

# Jewish Anarchism

Shane Burley, Anna Elena Torres, and Kenyon Zimmer

July 2023

Shane Burley interviews Anna Elena Torres and Kenyon Zimmer, presented here as a condensed version of a longer interview from the July 2023 episode of the Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness podcast. The discussion heavily references *With Freedom in Our Ears: Histories of Jewish Anarchism*, edited by Anna and Kenyon.

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**Shane Burley** Since about 2019 or so I've been hearing more and more folks who offer their identity not just as Jewish but calling themselves specifically *Jewish anarchists*. It seems to be part of a wave of interest in the historical relationship that there's been between anarchists and Jews, particularly in the US amongst immigrant communities from the late 19th and early 20th century. These Jewish radicals were incredibly influential in building the labor movement and the left in general, but it's those same anarchists who are often written out of the histories entirely. So while Jewish involvement in organizations like the Communist Party have been well-documented, they have also been a really big focus of right wing conspiracy theories. The heavy influence of Jewish anarchists on this history is often erased. Recently Verso republished a now classic book called *Yiddishland* about the role of Yiddish speaking Jews on the left. And the anarchist publisher CrimethInc put out a review in response that noted that their copy was defective—the book didn't mention anarchists. So over the past few years a number of organizations have crept up that have sort of revived this idea of Jewish anarchism in a really organized sense. There's been Jewish anarchist discussion groups on platforms like Discord and Signal. There's radical Jewish collectives like Rebellious Anarchist Young Jews and the Fayer Collective, which people probably know because they recently wrote a piece that was published in *Jewish Currents* about

direct action and the movement to Stop Cop City outside of Atlanta. Yiddish itself is seeing a revival amongst anarchists or radicals and that's giving a lot of people the ability to crack into old documents from Jewish history that have been overlooked or untranslated for a long time.

The current wave of Jewish anarchism has also had a few signposts along the way. Recently some big events and books have got people's interest, like the Yiddish Anarchists Conference that was hosted by the YIVO Institute in 2019, recent books like Cindy Milstein's *There's Nothing So Whole as a Broken Heart*, or Hayyim Rothman's *No Masters but God*, also got a great deal of interest. And there's also just been a conversation about this happening with the growth of the Jewish left in the US with projects like *Jewish Currents* and Jewish anti-Zionist groups. All of this shows that there's a cultural shift happening and people are looking to rebuild something they think of specifically as a Jewish anarchism. There seems to be a lot of reasons for this. Young Jews want to be active in Jewish life, but they feel unrepresented by the dominant world of NGOs and modern synagogues. They often want Judaism informing their politics outside the world of Zionism, and they're also rediscovering the depth of Jewish tradition for remaking the world. So there are definitely differences between the way we talk about historic Jewish anarchism and a lot of people that are reviving it contemporarily. For example, there's a very big focus on Jewish religious life and Jewish ritual and kind of a turn towards looking at Hasidic and spiritual or philosophical sources and reframing them to radical politics. But this still puts us back in the long history of Jewish anarchism in the US and across the world. And so a number of radical historians are diving into largely untranslated archives to try and make this history accessible for a whole new generation of folks, which gets us back to the book we're talking about here, *With Freedom in Our Ears: Histories of Jewish Anarchism*, an anthology of writing and scholarship on Jewish anarchist history, specifically focusing on how anarchist publishing, translation, and trans-cultural organizing helped to build a uniquely revolutionary movement. The book is edited by two of the most important historians that are digging into this work, Anna Elena Torres and Kenyon Zimmer.

I was so excited to interview both of the book's editors about that history, and what lessons that has for both the future of anarchism and Jewish communal life. I'm curious how both of you came to talk about Jewish life or be involved in Jewish life and also your history with anarchism.

**Anna** I grew up in the Bronx, in the Amalgamated Cooperatives, which were built as union housing by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. Amalgamated, where I grew up, was one of three of what were called the Bronx Utopias. These were living experiments informed by socialist, communist, and anarchist ideas built largely by Russian Jews who were coming in the 1920s to New York City. There were a number of mutual aid projects as part of Amalgamated which prevented all evictions during the Great Depression. There was a bus system for workers to go to the garment factories on the Lower East Side from the Bronx. There was a free milk program for children. There was a library. There was a theater. There are these spaces kind of built into the literal infrastructure of these union houses. So that's where I grew up, and the people around me were largely the age of my grandparents. And many of them were Soviet dissidents. The way that they practiced socialist and anarchist ideals every day was very matter of fact, and there was also a sense of a deeper history around this community in the Bronx.

I also grew up in an Orthodox Jewish community simultaneously, so having this very capacious idea of Jewish community where you might think on paper, "Okay, how is it that you are shomer Shabbos and keeping kosher and you're also living in a socialist space"? It might seem contradictory if you were to only look at these formations on paper, but in practice it just felt

like a very expansive way of relating to Jewishness, being part of multiple communities. Some of the practices that I grew up with, like keeping kosher (and now being vegan), they've accrued additional meanings. Or growing up keeping Shabbat: I retained that, but also re-signified it as an opposition to the totalizing effect of working life! There are continuities, although you might also see these aspects as contradictory. I think they are actually these resonances and continuities and ways in which these forms of Jewishness can echo back and forth between each other, and both of them have anarchist dimensions for me.

**Shane** Kenyon, I think you come from a slightly different background with this. How did you come to study anarchism and how did you make your way to being a historian of Jewish life?

**Kenyon** I grew up in rural northern California. I have no Jewish ancestry that I'm aware of. I grew up in a non-religious family. In college, as an undergraduate in the early 2000s, I was drawn into the orbit of the so-called anti-globalization movement and was introduced to anarchist politics and activism through that. While at the same time, as a student, I was navigating my way more and more towards being an academic historian and the two interests seemed to naturally coincide as I became interested in anarchism in the then present as well as its historical roots. It was in the process of excavating the history of anarchism in the United States that I very quickly realized there were some huge gaping holes in what was available in the historical record. One of them being the whole history of Yiddish speaking anarchists in the United States, which at that point virtually nothing had been published on. So, I sort of ended up pursuing that history. Then, in graduate school, I started learning to read Yiddish so that I could do some of that research, because no one else had. I felt like it was necessary, in order to do anything else I was interested in, to first have some of those foundations. I ended up writing my doctoral dissertation and my first book about both Yiddish and Italian speaking anarchists in the US, and everything has more or less snowballed from there.

**Anna** I think it's worth noting that Kenyon and I are working in different fields, labor history and comparative literature. But both of us were addressing the profound erasure of Jewish anarchism in our respective fields. One of the hopes for the book would be to collaboratively create an interdisciplinary response to multiple absences and multiple erasures within different fields.

**Shane** The book really talks about the way that a lot of these politics interacted with everyday folks' lives as not disconnected, not even just necessarily subcultural, but something that actually was effective in their workplaces and their communities. What role do you think anarchism had in everyday Jewish life? Is it something that would have been alien to a lot of communities, or do you think it's something that a lot of Jewish communities, working class Jews, and immigrants would have had some relationship to, would know something about, or that it would be influencing their spaces?

**Kenyon** Yeah, I think part of what's kind of so astounding about the historical erasure that Anna mentioned is that, in the late 19th and early 20th century, virtually everywhere you found Yiddish speaking Jews, and anarchism was an institutionalized part of everyday life. Anarchists were leaders and organizers and rank and file members of predominantly Jewish labor unions. They were publishing newspapers like New York's *Fraye Arbeter Shtime*, *the Free Voice of Labor*, which was not just an important anarchist newspaper, but an important newspaper on its own merits, as well as a vitally important tribune for Yiddish poetry, literature, and cultural criticism that was read and taken seriously by Yiddish readers of many different political persuasions. And Yiddish, anarchist intellectuals were influential and respected in all sorts of fields, from being medical doctors, to being translators, playwrights, sociologists, cultural critics, poets. So, yes, for

most—again largely speaking in this case of the Yiddish speaking Jewish world—anarchism was a fairly ubiquitous presence.

**Shane** I'm also curious, on the flip side of this, that was the role of actual Judaism in the lives of radicals? There's a certain ambivalence that you see in the book with Jewish radicals and religious life. Maybe they were coming from religious communities they found restrictive, but also being a part of radical politics that were critical of religious communities. This is something I think is a little bit different when you're talking about Jewish anarchism today where there's a lot more of a rediscovery of Jewish tradition. What relationship do you think that Jewish anarchists actually had to Judaism? Is it different from how we understand Jewish practice now?

**Anna** I think that it would be fair to say you could do both a very close reading of some historical texts that would show you, "All right, this is how one particular figure is using vocabulary from the Jewish religious context. And they're re-signifying it, or they're reinventing it, or they're using it to a new radical end." At the same time, that's also coexisting with an excoriation of religious patriarchy, rejection of the rabbinate, and rejection of religious power. There are these multiple aspects. One really well known phenomenon is the Yom Kippur Balls which were held in many areas. They were these spectacular protests in front of synagogues on Yom Kippur. People dressed up and danced and played music and ate ham sandwiches very demonstratively. And there were also texts written to go along with that which would parody Hebrew religious texts. But of course, in order to write a parody of religious texts, you need to know that text really well.

There are other ways as well from a linguistic or literary aspect where you could see how Jewish tradition was being reinvented with a kind of radical lens. For example, Anna Margolin, a Yiddish modernist writer, described herself in a letter where she says, "I've always been an anarchist. I've never been able to be an atheist. Indeed, in times of trouble, I spoke to God and I gave God hell." And that's one way of modeling the psychological straddling of having grown up with a religious background and then reinventing it in some way towards anarchism.

Kenyon can also speak more to the broader ways in which anti-religiosity was being mobilized, particularly the critique of religious patriarchy and ideas about Jewishness as chosen-ness or separateness. That's one of the tensions of Jewish anarchism, I would say.

**Kenyon** Yeah. I think, broadly speaking, the vast majority of these Jewish anarchists at least would have considered themselves militantly atheist, even if they were drawing on vocabulary, symbols, and even concepts from Jewish religious tradition. That was the language and the constellation of concepts and symbols that they had available to them and that would make them understandable to a Jewish audience. And, of course, there were always exceptions. There were people like the Russian Jewish anarchist, Abba Gordin, who very explicitly tried to synthesize Judaism with their anarchism—even in some cases claiming that Judaism at its very core was an anarchistic religion. Those beliefs tended to be on the margins of the movement. I think, as you pointed out, Shane, that's a very different context and a very different view of religion than we see in a lot of cases in the present day where there's much more openness to religious and spiritual ritual, if not also belief in creating and maintaining a distinct but radical Jewish identity.

**Shane** I am curious about the role that Yiddish played. Yiddish also seems to have had a sort of binding quality to identity. If we're walking away from strict religious traditions, then the secular avenue for expression and community building could be built in some communities around Yiddish. What role did Yiddish publications have in building that sense of community amongst Jews and non-Jews?

**Kenyon** That's a multilayered question, and in part it depends on who and where and when we're talking about. For Yiddish-speaking Jewish anarchists, obviously, Yiddish publications were incredibly important. Although, in a lot of ways you can find parallels with other linguistic groups where the anarchist press at the time combined the functions of newspapers, what we would think of today as social media, and other cultural political outlets. These were transnationally circulating periodicals which not only reported on events through an anarchist lens, but were venues for individuals or organizations to communicate with one another. They were the main centers through which funding passed, whether that was funding for the newspaper, funding for a defense case somewhere, funding for the Spanish Civil War, that was primarily organized through publications. Debates between different factions, different individuals, were aired primarily on the written page. There was cultural dissemination of literature, plays, and cultural criticism, but also, importantly, translations of non-Yiddish texts into Yiddish. All of that was hugely important. But there are other sorts of sectors of this historical Jewish anarchist population that either didn't speak Yiddish or preferred to utilize other languages. Emma Goldman published *Mother Earth* in English. Although she read the *Fraye Arbeter Shtime*, she almost never wrote in Yiddish. Same goes for Alexander Berkman, who published the English language paper *The Blast*. These were publications aimed at a very different audience—these were publications not for a specifically Jewish audience, but for a more generally conceived American audience.

**Shane** One thing that was kind of interesting—and this is true in a number of the contributions from the different scholars—is the discussionary element of publication which highlighted the lack of consensus on a lot of very serious issues amongst them. What are some of the biggest issues people are debating in these anarchists publications at the time? There's the role of large labor unions and revolutionary labor unions, there's expropriation, there's an entire chapter in the book that discusses debates around expropriation and the stealing of resources from rebels for revolutionary movements, and also sexual politics. What did you see as some of the biggest debates that were being had?

**Kenyon** A lot of them, when you boil them down, had to do with, “What does it mean to be both Jewish and internationalist?” This was linked to, “How do you respond to Zionism?” Or, “How do you respond to this other Jewish territorialist movement that has its own socialist or even anarchist wing?” “What does it mean about language?” Does it mean that if you're an internationalist—and especially if you live in the United States—and you want to exhibit and foster class solidarity amongst all the working class, does it make more sense to transition to English, or to use both English and Yiddish, or to focus on Yiddish and give primacy to organizing amongst the Jewish working class, at least in the short term? And yet, these are questions that are debated explicitly and implicitly over a couple of generations of anarchists. That's sort of one category.

Another one is tactical. You mentioned the chapter on expropriations, and there were debates about the role of revolutionary violence, however you might define that. You know, there's an early phase of admiration for propaganda of the deed. Then, at least in Jewish circles, that largely—but not entirely—gets subsumed under preference for things like syndicalism or education.

Then I think there's also a third category of arguments which you could frame around the question of, “Exactly how political is the personal?” For Jewishness and Jewish identity, are gender roles, patriarchy, sexuality, racial identity, etc. sort of secondary concerns, peripheral concerns, or are they central? It's a debate in more modern terms about intersectionality versus

the primacy of class or ethnicity or race in conceptualizing the anarchist struggle and anarchist goals.

**Shane** Those seem like perennial debates too. I mean, those sound so familiar to me from political debates. They've stayed the same kind of conversation around your own identity and internationalism, the role of personal and interpersonal politics, particularly the role of violence or expropriation versus, like you said, the more syndicalist approach to organizing the workplaces.

**Kenyon** Yeah, and those debates can also look radically different depending on location, or even the same people but talking about struggles in different locations. If you look, for example, at the *Fraye Arbeter Shtime*—which, by the early 20th century, the editorial line has moved far from propaganda by the deed to much more of a gradualist approach—yet when revolution breaks out in Russia in 1905, it's 100% behind the armed revolutions and expropriators of the 1905 Russian Revolution because it's a very different context. So, it's less of an ethical judgment and more about tactically what makes sense in these different contexts.

**Anna** We've been talking about the content of the newspaper, but I also want to say a note about what the newspapers look like. Their layout responded to the aesthetics of the day. If, in your mind, the phrase “anarchist newspaper” is a zine published in Kinkos, I would want you to try to imagine the mastheads with, for example, ladies draped in togas, holding up banners with the names of the newspapers on them, or using tropes of martyrdom, as around Haymarket, or cosmic aspirations of anarchism. Visually, they were very, very thrilling for the time. And we also have ads in the back, which are a window into the ethnography of the world of the anarchist press' readers: you would have ads for the cafes, and ads for other books that you could get a subscription to; often the newspapers would be promoting one another. “If you subscribe to *Fraye arbeter shtime*, you might really love having a bound copy of Kropotkin that we can send you.” So, just to point to some of the material history that reading the newspapers can tell you: a newspaper is not just about expressing opinions per se, but also an object that circulates in the aesthetic and material lives of people reading it.

**Shane** How has Yiddish changed? Or how is it changing?

**Anna** Yeah, language is plastic, it's always plastic. If you look at the waves of language reforms during subsequent iterations in the Soviet Union, there are very carefully planned out language reform projects as part of a Soviet Imperial project where the language was re-spelled to make it phonetically readable. And so there's this kind of political plasticity of Yiddish. And in many places on the left at that time, for example, there are these Soviet writers who continued to use the religious corpus as a sort of resistance against the persecution of Soviet Jews and a kind of reassertion, even within the language of a particular identity. So, in one place that kind of language might be resistance against assimilation, and in other places the politics of language might be a gesture towards internationalism. I wouldn't say that there's a single core or a single linguistic politics there. It's so dependent on the orthography, and so dependent on the location, and we have to always historicize what was happening with Yiddish in that moment.

**Shane** I think the big question I had when starting to read this book, thinking about the scholarship and all the other kinds of projects that we've talked about, is why the interest in Jewish anarchism has been so heavy lately, and why has it maintained itself over the generations? Why does this research really seem to connect with people in a profound way?

**Anna** I think that there's something really capacious about Jewish anarchism and its multilingualism. Its “Yes, and...”-ness. Think about the importance of multilingualism and contrast that with Zionist single-language ideology: just Hebrew and nothing but Hebrew. There's something

capacious and multitudinous about Jewish anarchist language politics. But at the same time, anarchism is unrelenting against capitalism, against borders, against the military, against anything that diminishes the autonomy of the body. I think that combination can really resonate with abolitionism today, with the dissolution of borders, taking an unrelenting stand against militarized borders, affirming the autonomy of reproductive rights, of trans life. I think that there is space which is both militant and unapologetic in anarchism—and it also is very capacious, which other iterations of a singular platform or singular language may not have space for.

**Kenyon** On the one side, a lot of Jews are looking for radical alternatives to the collapse of Communism, disillusionment with both the US and Israel, and wanting to center things like LGBT concerns, decolonial concerns, anti-racist, feminist concerns, and I think they are looking for alternative genealogies of Jewish radicalism outside of Communism, or Zionism, or leftist labor Zionism, or social democracy. I think, historically, anarchism made more room for those concerns. Contemporarily, it allows much more room for those concerns than some other strains of leftist political ideology. Then, on the other side, I think that more recently more anarchists who are Jewish are identifying themselves specifically as Jewish anarchists, in part as a response to resurgent antisemitism in the US. I think it's caused a lot of people to reevaluate their own Jewishness and center it more in their politics.

**Shane** What kind of lessons do you think are most important coming out of some of the discussions that we have in the book? It's obviously a Jewish anarchist history, but it really is also a radical political history that I feel has really big implications far beyond that. What are the big lessons you want people to encounter and engage with?

**Anna** I think about this research as a resource for collective political imaginations: how might this archive offer a political imagination? In the same way that the anarchists we're writing about were themselves invested in anarchist history and anarchist genealogy. They wanted to read the Talmud as a kind of anarchist ethics. They wanted to think about the Essenes—the ancient, all-male brotherhood—as a kind of proto-anarchist brotherhood. They were interested in reading history. They were interested in mutual aid as imminent within the material physical world. This tendency towards reading history with an anarchist lens, I think, has its own genealogy of thinking about world history as a sort of archive for the political imagination, for what's possible to think, of how our political imaginations have been narrowed so catastrophically to think that present forms of life are the only possibility. I hope the book can counter that. At the same time, it's also a challenge to not romanticize it or to be too protective of what we're recovering, and to also think about where were the moments when Jewish anarchists did not betray their whiteness. Were their ideals of free love just reaffirming patriarchy through women's suffering, rather than actually easing it? So that's part of the challenge too: remaining critical in this process of recovery.

**Kenyon** Yeah, and I think, in terms of providing a usable past, just seeing that Jewish anarchists can and have been major, pivotal, central figures in labor movements, revolutionary movements—whether those were specifically Jewish or not—and in cultural movements. There's so much of this history for which the anarchist origins of it are hidden from most people, even if you might be familiar with some of the individuals or institutions involved. An example that I like to use is the Manhattan Bridge. It was engineered by the Jewish anarchist, Leon Moisseiff. There's a plaque on it that specifically acknowledges Moisseiff's contribution, but even on his Wikipedia page there's no mention of the fact that he was also a dedicated lifelong anarchist who edited

a Yiddish language anarchist journal, the *Freye Gezelshaft* or *Free Society*. This anarchist past is literally built into the everyday infrastructure of Manhattan, but it's somehow invisible.

In terms of useful paths, I think what's also important about this anthology is that it shows there's no one right way to be a Jewish anarchist. Here are many paths. Jewish anarchists today who are insurrectionists, or syndicalists, or educators, or painters, or poets, or doctors, or neighborhood organizers, or birth control advocates, who speak English, or Yiddish, or Esperanto, they're all carrying on in the tradition of one strand of Jewish anarchism or another. There's one passage that we quote in our introduction from the Jewish anarchist historian Martha Acklesberg, "No one should be forced to choose among aspects of his or her identity as the price for political or communal belonging, we are each full beings capable of multiple commitments to a variety of cool activities." And I think that really sums up what the book illustrates as the almost innumerable ways in which Jewish anarchists of the past combined different commitments, and at the same time provide some guidance for radicals in the present to explore the different ways they might reconcile different commitments to multiple groups or causes and identities rather than feeling like they have to choose one or the other.



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