

Sholem Asch and the Jewish Jesus

When I encountered Asch's work in around 2007 and entered the portal of Yiddish language and literature, I was surprised by two things. The first is how truly an important figure he was in his time not only to Jewish readers, but to Christians as well, not only as an author, but also as a widely regarded spokesman on behalf of Jewish concerns to the wider world. The second thing is how precipitously his reputation fell and how forgotten he had become, although in recent years, interest in him has revived, mainly through the play *Indecent*, which is about Asch's 1906 play, *God of Vengeance* and the controversy surrounding it.

But before I talk about Sholem Asch and the Jewish Jesus, I need to step back a bit in order to put Asch and his work in the somewhat larger context of the Jewish encounter with Jesus and Christianity in the modern era. By the time Asch came along, Jewish thinkers and educators such as the renowned scholar Abraham Geiger, one of the guiding founders of Reform Judaism, and others such as Heinrich Graetz, C.J. Montefiore and Joseph Klausner were already there before him. Those scholars who were eager to step through the gates of academia particularly in Western Europe and especially in Germany had already begun to come to grips with the Jesus of the New Testament for some decades. Ironically, as they enlisted the tools of historiography gained from the Christian world of biblical scholarship and for the first time approached Jewish history in such a fashion, when they came to the first century, they ran into you know who.

They had a two-fold agenda. The first, as I said, was that these brilliant Jewish scholars badly wanted a foothold in the Christian dominated academic world, and naively believed that their knowledge of Second Temple Judaism would make them welcome colleagues to the liberal Christian theologians engaged in their so-called search for the historical Jesus. In this they were

sadly mistaken. The liberal Christian biblical critics whom they thought would welcome them with open arms instead gave them the cold shoulder. They were not wanted. They were not wanted because as the scholar Susannah Heschel puts it, they reversed the gaze, interrogating the New Testament through Jewish eyes as the Tanakh and their Judaism had been interrogated (and defined) by Christian eyes for almost two thousand years. They could not abide this.

In an era when it seemed that the carrot of civic participation seemed to be dangling in front of the Jewish nose, the second thing desired was a seat at the table of European culture generally. By reminding Christians that their Redeemer was a Jew, this fact made Jewish people lives matter, if you will, whether Christians liked it or not. And now, as things developed, it wasn't only Jewish scholars in the ivory tower who wanted to mix it up with Jesus and Christianity. It was Jewish artists and writers who were getting into the swim of things.

But for Jews to reclaim Jesus as a Jew and remind the Christian world that it owed its very existence to its Jewish heritage was a tricky business. How far could we go in affirming him as “one of us” while carefully peeling away the parts that affirm the Christian Gospel about him? Put another way, could we get a pound of Yeshua's Jewish flesh without taking a single drop of the Redeemer's blood along with it?

Alongside this, was the question generally about how much or how little ought Jews imbibe the atmosphere of the Christian world they were freer now to move about in. The ghettos had not only kept Jews out of the wider world. They had also kept the temptations of the wider world away from the Jews. Now the gates were open and negotiating the pathways of modern western Europe was proving to be a daunting task.

The disciples of Moses Mendelsohn in the Berlin Haskalah, the Jewish response to the Enlightenment, and their followers, the Maskilim, also had a mission. It was to bring their

“enlightenment” to their benighted Eastern European brethren. But they had a problem. If these intellectuals, who were so in love with the German language and German culture, wanted to reach their ignorant, unwoke, hillbilly cousins, as they considered them, they must write in Yiddish – a language they had much contempt for. To them, it wasn’t even a language – it was a jargon, something one likened to the snorts and grunts of farm animals. But they had no choice. They held their noses and wrote in Yiddish. And as their message began to penetrate something wonderfully amazing happened.

A growing class of Eastern European Jewish creative writers was spawned and they invented a literature so deep, so expressive, and so very human. The big three were – S.J. Abromavitch (Mendele Mocher Sforim), S.N. Rabinovich, better known as Sholem Aleichem, and Y.L. Peretz.

Peretz lived in Warsaw, and attracted a young following who were regularly received in his home for encouragement and refreshment. Among them, around the turn of the twentieth century, was a young Sholem Asch, who born in the town of Kutno, Poland in 1880 and had gravitated to Warsaw to expand his horizons. Asch was at that time struggling to find himself as a writer in Hebrew. Peretz advised him to switch to Yiddish, and after the proverbial kiss on the forehead, Asch was launched. His short stories and plays quickly gained widespread popularity not only in Yiddish, but in translation into Polish and Russian and later into English. From almost the first, Jesus and Christianity held a fascination for Asch.

But what was the Jewish world to make of this stirring of interest in a faith and a culture that had for centuries treated them with contempt? Was it good or bad? Nowhere was this issue fleshed out more passionately than in the Yiddish journal *Dos naye leben*, founded in New York City in 1908 by renowned Yiddishist Chaim Zhitlovsky (1865-1943). He and his boyhood friend

from Belarus, Shloyme-zanvel Rappoport (1863-1920), who would attain literary fame as S. An-sky, best known for his play, *The Dybbuk*, engaged in a heated debate on the relationship of Jews to Jesus and Christian culture in a series of articles published in *Dos naye leben* in 1909 called “Di Tselem Frage” – The Cross Question. I can’t, for the sake of time, explore this as fully as I would like. But the point is that the controversy centers largely around Asch’s 1909 short story “A Carnival Night” in which the Jews of Medieval Rome are being run through the streets and beaten along the way. As they pass a church, the figure on the crucifix stirs to life. Yeshua descends from the cross, goes outside and takes his place with his brethren, to run among and be beaten alongside them. What is the moral? When Christians persecute and murder Jews it is as if they are persecuting and murdering their own Messiah all over again. It is a theme that the Jewish artist Marc Chagall would revisit over and over.

Fast forward thirty years. Establishing himself as a widely popular Yiddish writer not only of short stories, plays and essays, Asch also wrote lengthy historical novels, some of them biblically based. Vigorously promoted by Ab Cahan, the dictatorial editor of the vastly influential paper *Forverts*, Asch reached a huge audience of Yiddish readers both in America and in Europe. His stature as an international figure and spokesman for the Jewish people is attested to by two Nobel Prize nominations, in 1933 and 1944, although he would be denied that honor on both occasions. His treatment of Christian themes and particularly his successful courtship of a Christian readership, particularly in the U.S. where he and his family had relocated even before W.W. I, enhanced his popularity and excited a hostility and an envy among his contemporaries that reached a crescendo with the publication of his epic *The Nazarene*, to which I now turn.

For those of you who have not read it, I recommend it. For people in our field, what is of particular interest is that it is an astonishingly ahead of its time re-Jewishing of the life and times

of Yeshua, a work of enormous scope and in my view the best of Asch's so-called Christological trilogy, which was followed by *The Apostle* in 1943 and *Mary* in 1949.

But the publication of the Nazarene in 1939 ignited a firestorm of negative response from Jewish critics, spearheaded by Asch's former champion Cahan, who had advised Asch to leave such subject matter alone. Framed by a plot device that places the story in the Warsaw of the 1930s, *The Nazarene* transports two antagonists, an unnamed Jewish narrator and the anti-Semitic Pole Pan Viadomsky, through time into the first century. The former appears as Jochanan, a young disciple of Rabbi Nicodemon. While not a follower of Yeshua himself, Jochanan has a front row seat for all of the ensuing events. The Jew-hater Viadomky emerges as Cornelius, a Roman centurion who acts as the right-hand man of Pontius Pilate. In this story within a story, Asch closely follows the events described in the Gospels, emphasizing its Jewish aspects through the use of the Hebrew names of people and places and through his textured description of the first-century Jewish world and above all, his sympathetic depiction of the Jewish Messiah.

Spurred on by the incensed Cahan, Yiddish writers in his pocket relentlessly attacked Asch on the pages of the *Forverts* and elsewhere. This went on for years. One, Chaim Lieberman, actually wrote a book, *Sholem Asch and Christianity – an Answer to His Missionary Writings* (1950). In it, he accused Asch of being “a desecrator, a misleader and a seducer, a traitor to all that is most precious and holy, a corrupter of the house of Israel.”

Not all of the Jewish critics lined up against Asch. Some objected to Cahan's attempt to bully Asch and sided with Asch on the basis of artistic freedom. Chaim Zhitlovsky, who had praised Asch's “A Carnival Night” so fulsomely on *Dos naye leben* thirty years earlier, weighed

in for Asch with an approving review entitled, “Our Brother, Jesus of Nazareth.” Not known for coolness under fire, Asch also protested both vocally and in writing, which intensified the feud.

Seeing that the subject of Jesus was no longer taboo in the Jewish world, we are led to ask what provoked such a violent response among Asch’s Jewish critics. The most popular reasons advanced seem to be the poor timing of the novel’s publication, coming as it did on the eve of World War II, the implacable enmity of Abraham Cahan, Asch’s ambiguous public statements about Jesus after the novel’s appearance and his own temperamental personality. But I think there is more. I would like to suggest that in addition to these plausible factors, there are reasons that are more complex and more deeply rooted in the nature of the particular story Asch was telling about Jesus and the manner in which he told it.

We should note at the outset that Asch’s actual portrayal of his Yeshua could hardly have mattered to the vast numbers who read Asch only in Yiddish, since it was a full two years after the English publication before any Yiddish publishing house would touch it. Therefore, whatever impressions Asch’s confused Yiddish readers received would be via second hand reports, and those mainly by the cadre of critics that lined up against him. But this blurring of the well-patrolled border between Judaism and Christianity, as I shall shortly describe, was nothing new with Asch. His unusually friendly attitude toward Christianity, expressed in various earlier works had already made him something of a transgressive figure.

In contrast to the criticism Asch’s *Der man fun Natseres* was subjected to in the Jewish press, the publication of Maurice Samuel’s English translation, now titled *The Nazarene*, proved to be, from the first, wildly popular. In 1941, two years after its appearance, it is estimated that *The Nazarene* had some two million American readers, an extraordinary number for any translation from Yiddish and an incontrovertible sign of Asch’s cultural influence. It appeared on

the New York Times fiction best seller list in third place in December of 1939 and remained in that position for eight weeks before dropping off the list. Unlike Jewish audiences, Christian readers were quite used to the historical novel treatment of the life of Jesus. *Ben Hur The Robe*, *The Big Fisherman*, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* – the vast popularity of this genre among a Christian readership supported the rousing success of *The Nazarene* and Asch’s following New Testament works. Asch had struck a literary gold mine and had also made a name for himself as one of the foremost representatives of the Jewish people to the Christian world. His response to his critics, I think resembled that of Liberace who once remarked, “I cry all the way to the bank.”

The objection of the Jewish critics to the *The Nazarene* was not primarily Asch’s depiction of Jesus in and of itself. As I mentioned earlier, their criticism must be seen against the background of Asch’s earlier writings, specifically about Jesus, Jews and Christians, his standing in the non-Jewish world and the ambivalence that many of his contemporaries felt toward him on these accounts. What many may have felt, although they might not have said it in so many words, was that Asch’s treatment of Jesus was indeed an act of subtle subversion. That is, Asch employed the Jesus he depicted in *The Nazarene* as a vehicle for his own vision of a blended Judaism and Christianity, which he had already advanced in earlier writings. It was this construction of Jewish-Christian relations, rather than Asch’s Jesus *per se*, that struck such a raw nerve. For example, toward the end of *The Nazarene* Asch stresses his perception of the essential unity of the Messianists (Jewish Christians) and those Jews who remained outside that fold.

The *only difference between us* (italics mine) was that in their belief the Messiah had already been once on earth and was due to return, and we said this could not be, that the Messiah could not have been on earth and mankind remain unredeemed from evil, but full of wickedness.¹

That’s it! Not big deal. You can all go home.

¹Sholem Asch, *The Nazarene*, Maurice Samuel, trans. (New York: Carrol & Graf, 1939), 693.

This is but the full-blown expression of the theme that Asch returned to time and again in his writing from virtually the beginning of his career. In his novella, *The Little Town* (1904), he writes of Jews and Christians at worship, as the Jews usher in the Sabbath, accompanied by the sound of church bells calling the Christian faithful to prayer, “The singing and the ringing mingle and become a single prayer to a single God.”² In this instance, Asch’s portrayal is, in the words of contemporary Yiddishist David Roskies, an attempt to create a mythological shtetl “by turning it into a mutually reliant Holy Community of Christians and Jews.”³

Asch would expound upon the theme of Jewish-Christian unity in non-fiction works also, such as *One Destiny: An Epistle to the Christians* (1945). This, by the way, was my discovery of Asch at an outdoor bookstall on Broadway, as my wife Kirsten and my eyeballs were simultaneously drawn, for some reason to this slim volume practically hidden between “Football for Dummies” and “How to Repair a Carburetor” or something like that. There we were, around the corner from the old Chosen People Ministries headquarters on W. 72nd St. and a stone’s throw from the Beacon Hotel where Joseph Cohn had lived. Talk about convergences! And this moment was what set me on a path that led me not only to Asch, but the Yiddish language and literature that forms the context of his work.

In any case, Asch writes,

The preservation of Israel and the Nazarene are one phenomenon... The two are one. And notwithstanding the heritage of blood and fire which passionate enmity has brought between them, they are two parts of a single whole, two poles of the world which are always drawn to each other, and no deliverance, no peace, and no salvation can come until the two halves are joined together and become one part of God.⁴

²Sholem Asch, “The Little Town,” *Tales of My People*, trans. Meyer Levin (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1948), 100.

³ David Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1998), 52.

⁴ Sholem Asch, *One Destiny: an Epistle to the Christians*, trans. Milton Hindus (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1945), 37-38.

Now, just how that is supposed to happen any way other than how Paul envisions it in Romans 11, Asch doesn't say.

It's fascinating that the conclusions that other Jewish thinkers drew about Jesus were sometimes strikingly similar to those of Asch. Martin Buber famously wrote, "From my youth onwards I have found in Jesus my great brother." Along with Asch, they located Jesus in the framework of a Jewish world. They insistently asserted Judaism as the basis upon which any validity for the Christian religion must be sought, as did Asch. And like Asch, their efforts were consciously shaped by the Christian culture that formed the context of their work. However, Asch parts ways with them and others in one critical regard and perhaps this is the heart of the matter.

Despite the common ground Asch may share with the Jewish writers, artists and academics who have sought to engage with these subjects, his treatment of Jesus and Christianity was distinguished from theirs in one all-important respect. As Matthew Hoffman has astutely observed, in his very fine book, *From Rebel to Rabbi: Reclaiming Jesus and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, "...the reclamation of Jesus has always involved Jews asserting his Jewishness and thus implicitly rejecting the Christian Jesus of Western culture."⁵

But Asch refused to see it this way. He tried to square the circle by asserting Yeshua's Jewishness, along with these others, yes – but in such a way as to not implicitly reject the Yeshua of the Gospels. He wrote so warmly, so convincingly of a sincere faith in Yeshua that he seemed at least to some of his Christian readership to have entered the house of faith. But ever cagey about his own convictions, without openly either embracing or rejecting the claims of the New

⁵ Matthew Hoffman, *From Rebel to Rabbi: Reclaiming Jesus and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 2.

Testament, he was able to hold a Christian readership, all the while protesting to his fellow Jews that he had not crossed the threshold.

Be that as it may, in his attempt to have it both ways by eradicating the Jewish-Christian border, Asch became a lightning rod that brought down upon his own head the already existing Jewish anxiety and ambivalence regarding Jewish-Christian difference. Although he would always assert that he had not embraced Christian theological claims, in hewing as closely as he did to the events and the characterizations of the New Testament, Asch's Jewish Yeshua seemed to his critics to be far more of an acceptance than a repudiation of the Christian Lord and Savior. But for Christians, he was the giver of a Yeshua who was recognizable enough to them to be a Jesus they could embrace, along with Asch the Jewish author and the imagined world he offered them.

Finally, to sum up, yes, the timing of the publication of *The Nazarene* was unfortunate. Ab Cahan's enmity did him a great deal of harm. He also did himself little good in his own defense. But worst of all, beneath it all, Asch failed to keep a reclaimed Jesus safely in what his detractors deemed to be strictly Jewish territory. This, truly, was his original sin and his transgression.