



OUR SECULAR JEWISH HERITAGE

GERALD (YANKL) STILLMAN

Hearing the “Wicked Child”

By MARVIN LEINER

Respecting the Wicked Child: A Philosophy of Secular Jewish Identity and Education, by Mitchell Silver. The University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, MA, 1998, 248 pages, \$45 hardcover, \$16.95 paperback.

John K. Fairbank, the noted Harvard University professor and leading authority on China, once wisely observed that “the reporter is part of the report, like the historian of his history.” In *Respecting the Wicked Child: A Philosophy of Secular Jewish Identity and Education*, who Mitchell Silver is becomes especially critical to what he has written. He states that “this book is confessional philosophy. Its wellsprings are the author’s history, prejudices and inclinations . . . the commitments, principles, values, and attitudes that come most easily and are worn most comfortably, are built out of our Enlightenment heritage . . . our devotion to the ‘rights of man’ and the ‘scientific spirit’ is profound. Our commitment to universal human equality is primary . . . I cannot believe in God, won’t abandon the liberal emancipation project, and want to remain a Jew.” With this straightforward introduction he proceeds to give us a well-argued, beautifully written,

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magnificent book on what it means to be part of American *Secular* Judaism.

Mitchell Silver has been working for 20 years at Camp Kinderland, most recently as the camp’s cultural director. For several years he has also been the educational director of the secular I.L. Peretz *Shule* of the Workmen’s Circle in Brookline, MA. The fact that he works both in Camp Kinderland *and* in a Workmen’s Circle *shule* demonstrates that he is either a miracle worker or else a vivid example of how times have changed in the history of the two key left secular, Yiddishist organizations of Ashkenazi Jews in the United States — the defunct Jewish People’s Fraternal Order, JPFO, affiliated with the IWO, and the Workmen’s Circle.

Silver combines these current “hands-on” practical educational experiences with his years of studying philosophy (he teaches philosophy at the University of Massachusetts, Boston), and the result is, in Silver’s words, “a philosophical rationale for maintaining a Jewish identity, even if one isn’t and doesn’t wish to be religious . . . by rationally undergirding and weaving together our liberal, secular *and* Jewish inclinations, we give each additional element additional weight, depth, and life.”

MY first reaction to the title, *Respecting the Wicked Child*, was “Why use the term ‘wicked child’ in a book about secular Jews?” Wicked means “morally bad or evil” according to the first definition in Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary.

However, soon after starting the book I entered and appreciated Mitchell Silver’s “non-evil” frame of reference. The title of the book comes from the parable of the four sons in the Passover *Haggadah*: the wise, the simple, the ignorant and the wicked. The first three sons are characterized by the nature (or lack) of their questions. The fourth is the only one that is given a moral description — he is alienated from the tradition and asks, “What has it to do with me?”

Silver begins this book with the Wicked Child, most likely a member of the baby boomer generation, who was estranged from Judaism “but not yet prepared to abandon the Jews. She may not have wanted to sit politely at the seder table as if she understood or endorsed the proceedings, but she still wanted to be there. Although she could not articulate the reasons for the hold that being Jewish had on her, she wanted them to hold her children as well.”

In essence, Silver's work is an effort to justify a way of "fulfilling this desire" and that way is Secular Judaism.* The approach described in this book is a philosophy of Judaism; he describes a way of being Jewish and offers a rationale for being Jewish in that way.

When I was a child growing up in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn the word "argument" was not understood to be a "good" word — as in, "Oh, the neighbors are having an argument again!" Rather, it meant that they were fighting. However, in *Respecting the Wicked Child*, Silver consistently uses the words argue and argument in an honorable way — that philosophers seek justification through argument. He also impressively argues the case for Secular Judaism.

The first part of *Respecting the Wicked Child*, chapters 1 through 4, concerns itself with the philosophical bases and key characteristics of Secular Judaism including motivating the Wicked Child ["Why Bother?"], the historical context, and Secular Judaism's connection to spirituality and progressive politics. The second part, chapters 5 through 7, is framed by Silver's picture of Secular Jewish life. It is envisioned as an *educational program*. "What it means to be a Secular Jew is often best answered and, in some aspects, *only answered*, by articulating what Secular Jews teach their children" (emphasis mine — *M.L.*).

Here Silver emphasizes philosophical topics in Secular Jewish education, with separate chapters on the Holocaust and Israel. *Respecting the Wicked Child* also includes appendices useful in this connection: an outline of a six-year curriculum (7-13-year-olds) for a supplementary Secular Jewish school and excerpts from Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur services held at the I.L. Peretz Workmen Circle *shule* in Brookline.

These services combine "didactic with ritualistic and celebratory elements," employing and transforming rituals from the religious traditions. They include ancient prayers and old and new folksongs, classic Yiddish and Hasidic tales, poems by well-known artists, and poems and reminiscences by community members. Both of these appendices are useful for parents and teachers who are planning to start Secular Jewish schools or who already operate them. The

* I am using Silver's capitalization style and terminology: "When capitalized, 'Secular Judaism' refers to the specific vision of a non-religious way of being Jewish" that is described in *Respecting the Wicked Child*. Similarly, "Secular Jews" are its intentional adherents. Uncapitalized, "secular Jews" refers to all non-religious Jews. — *M.L.*

materials can be used to review, share, and learn about the practical and concrete aspects of the Secular Jewish educational curriculum.

SILVER combines style, substance and respect for his subject and readers, effectively presenting his central concerns for the project while not neglecting a range of philosophical issues. He has deliberately stored what he calls "philosophical bric-a-brac" in footnotes to "keep them from cluttering the text." I found that these passages are not digressions — the issues discussed often call for philosophical and historical perspective. Silver does the reader an important service in this slim volume by this integration of text and on-the-page footnotes, providing succinct clarifications, presenting the debates/controversies on issues, raising probing questions and taking clear positions.

An early chapter title asks "Why Be Jewish?" In addition to such arguments as "The Blood of the Martyrs," Silver notes that "Few Wicked Children are aware of the depth and breadth of Jewish civilization. It contains traditions rich in music, poetry, folktales, philosophy, theology, mysticism, liturgies, sacred objects, ornaments, rituals, homilies, myths, legends, and law."

Jewish culture, he argues, is not only of great value, it merits preservation. "It will be preserved by Jews or not at all." The most straightforward reason to be a Jew is one of the strongest: "*es iz gut tsu zayn a Yid*"; it is good to be a Jew. He then underscores a major theme of the book: "It is especially good for those seeking resources for a life devoted to social justice and ethical acts." In a later chapter, "From Wickedness to Wisdom," he offers greater details to support his thesis that those of us wishing to strengthen our social and moral commitments and pass these commitments on to our children will find the Jewish tradition affords resources for doing so.

THE chapter on "Secular Judaism and Progressive Politics" lays out how this is so. Silver begins by stating that a "crucial element" in Secular Judaism is the "progressive Jewish tradition . . . a vigorous Secular Judaism will be progressive." Silver then adds and argues that "a Jewish identity will add vigor to one's Progressivism." He proceeds to offer some basic premises about the nature of progressivism. "Beliefs" are critical: "the progressive believes in and wants a better world." And, "Progressives have consistently believed that human equality makes for a better world."

Silver then moves on to analyze Jewish identity

and tradition and their relationship to progressivism. He concludes that “central traditional values make Jews natural allies of progressives. The importance of the individual’s life and dignity, communal solidarity, equality before the law and the emphasis on education are core values in Jewish tradition and are, or should be, the mainstays of the progressive vision, for they remain the hopeful path to a better world.”

To support this argument, Silver takes us on a journey which includes many stops, too many to present in this short review. They include, for example, the “historical context” — the story of the origin of the branches of modern religious Judaism and Zionism, with a more detailed review of Yiddish secularist history because “it is less familiar and more relevant to my project.” In his discussion of the content of Secular Judaism, Silver continues with a moving statement about the heritage of Eastern European Jewry:

“[A]lthough it alone cannot be the totality of a viable Jewish identity, Yiddish and the culture of the Eastern European *shtetl* Jews should play a very prominent role in Secular Judaism. For it is here that we find most strongly the Jewishness that the Wicked Child is loath to abandon.

“If we want to intertwine our children’s Jewish education with progressivism, no period of Jewish history serves as well as that of the Eastern European Jews in the 19th and 20th centuries. Here is oppression and resistance, trade union activism and class consciousness, radical social theory and engaged intellectuals, progressive journalists and left-wing artists, nascent feminists and civil libertarians, anarchists and internationalists, secularists, and a full spectrum of socialists. It was a time when the Jews were a people of the left.

“... We can make a plausible case that this progressive strand contains the essence, or is at least the dominant motif, of Judaism throughout the ages. Within the bounds of honest history, Secular Judaism ought to make that case. But in Eastern European Jewry we have the self-conscious emergence of the progressive Jewish people.”

WHEN I was 20 — 51 years ago — early and groggy every Sunday morning I would *shlep* by train in Brooklyn to a JPFO *shule* to teach a group of children whose parents wanted a non-religious, progressive Jewish education for them. As the only teacher in this Little Red Jewish School House, I taught Jewish history,

Yiddish (with Yiddish texts), stories by I.L. Peretz and Sholem Aleichem, poems of the Yiddish working-class poets, songs and dances, and, of course, celebrations of the Jewish holidays — their history, customs, etc. I remember the first pages of the primer and the words: *Kinder, kinder, ful un ful, ful mit kinder iz di shul.*

I did not call it Secular Jewish education until years later. It was simply progressive Jewish *shule* education, including the Jewish people’s *mameloshn*, Yiddish. Teaching *shule* in 1949 was the beginning of my love affair with the joys of teaching, *Yiddishkeyt*, and a lifetime of work focused on public education and higher education in the United States and abroad.

When Mitchell Silver reports that 100 children attend the I.L. Peretz *Shule* and that 400 people came to the holiday services in Brookline, I smile and think of *ful mit kinder iz de shule*. This book is a gift and provocative resource for the Wicked Children seeking their Jewish identity; it is also a celebration of more than 100 years of Secular Judaism and an affirmation of a Jewish life that resonated with non-religious Jews in the United States, Eastern Europe and Israel in the 20th Century.

One result of reading *Respecting the Wicked Child* is that I plan to *shlep* again on that *shule* train — this time to Brookline — to see in action what sounds like a 21st-Century *shule* that builds on a rich Secular Jewish tradition. In the spirit of that tradition, I will have two books with me: one, a gift for the I.L. Peretz *Shule*, a recently published masterpiece, *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat*, by Simms Taback, a graduate of the New York City *shules*. This winner of the prestigious American Library Association’s 1999 Caldecott Medal for Illustration is based on a Yiddish folk tale told by secular Jewish teachers for generations.

In addition, I will have with me another inspirational book, *Respecting the Wicked Child: A Philosophy of Secular Jewish Identity and Education*, that speaks not only to Jews, theoretical philosophers, educators and psychologists, but also to other ethnic and racial groups about the important place of their identities and histories. I also plan to hug Mitchell Silver and thank him for this jewel that he has written. ■

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