

Material Culture
and Jewish Thought
in America

Ken Koltun-Fromm

MATERIAL CULTURE AND JEWISH THOUGHT
IN AMERICA

Material Culture and Jewish Thought in America

KEN KOLTUN-FROMM

Indiana University Press
Bloomington & Indianapolis

This book is a publication of

Indiana University Press
601 North Morton Street
Bloomington, IN 47404-3797 USA

www.iupress.indiana.edu

Telephone orders 800-842-6796
Fax orders 812-855-7931
Orders by e-mail iuporder@indiana.edu

© 2010 by Ken Koltun-Fromm
All rights reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. The Association of American University Presses' Resolution on Permissions constitutes the only exception to this prohibition.

© The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence

of Paper for Printed Library Materials,
ANSI Z39.48-1992.

Manufactured in the United States of
America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-
Publication Data

Koltun-Fromm, Ken.
Material culture and Jewish thought
in America / Ken Koltun-Fromm.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references
and index.

ISBN 978-0-253-35454-9 (cloth : alk.
paper) — ISBN 978-0-253-22183-4
(pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Judaism—United
States. 2. Jews—United States—
Identity. 3. Jews—United States—
Intellectual life. 4. United States—
Civilization—Jewish influences. 5.
Jews—Cultural assimilation—United
States. I. Title.

BM205.K65 2010
306.6'960973—dc22

2009052337

1 2 3 4 5 15 14 13 12 11 10

For ARNOLD EISEN

CONTENTS

· ACKNOWLEDGMENTS · ix

Introduction: Material Culture and
Jewish Identity in America · 1

- 1 The Material Self: Mordecai Kaplan
and the Art of Writing · 13
 - 2 The Material Past: Edward Bernays,
Joshua Liebman, and Erich Fromm · 53
 - 3 Material Place: Joseph Soloveitchik
and the Urban Holy · 108
 - 4 Material Presence: Abraham Joshua Heschel
and *The Sabbath* · 141
 - 5 The Material Narrative: Yeziarska, Roth,
Ozick, Malamud · 180
 - 6 The Material Gaze: American Jewish Identity
and Heritage Production · 225
- Conclusion: American or Jewish
Material Identity? · 270

· NOTES · 279

· BIBLIOGRAPHY · 315

· INDEX · 329

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I enjoy telling my friends that finally, after a rather long and circuitous search, I have found my authorial voice in this book. But that voice has been deeply inflected by the far more melodious tones of friends, family, colleagues, and students. My voice, as I have come to understand it, resonates with those whom I admire and trust. It echoes, but also travels beyond those who have influenced me as a writer and person. I want to acknowledge some of those voices here, and dedicate this book to one very eloquent voice in particular.

In temperament I am still a student at Haverford College, and so I find many of my most valuable colleagues among the student body here. Josh Mikutis and Carolyn Warner read this book in its entirety, offered trenchant critique when I needed it most, tracked down footnotes and missing citations, and provided support and courage to carry forward. They represent the very best that Haverford has to offer. Jessie Post helped to polish this manuscript into a readable form, and I am very grateful for her generosity. Karen Terry and I have worked closely together over the past two years. She knows how much this book resounds with her influence, and for that I am deeply grateful. Students in my Jewish Images, Material Religion, and American Judaism courses never fail to remind me of the richness of a college that still prizes creativity, demands intellectual energy, and cultivates honorable lives.

Like the students, my colleagues are hard working, generous with their time, and dedicated to their profession. The members of the Haverford Religion Department—David Dawson, Naomi Koltun-Fromm,

Tracey Hucks, Terrence Johnson, Anne McGuire, and Travis Zadeh—are, to my mind, family in the most meaningful way. Comfort at home allows me to venture out in new and sometimes uncertain paths. Colleagues beyond my institutional home have been supportive, encouraging, and committed. A special and heartfelt appreciation to Lila Corwin Berman, Zak Braiterman, Nathaniel Deutsch, Andrew Heinze, Leah Hochman, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Laura Levitt, John Modern, David Morgan, Robert Orsi, Riv-Ellen Prell, Nora Rubel, Jonathan Sarna, Jenna Weissman-Joselit, and Michael Zank. My collaborators in the Works in Progress Group in Modern Jewish Studies have also guided and challenged my work from its inception, and it is that much better for their effort. My friends at Indiana University Press, especially Janet Rabinowitch and Joyce Rappaport, have moved this project along with speed, humor, and dedicated work. I thank all of you for your generosity and passion.

I have been undeservedly supported by the Mellon New Directions grant, Haverford Research grants, and the Hurford Humanities Center at Haverford College. The folks at the Hurford Center have tirelessly supported my projects from the beginning, and to Emily, James, Kim, and Richard I owe far more than I have received. A portion of chapter 1 appeared in “Performing the Material Self: Mordecai Kaplan and the Art of Writing,” *AJS Review* 31, no. 1 (2007): 109–31, and I am grateful for the permission to reproduce much of that article here.

Support comes in many forms, of course, and I feel that sense of gratitude for those closest to me. My daughter Talia will tell you I spend too much time at the computer, and she is undoubtedly right. But playing whatever sport that includes a ball with her, and running after Isaiah while imagining new railroad scenes and birds along the horizon with Ariel—all this brings me back to what is really important and central in my life. Without them and Naomi, all of whom live more fully than I, working at the computer would be lonely indeed.

Some fifteen years ago I first read many of the texts discussed in this book with my teacher and friend, Arnold Eisen. Though both Arnie and I have traveled far from those first days at Stanford University, in many ways this book returns me to that time of initial fascination and concern. Arnie did not teach me to read these texts as I do (I cannot blame him for that), but he did guide me in listening well, in cherishing learned texts,

in cultivating disciplined habits, and in writing with care and integrity. But more, far more than all that, Arnie modeled then, and continues to demonstrate now the life of commitment, of Jewish engagement, of honest living, and of responsible faith. I dedicate this book to Arnold Eisen because it could be for no other.

Ken Koltun-Fromm
Haverford College

MATERIAL CULTURE AND JEWISH THOUGHT
IN AMERICA

INTRODUCTION

Material Culture and Jewish Identity in America

On a train bound for Schenectady in December 1928, Mordecai Kaplan continued his obsessive journal writing, this time in the third-person. He chides himself for turning to “his latest fad,” once again postponing a harder look at “the metaphysical problem which he set before himself.” As Kaplan reflects on his “weakness for formulas” and the “universe of words,” he regrets that he never had “the fortune of experiencing the thrill of firsthand contact with things.” The journal became that sensual thing for Kaplan, and it promised exposure to a material world. Writing in the third person, Kaplan venerates the empowering technology of things:

But he never lost sight of the greater reality of the universe of things which was denied to him. He never heard the phonograph, radio or telephone without wishing it were appropriate to kneel down and worship. If he had his way he would have created a ritual and recommended specific benedictions to be recited before making use of these great products of human ingenuity.¹

Things fail to solve metaphysical problems, but they do attract reverence and religious homage. Kaplan draws a “universe of things” into the orbit of ritual activity: hearing things compels appropriate devotion. Is this false idol worship, offering to dead objects what should be God’s own? Or has Kaplan tapped into the ways in which things move us, the modes in which we see, touch, and hear things, and the magnetic appeal in and through which physical objects inflect and shape personal identity? Perhaps Kaplan even senses the effervescent quality of things

that speak—the radio, phonograph, and telephone. These things come alive, as it were, and so deserve his ritual worship and attention. In this material universe, Kaplan can experience the thrill, firsthand, of sensual touch and religious reverence.

For Jewish immigrants like Kaplan, America offered many such enticing goods. Material temptations surrounded the immigrant world, and seduced Jews, as they did Kaplan, into the “greater reality” of enlivened things. Through such physical exposure, Jews fashioned a material Jewish identity in America. It is an identity steeped in the magnetic and alluring quality of things. Even more, American Jews produced second-order reflections on the nature of things and their material charms. Jews were profoundly embedded in the very culture that provoked their own musings on identity and materiality. The dynamic interplay between American Jewish thought and culture is the subject of this study.

This book explores how American Jews work with things, and how they think about them in ways that produce distinctive identities. By linking the material dimensions in culture to Jewish identity in order to create what I call *material Jewish identity*, I seek to inscribe the very thing I want to uncover: the material features of Jewish thought and practice. American Jews like Kaplan constructed their selves in and through material objects. Kaplan is mesmerized by things, but he is not the only Jew in America to be drawn to the vivifying effect of the material landscape. Yet he does capture the central preoccupations of this book: the modes by which Jews confront objects; how devotion to the past (living only in a “universe of words”) limits material abundance and success; the ways in which place—the “universe of things” or a local train to Schenectady—inspires Jewish thought and practice; the presence of physical objects in Jewish ritual life; the formation of character tethered to material things; the visual paradigms in and by which Jews see things; and the manner in which those objects, in turn, speak to Jews. This book explores how American Jewish thinkers as diverse as Joseph Soloveitchik, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Joshua Loth Liebman, Eric Fromm, and Mordecai Kaplan fantasize about objects, and the impact of those things on American Jewish thought. But it is also a book about visual and literary culture, and the methods by which narrative, film, and photography trace the material formations of Jewish heritage and character. Jewish thought is a cultural practice, and that practice generates compelling

accounts of an identity steeped in material culture. This is what I mean by material Jewish identity in America.

For too long, scholars have stuffed Jewish thought into intellectual, social, or political straitjackets. Reflections on Jewish thought have become critical—and still important—exercises in epistemology, social critique, aesthetics, as well as philosophical and social ethics.² Some, as reflected in Jonathan Freedman’s impressive work *Klezmer America*, have turned to cultural studies to reinvigorate a multifaceted and creative Jewish ethnicity. But Freedman has little to say about Jewish religious thought, and often neglects it for the staple cultural issues of ethnicity and race.³ This book, in contrast, weaves religious discourse into the fabric of cultural studies, fastening the physical, bodily, and sensual pleasures of material life to religious thought. It broadens the rubric of cultural studies to include the theoretical but deeply material musings of Soloveitchik, Kaplan, Heschel, Liebman, and other Jewish thinkers. But it also recaptures the stuff of Jewish culture—literary works, as well as *The Jazz Singer* films and *Lilith* magazine glossies—to better understand the material dimensions of Jewish identity in America. Kaplan evokes this sense of cultural depth as a “greater reality of the universe of things”: a world, so he claims, worthy of veneration. This book is but one form of tribute to the charms of the material world.

Those charms reveal the material roots of American Jewish thought. In stating it this way, I want to expose the cultural patterns that inform Jewish thinking about things, and the visual and literary paradigms that ground Jewish identity in objects. In short, I seek to wed cultural studies to Jewish thought. A marriage like this does not come easily, especially for those trained in modern Jewish philosophy. In my graduate school days, students of religion would study the great European, American, and Israeli thinkers, while historians stuck to cultural trends. Religion types like myself rarely cared about social worlds; we had great thoughts to think, problems to solve, intellectual patterns to trace, and a philosophical heritage to recount. When I first read Soloveitchik, I turned to Kant and Kierkegaard, together with Jewish law and biblical texts, to understand his world of *halakhah*. But you will not find that philosophical heritage in my discussion of Soloveitchik’s *Halakhic Man* and *Lonely Man of Faith* in chapter 3. Instead, I turn to cultural theories of urban religion, and how city images and landscapes inform Soloveit-

chik's theory of Jewish law. I situate his work within notions of the urban holy and the transformative potential of the streets. In other words, I want to turn Soloveitchik into a cultural theorist, one who thinks deeply about his material landscape and its impact on Jewish observance. It is a thinking about identity within the physical spaces and material objects of experience. Cultural studies drags Jewish thought into the messiness and allure of city life, into the "universe of things" that seduce, enliven, and transfigure Jewish identity. One can certainly study Kaplan's theory of civilization, or his appropriation of Durkheim's social theory, or even Soloveitchik's philosophical dance with Kant and Kierkegaard. These are all worthy pursuits. But this book does not walk along those theoretical paths. Instead, it reveals the material culture within Kaplan's Jewish thought, and the urban roots of Soloveitchik's legal world. I uncover artistic performances that deliver the material stuff of civilizations, show how Kaplan personifies his journal as a material friend in lieu of community, and explore Boston's urban streets that inflect Soloveitchik's view of Jewish law. If Kaplan turns to material products, like his journal, to bear witness to a life well-lived, then Soloveitchik transforms urban chaos into a holy grid of religious byways. Journals and holy grids bind Jewish thought to culture.

In more than one way, Kaplan is the hero of this book. He introduces all the thematic concerns that situate my portrayal of American Jews—the cultivation of material identity in America; the weight of the past on material success; the chaotic allure of cityscapes; the presence, seductive appeal, and inescapable texture of things; and the ways in which Jews visualize heritage through artistic mediums. Each of the following chapters takes up these issues in some detail, working through Jewish texts that foster material identity. The chapters are ordered in roughly chronological order, critically addressing a central theme in the construction of Jewish identity in America.

Chapter 1 focuses on Kaplan's description of his journal as a material friend—as a physical exposure of self that cultivates and situates his presence in America. Kaplan becomes American in and through his journal as he reflects on the meaning of journal writing and its relation to personal identity. A study of his journal from 1913 to 1934 reveals what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls "the constitutive power of display." Objects become particular, recognizable things in and through contex-

tual performances. Kaplan's journal is one such performance and display. It is an arranged and classified item that explores identity through an "exhibitionary logic." Kirshenblatt-Gimblett rightly emphasizes the staging of identity that also captures Kaplan's imagination: "The agency of display . . . is not to be folded into 'the image of the Jew' or even representation, whether discursive or demographic. Display not only shows and speaks, it also *does*—with greater or lesser success."⁴ Kaplan's journal witnesses to this power of display, for it materializes his Jewish identity in a cultural, artistic medium. This is but one of the material artifacts that make up a civilization—Kaplan's embracing term for the cultural, artistic, and religious products and folkways of ethnic groups. Kaplan's Jewish self is on display in a journal that exposes his modernist anxieties of self-fashioning. The journal also physically embodies Kaplan's desire as an immigrant to create something of permanence in his new homeland. He fashions his Jewish American identity by inscribing it in his journal—that "agency of display" in which Kaplan labors "to be seen and heard."⁵ The journal does not represent Kaplan, nor does it signify deeper or more transcendent meanings. Instead, the journal embodies what Kaplan calls his "self-aspect" because it enacts his material self in America. For Kaplan, writing is a kind of material act of exposure, in which he embodies his Jewish identity within an American social world.

Immigrants like Kaplan struggled with their past inheritance to cultivate a home in America. Jewish ancestors and their claims upon religious and cultural observance often inhibited a full exposure to the American scene. It was a heavy weight to sustain and nurture, and a good many American Jews sought a lighter freight with fewer obligations. Matthew Frye Jacobson observes how Americans deny a difficult and conflicted past to make room for another, more congenial heritage. He describes the contrivance of a "roots trip" that dislodges a cumbersome, often tragic history, in order to nurture a more exultant, glorious narrative. Immigrants often absorb or even create this kind of story as they establish "roots" in a new country. They displace past burdens with more liberating blessings. It is a willful forgetting that forges new beginnings.⁶ This is precisely what Edward Bernays, Joshua Loth Liebman, and Eric Fromm sought to do for America—the subjects of chapter 2. Bernays, the nephew of Sigmund Freud, appropriated his uncle's psychology to liberate Americans from repressive desires inherited from the past.