

### **Abstract**

“Exorcising the Dybbuk” explores the role that Jews played in shaping the American counterculture of the 1960s and early 1970s. The essay centers an unusual episode, the exorcism of Judge Julius Hoffman, whom Jewish counterculturalists deemed “possessed” because of his actions during the infamous Chicago conspiracy trial of 1969. Jewish activists drew on religious language and Jewish mythology to articulate their dissent and dissatisfaction with American life. They critiqued American authority, capitalism, and hypocrisy through a specifically Jewish lens, sparking concerns among the Jewish mainstream. By emphasizing these exchanges between the radicals and “the establishment,” this essay reframes the counterculture as a moment of Jewish crisis and confrontation.

## Exorcising the Dybbuk

According to Jewish folklore, a Dybbuk is a lost, wandering soul that roams the earth in search of a human host. Clinging to its prey like a leech, the Dybbuk possesses the victim entirely, dictating their mind and body. It is a malicious, sadistic spirit that prevents the host from distinguishing between good and evil and right and wrong. The vile demon will never leave its host willingly, but once recognized as a Dybbuk, Jews may forcibly expel it through exorcism. Mythologists claim that these are typically family matters kept shrouded in secrecy in order to avoid gossip and speculation.

But in February 1970, the Radical Jewish Union, a Columbia University student group, announced the first public exorcism of a Dybbuk when they deemed Judge Julius Hoffman “possessed.” The Jewish judge had earned the wrath of leftists while presiding over the trial of the “Chicago Seven.” Amid contentious demonstrations and escalating public rage, the United States Justice Department had accused seven antiwar activists of conspiring to incite a riot at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Three defendants – Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, and Lee Weiner – were Jewish. Facing off against the hostile judge, Hoffman infamously cried, “You are a disgrace to the Jews. You would have served Hitler better. Dig it!” The trial became nothing less than a spectacle with Jews in the starring roles. “It was a Jewish morality play,” Weiner later reflected, gesturing to the bubbling discontent between Jews in the American counterculture and those representing the “establishment.”<sup>1</sup>

By the time the Radical Jewish Union vowed to rescue Judge Hoffman’s soul from the Dybbuk’s corruption, Jews had already emerged as main characters of the counterculture. Yet in both popular and scholarly memory, the tie-dyed bohemianism and left-wing radicalism of the 1960s has been simplified to “middle-class white youth” in revolt. “Hippies,” writes historian Damon Bach, belonged to an alienated generation that rejected Cold War America’s “consensus, conformity, and conservatism.”<sup>2</sup> But behind generic depictions of rebellious and disgruntled white youth is a deeply Jewish story. As experienced “outsiders,” Jews longed for a movement that would celebrate eccentricity, freethinking, and cultural and political reinvention. In 1969, a Jewish peacenik ruminated that Jewish youth “have found a haven within the secular radical community,” where their perspectives were not only accepted but “acclaimed.”<sup>3</sup>

Jews helped shepherd the transition from the “Old Left,” which emphasized class struggle, to the social justice-oriented “New Left” of the 1960s and 1970s. Queer Jewish thinkers like Allen Ginsberg and Paul Goodman became the architects of the counterculture’s political philosophy. Ginsberg’s *Howl*, published in 1956, lionizes the “angelheaded hipsters” who bravely defy societal norms. Like radical Jews of the next generation, Ginsberg excoriated American authorities by invoking Jewish mythology. Moloch – the grotesque, bull-headed false god of the Hebrew Bible – embodies the rot of American culture in *Howl*. “Moloch! Moloch!” the poem reads, “Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy judger of men!” The figure of Moloch holds the same possessive powers as the Dybbuk. Ginsberg laments that the hateful

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Sloman, *Steal This Dream: Abbie Hoffman and the Countercultural Revolution in America* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), “Hoffman v. Hoffman.”

<sup>2</sup> Damon Bach, *The American Counterculture: A History of Hippies and Cultural Dissidents* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2020), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Howard Levy to Michael Robinson, 1970, Box 7, Folder 10, Jewish Peace Fellowship Records, American Jewish Historical Society Records, New York, NY.

deity has “entered [his] soul early,” rendering him “a consciousness without a body.” Jewish counterculturalists resented the stifling confines of American society and feared becoming trapped within it. The language of exorcism, of expunging something unwanted, appealed to Jews who wished to repel mainstream influences.

Paul Goodman’s 1960 book on juvenile delinquency, *Growing Up Absurd*, prophesized that young people would rebuff American materialism and social mores. His intellectual coming-of-age occurred in the Jewish socialist circles of New York, where labor exploitation pushed many into ardent anti-capitalism. His work resonated with disaffected young people, including college-aged Jewish leftists who balked at the hypocrisy of American life. Many Jewish “red-diaper babies,” the children of Communists, questioned the postwar narrative of American heroics. The victory over Nazi Germany had promised the death of fascism and authoritarianism and the advent of freedom. Yet the government’s hunt for Communist subversives, which was sometimes colored by antisemitism, blatantly violated civil liberties. The fearmongering of the Red Scare spilled into college campuses, where censorship outraged politically engaged Jews.

The 1964 Free Speech Movement at the University of California, Berkeley, energized the fledgling student movement of the Sixties, and Jews appeared on the frontlines. The university had banned political expression and advocacy in response to student organizing around the Civil Rights Movement. Administrators feared that student protesters were too “radical” and would upset conservative financiers and members of the Board of Regents. Jewish graduate student Jack Weinberg, who coined the famous countercultural phrase “don’t trust anyone over 30,” defied the policies. His attempted arrest sparked chaos. Students cried out, “take all of us!” and sat down in front of the police car to prevent Weinberg from being taken into custody.

The showdown between students, police, and administrators remains essential in narratives of Sixties rebellion, but the centrality of Jewish actors is often overlooked. Those involved recognized how their Jewish heritage dovetailed with their contemporary concerns. Organizer Jackie Goldberg commented, “Jews were consistently fighters against fascism, and a lot of the Free Speech Movement was a fight against fascism.”<sup>4</sup> During the confrontation, witnesses recalled antisemitic taunts. Student Michael Rossman attested that counter-protesters “threw eggs at” and “Jew-baited” participants before calling them Communists, creating a scene that encapsulated the intolerance of American life. Surveying the calamity, a university official sneered, “it’s a typical Jewish trait to be a rebel.”<sup>5</sup>

Led by a sense of responsibility to fight authoritarianism, Jews regularly populated New Left demonstrations like those at Berkeley. They filled the ranks of nationwide student groups like Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), whose leadership included prominent Jewish activists like Mark Rudd, Todd Gitlin, and Bernardine Dohrn. But it was a beguiling Irishman, Tom Hayden, who emerged as the organization’s poster child. Paul Buhle, a former member, recalled that the “heavily Jewish SDS needed its Gentiles in the early years” to avoid the antisemitic backlash that might come with overtly Jewish leadership. This was especially true in Chicago,

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<sup>4</sup> “30 Years Later, Movement Founders Recall Their Jewish Liberal Roots,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, December 12, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> David Lance Goines, *The Free Speech Movement: Coming of Age in the 1960s* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1993), 463.

where the overwhelmingly Jewish character of SDS stood out on campuses that were “99 percent Christian.”<sup>6</sup>

Jews also engaged with the more experiential and expressive forms of the burgeoning counterculture, establishing and joining hippie communes. Jewish New Yorkers founded New Buffalo, a “back-to-the-land” desert utopia in New Mexico. The commune became the basis for the counterculture’s most iconic film, 1969’s *Easy Rider*, in which outsiders and outlaws experience both freedom and violence while pursuing alternative lifestyles. In the late 1960s, researchers determined that 20-25% of those living in San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury – the most well-known hippie enclave – were Jewish. The famous psychologist and psychedelic enthusiast Dr. Timothy Leary speculated that the number was closer to 40%.<sup>7</sup>

“The Hashbury” gave rise to free clinics, anarchist bookstores, and head shops that sold drug paraphernalia. Young Jews were drawn to its spontaneous “happenings” and “be-ins” that gathered people together to celebrate community, music, and above all, authenticity. Participants felt unrestrained and uninhibited, free to exist as themselves without the pressures of “straight society.” The image of Phyllis Willner, a Jewish runaway from Queens, riding with her outstretched arms on the back of a Hells Angels motorcycle personified the liberty and enthrallment that young Jews pursued.

Historians commonly frame the midcentury crisis of Jewish “assimilation” as a concern of elders who feared intermarriage and waning interest in Judaism. But the anxieties went both ways, with Jews in the counterculture equally distressed by the perceived loss of Jewish values in the larger community. They cherished hippiedom out of rejection of the “sham” of their parents’ life, alleging that Jewish homes and institutions had become dulled by adherence to capitalist values. Some counterculturalists charged that their elders were willing to “do the bidding” of the “WASP power elite” for only “a few piddling crumbs and favors.”<sup>8</sup> Their romanticized view of the American Jewish past – characterized by socialist firebrands and crusading laborers – had been disturbed by the societal chase for wealth and conformity.

The “Jewish establishment” responded to the counterculture both harshly and sympathetically. Many were appalled by the hippie lifestyle, sharing the wider culture’s disgust for “longhairs,” beards, and other aesthetic choices. Some argued that LSD and similar psychedelics, which induced “artificial flights from reality,” were reprehensible to Jewish tradition.<sup>9</sup> Jewish civic leader Albert Vorspan complained that young Jewish radicals had engaged in “adolescent” and “reactionary” thinking. Though most Jews leaned liberal and shared many political sentiments of the New Left, they regretted the counterculture’s “arrogant self-righteousness” and disruptive political tactics. The most extreme critics accused Jewish counterculturalists of “seeking goodwill on the radical left at any price,” excoriating those who had admired the Black Panther Party.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Buhle, “The Jewish Presence among Students for a Democratic Society,” *Jewish Currents*, June 1, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> “Jews Make Up 20% of Frisco’s Hippies,” *The Jewish Sentinel*, November 9, 1967.

<sup>8</sup> Letter from Radical Jewish Union to Andrew Cordier, President of Columbia University, 18 February, 1970, Box 37, Folder 15, Jewish Students Organizations Records, AJHS.

<sup>9</sup> “Use of LSD Violates Basic Jewish Moral Principles,” *The Jewish Sentinel*, January 29, 1970.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Albert Vorspan to Mike Tabor, 4 December, 1969, Box 1, Folder 8, Jews for Urban Justice Records, AJHS.

In their 1967 song "She's Leaving Home," The Beatles epitomized the generation gap with Paul McCartney crooning from the perspective of a devastated parent: "*we gave her most of our lives / sacrificed most of our lives / we gave her everything money could buy / she's leaving home, after living alone, for so many years.*" These words would have resonated with many Jewish families. A father lamented in the Jewish press that his daughter, "raised in a liberal, Jewish home," had joined the radical antiwar movement against his wishes. "I encouraged her to read about Nazism and our people, and now she is for humanity and against war," he shrugged, pleading, "what can I say? What can I do?"<sup>11</sup> Concerned about such stories, Jewish agencies like the Jewish Family Service sent representatives into the Haight to locate and counsel "young Jewish wanderers" who had strayed too far from home.

Politically, establishment Jews were not so distant from these travelers. Major Jewish groups, including the American Jewish Congress, were among the first communal organizations to openly condemn the Vietnam War. Jewish critics of American foreign policy were so perceivable that both Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon complained privately that they could not procure Jewish support. A Jewish counterculture initiative, Trees and Life for Vietnam, arranged to plant trees in North Vietnamese villages and countrysides where American bombing had scarred the land. The group articulated their unique perspective on the war in connection with Jewish history. "Having experienced the Holocaust and knowing the possibility of extermination," members explained, "the tragedy of the war in Vietnam demands a compassionate response from Jews committed to the ideals of justice, mercy, and loving-kindness."<sup>12</sup>

The Vietnam War prompted a range of responses and actions from Jewish leftists, but some scandalous protest tactics deepened rifts within the Jewish community. In 1968, when Abbie Hoffman led his Youth International Party to the site of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, these tensions exploded. Hoffman had formed the "Yippies" at a New Year's Eve party in 1967, accompanied by Jewish co-founders Anita Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, Nancy Kurshan, and Paul Krassner. The Yippies gained quick notoriety for blending the theatrical dress and antics of hippies with the political solemnity of the New Left. Questions of Jewish identity informed their every move, with Hoffman determining that there were "two kinds of Jews in the world," the merchant class and the troublemakers. The capital-obsessed merchants "didn't want to cause any trouble" and laid low until their eventual persecution by the state.<sup>13</sup> Alternatively, the troublemaking rebels had followed in the footsteps of pioneers like Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, Jewish anarchists whose politics led to their deportations in 1919.

Using the services of the Liberation News Service, an underground news agency, the Yippies invited people to join their demonstration at the Convention. "Come all you rebels, youth spirits, rock minstrels, truth seekers, peacock freaks, poets, barricade jumpers, dancers, lovers and artists," their promotional flyer read, "Chicago is yours! Do it!"<sup>14</sup> 15,000 protesters gathered in Chicago, representing a mix of different organizations and movements unified under one antiwar message.

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<sup>11</sup> "Many Jews Disturbed by Democratic Convention," *The Jewish Sentinel*, September 12, 1968.

<sup>12</sup> "Trees and Life for Vietnam" pamphlet, 1970, Box CB4, Folder 1, Trees and Life for Vietnam Records, AJHS.

<sup>13</sup> Sloman, *Steal This Dream*, "Quotes from the Underground."

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

The mutual resentment and mistrust between authorities and counterculturalists meant that the occasion was almost destined for violence. Weeks before the Convention, the Yippies met with representatives of Chicago's mayoral office to set their expectations for peaceful protest. One official asked skeptically, "what do you guys plan to do in Chicago?" With the sarcastic wit typical of the Yippies, Paul Krassner responded, "have you seen *Wild in the Streets?*" The 1968 film had depicted teenaged revolutionaries who poisoned the water supply with acid and seized control of the government. Chicago authorities took the joke seriously and requested assurances from the Bureau of Narcotics that the water could not be poisoned with LSD.<sup>15</sup>

The calamitous outcome of the protest has been well-established in histories of 1968. At one corner of Lincoln Park, Chicago policemen assaulted 1,500 Yippies and their associates with tear gas, clubs, sticks, and fists. Jewish senator Abraham Ribicoff immediately condemned the "Gestapo tactics" of the police. Watching from their television sets at home, many observers swore that they could read Mayor Daley's lips as he screamed inaudibly at Ribicoff: "you Jew son of a bitch."<sup>16</sup> As with other woeful clashes of the Sixties, the Chicago riot carried a distinctly Jewish image.

Depending on the audience, Yippies were either brave underdogs with moral clarity or ostentatious and judgmental rabble-rousers. Reflecting on Chicago, a Jewish reporter asked Jewish peace activist Allan Solomonow if he agreed that the Yippies "and other politically active Jews" had induced antisemitism. "Isn't it foolish for Jews like yourself to be so active in the peace movement," he inquired, and "don't you realize your actions will only make it more likely that antisemitism will increase in America?" Solomonow replied that antisemites, like all irrational thinkers, "will always be able to convince each other that the Jews are to blame for something." He insisted that the Jews possessed a "deep, historic commitment to the oppressed" regardless of societal backlash.<sup>17</sup>

Jewish student radicals agreed. Contrary to beliefs that they had rejected their Jewish heritage in exchange for acceptance in secular left-wing movements, many youths understood their activism through a Jewish lens. "Our goal is not only to make the Jewish community more radical," explained one student, "but to make it more Jewish." Activists like those in the Radical Jewish Union sought to "liberate" Judaism from the political apathy associated with middle-class whiteness. They feared that by attaining a comfortable economic status, Jews would lose touch with the needs of the marginalized. Like their Black counterparts, radical Jews invented new phrases to condemn those who they felt had not lived up to Jewish ethics. "White Anglo-Saxon Hebrews" and "Uncle Jakes" entered the Jewish counterculture's lexicon.<sup>18</sup>

Between 1969 and 1970, during the Chicago conspiracy trial, Judge Julius Hoffman became the quintessential "Uncle Jake" among radical spectators. Hoffman's bias against the defendants was so severe that he controversially bound and gagged Bobby Seale – the initial eighth defendant – before Seale's charges were dismissed. While Jewish defense attorney William Kunstler defended the rights of his clients to hold their protest at the Convention, the Yippies made a "laughingstock" of the judge. "Every kid in the world hates you," shouted Rubin,

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Lance Morrow, "1968 Like a knife blade, the year severed past from future," *Time Magazine*, January 11, 1988.

<sup>17</sup> "Allan Solomonow Interview at Harvard Hillel," 1968, Box 16, Folder 4, Jewish Peace Fellowship Records.

<sup>18</sup> Harold Goldberg, "A Generation in Revolt," *Intermountain Jewish News*, October 17, 1969.

quipping that Hoffman was “synonymous with Adolf Hitler.” The various anxieties of the Jewish counterculture had burst forth before the entire nation. Defendants regularly chastised Hoffman as “over-assimilated,” “a front man for the WASP power elite,” and a “*shande fur die goyim*” (a disgrace in front of the Gentiles).<sup>19</sup>

It was then that the Radical Jewish Union performed their exorcism. According to material published by the Union, Hoffman represented the ideal target for a destructive Dybbuk: morally weak, susceptible, and driven by the desire for power. The trial, “one of the most important in the history of America,” had come “under the control of this Dybbuk, this evil demon, perverting justice, and condemning innocent human beings.” Using a liturgy consisting of Hebrew prayers, biblical readings, and the blowing of the shofar, members attempted to expel the Dybbuk outside of the U.S. Court House in New York. The lengthy ritual was equal parts theatrical and cathartic. Participants concluded by bellowing loudly, “we demand that you, DYBBUK, be banished from the face of the earth forever!”<sup>20</sup>

Other Jewish radicals felt inspired by the ceremony. In Santa Barbara, Jewish demonstrators staged their own “trial” in which actors indicted Judge Hoffman for behaving unjustly. Those performing as jurors encircled the stand-in for Hoffman and proceeded to chant and make noises to scare the Dybbuk away. For many Jews, the only explanation for Hoffman’s “perversion of justice” was that he was possessed by a mythical, corrupting force.

Some commentators ridiculed these acts, remarking that only “superstitious Jews” have ever believed in the Dybbuk, and that neither the demon nor the ritual of exorcism was authorized by any branch of Judaism.<sup>21</sup> Yet for participants in the counterculture, the unconventionality and absurdity of an exorcism was precisely the point. Radical Jews expressed their grievances by thinking outside of the box. By calling upon the folkloric figure of the Dybbuk, they blended the mysticism and spirituality of the larger counterculture with specifically Jewish mythology. In a movement often defined by experimentation and personal transformation, Jewish counterculturalists found occult rituals to be deeply satisfying and productive.

By all accounts, the exorcism did not work. Hoffman’s lopsided trial resulted in five convictions for violations of the Anti-Riot Act, though they were overturned in 1972 after the appellate court found the judge to be “antagonistic” toward the defense. But by exorcising the Dybbuk, Jews in the American counterculture made good on several goals. Critics might have scoffed that the act was “crazy” or “preposterous,” but the exorcism enabled activists to effectively publicize serious moral positions related to Vietnam, police brutality, and ongoing challenges to free speech.<sup>22</sup> The radicals had continued traditions established by earlier Jewish mavericks who were unafraid to stand firm in their pursuit of social and economic justice. The Dybbuk may have lingered on, traveling aimlessly from person to person, but the Jewish spirit of dissent and resistance remained protected.

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<sup>19</sup> Clavir, Judy and John Spitzer, eds., *The Conspiracy Trial* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971).

<sup>20</sup> “Exorcism of the Dybbuk,” February 1970, Box 37, Folder 15, Jewish Student Organizations Records.

<sup>21</sup> “To Exorcise a Dybbuk,” *Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle*, February 13, 1970.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

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### Archival Collections

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Trees and Life for Vietnam Records