...] I don’t consider myself a saint, but I would prefer to drink a whole bottle of castor oil rather than make a blessing (say a lie) on an open Torah in front of a congregation of Jews. [...]

Your devoted reader,
Mogn [‘Protector’ or ‘Shield’]

In the commentary that followed this letter, the anonymous column editor had to defend the newspaper’s stand:

You are mistaken, dear friend, when you say that we gave the freethinking author of the ‘Bintl Briv’ in question permission to abandon his freethinking principles. Absolutely not! [...] As a longtime reader of the *Forverts* you know well that we pride ourselves on constantly promoting tolerance for both sides—tolerance towards the religious and the freethinkers. [...]

You were completely correct when you said that there is a difference between the generation of young Jews who came from the old country and the generation of young Jews born in America. In America, certain Jewish homes even celebrate a ‘bat mitzvah’ for girls, something which was entirely unknown to Jews in the old country. As the renowned poet Heinrich Heine wrote: ‘Other times and other birds! / Other birds, and other songs!’¹⁴

You mentioned in your letter that your wife is religious, even though you are a freethinker. There are many such cases. The famous French socialist Jean Jaurès had a deeply religious wife who was very active in the Catholic Church which she belonged to, and her famous husband, who himself was not religious, did not interfere with her religious commitment. [...]

¹⁴ See A. Phelan, *Reading Heinrich Heine* (Cambridge 2010) 132.

The next month brought a new letter written by another grandfather. It was published on November 13, 1942 under the title ‘An “Epidemic” of Atheist Grandfathers’ in the section ‘From People to People’:

Esteemed editor:

Lately a sort of ‘epidemic’ of bar mitzvah problems has arisen. Grandfathers who immigrated here thirty or forty years ago and threw their prayer shawls and phylacteries in the ocean thinking that that would free them from Judaism, now suddenly realize that their American-born grandchildren don’t know of any such tricks for evading their heritage. The grandchildren see their Christian classmates go to church on Sunday and wonder why they shouldn’t go to synagogue on Saturday. And if the grandchildren go to synagogue they must also know how to pray, so they end up going for religious instruction after school or on the weekends. Once they go for religious instruction, when they become thirteen years old the teachers tell them they must have a bar mitzvah. If they make a bar mitzvah it means there must be a party and a party means they must invite family. This creates a problem for the old grandfathers. [...]

I will tell you from my own life experience. I am also a grandfather, and my son, a physician, is far from being religious. My grandson, an American-born [...] became bar mitzvah three years ago. I felt that being in the synagogue together for the bar mitzvah helped bring the three generations closer, the synagogue brought us together. No birthday party or graduation party was able to accomplish what the synagogue during the bar mitzvah was able to accomplish.

Yakov Sklar
568 Barbey Street
Brooklyn, New York

This letter apparently touched a raw nerve with the previous letter writer (*Mogn*) who decided to reveal his identity and sent his reply to the open tribune of ‘From People to People’ rather than to the anonymous space of *‘Bintl Briv.’* His riposte appeared on December 3, 1942, entitled ‘An Atheist Grandfather Has the Last Word’:

Esteemed editor:

[...] You think that I am of the opinion that every religious Jew who celebrates a bar mitzvah is an ignoramus? No Mr. Sklar, I am old enough to know better. But how many fathers who were raised in America know about Judaism? And how many bar mitzvah boys know what a bar mitzvah really means? Certainly not every freethinker is as courageous as a ‘Galileo’ because it is not necessary for him to be so since he lives in a country where there exists religious freedom.

[...] It is incorrect to say that I wrote that I feel today exactly as I did thirty years ago regarding all matters—I only meant that my opinion of religion hasn't changed. However, even in this matter I am prepared to change my opinion if someone could show me that I am following a false path.

I learnt from Mr. Sklar's letter that there is a middle road in terms of heresy, meaning that one could be partly on one side and partly on the other side. That is, it's possible not to believe in god and still say a blessing over the Torah. The truth is, I don't understand how this is possible, although the fact that I don't understand this is probably because my father and my teacher never taught me how to be a heretic. Another thing I learnt from Mr. Sklar's letter is that a synagogue is the only place where family and friends can become close to each other. This is truly news to me.

Moyshe Goldstein
110 7th Avenue,
Newark, NJ

Judging by the letters, the return of bar mitzvahs to the secular, particularly socialist, sector of the American Jewish population was met with sorrow by some of the elderly eastern European immigrants. The increasing attraction of rituals based on old Jewish traditions clearly pointed out that the secularists' ideological and cultural values had little relevance to their children and grandchildren. Upon his arrival from Europe in 1938, the Jewish social scientist and *Forverts* journalist Jacob Lestschinsky could clearly see the abyss (he called it the 'abyss between the present and future') that had opened wide between the first and the second generation of Jewish Americans.¹⁵ Later he diagnosed the radical change in American Jews' perception of identity: while it was an almost non-issue for the first, 'organically Jewish' immigrant generation, the second and third generations tended to make an effort in order 'to be Jewish.'¹⁶ Ironically, the first generation, raised in the 'old country,' were often annoyed by the predominantly formal (compared with their once 'genuine') attitude toward these rituals and that people 'had more pleasure from the *bar*, the son [it could be

¹⁵ See G. Estraikh, 'Jacob Lestschinsky: A Yiddishist Dreamer and Social Scientist,' *Science in Context* 20, No. 2 (2007) 231.

¹⁶ J. Lestschinsky, 'Yidishkayt—nusekh Amerike,' *Forverts* 1 January (1950) 2.1.

interpreted also as ‘the treat’], than from the *mitzvah*.¹⁷ Meanwhile, the *Forverts* played an important role of an authoritative arbitrator, helping its readers navigate their lives through the ever-changing American Jewish landscape. In November 1944, the *Forverts* hired Aaron Ben-Zion Shurin, an Orthodox rabbi, which was an unprecedented step in the history of this secular publication. According to Rabbi Shurin, who wrote for the paper for over six decades, his ‘hiring reflected the feeling of the founding editor, Abraham Cahan, that the newspaper needed to speak to the religious Jews who flooded the United States in the 30’s and 40’s.’¹⁸ By that time, the newspaper had also changed its political stance, becoming more Rooseveltian than socialist and, as a result, considered religion as one of the ‘institutions indispensable to Americans.’¹⁹

¹⁷ B. Reisman, ‘Why I Came to America,’ in J. Cohen and D. Soyfer, eds, *My Future Is in America: Autobiographies of Eastern European Jewish Immigrants* (NYU Press, New York 2006) 101.

¹⁸ Rabbi A. Shurin and A. Mindlin, ‘A Religious Voice in a Secular Forest,’ *The New York Times* November 28, 2004.

¹⁹ F.D. Roosevelt and C. Hutchins, *State of the Union Addresses* (Kessinger Publishing, New York 2004) 92.