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Rosa Sonneschein's Fin-the-Siècle Fiction:
The Clashing Worlds of Zionism, Reform Judaism,
Feminism and Conformity

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Abstract

Rosa Sonneschein (1847–1932) was an important figure in late nineteenth-century American journalism, activism, and fiction. While a few brief studies were dedicated to her biography and to her role as a Jewish social activist, editor, and contributor to *The American Jewess*, no critical work has been devoted as yet to her literary production. The aim of this essay is to rectify this critical neglect by examining Sonneschein's wide literary opus and by investigating its connection, if any, to the views she expressed as a journalist and a public speaker. This essay will explore Sonneschein's threefold literary oeuvre, consisting of the following genres: Jewish fiction, non-Jewish fiction, and literary sketches. It will also try to explicate Rosa's often conflicting stance with regard to Judaism, feminism, and Zionism, a standpoint which should be examined in the context of the fin-the-siècle's turbulent changes American society had to cope with, especially pertaining to massive immigration, religious and social reforms, suffrage and temperance movements, etc.

Keywords: Rosa Sonneschein, *The American Jewess*, Zionism, feminism, social activism, fiction

Rosa Sonneschein (1847–1932) was a writer, a publicist, a Jewish activist, an ardent Zionist advocate, a Rebbitzin (a Rabbi's wife), and the founder and editor of *The American Jewess* magazine, the first English-language journal addressed to American Jewish women, published between 1895 and 1899. Born in Moravia to Hirsh Bar Fassel, a prominent and wealthy Rabbi and philosopher, Rosa was well-read and educated and fluently

spoke several languages. In 1864, she married Rabbi Solomon Sonneschein, a writer and the head of several congregations in Europe. Upon the couple's immigration to America in 1869, he served as a Rabbi in New York and St. Louis and Rosa performed the duties of a Rebbitzin.

While a few brief studies were dedicated to Sonneschein's biography and her role as a Jewish social activist and editor and contributor to *The American Jewess*, no critical work has been devoted as yet to her literary production consisting of several short stories, literary sketches, social, religious, educational and political addresses, essays and editorials. This paper is targeted at redressing this disregard by exploring Sonneschein's literary and journalistic corpus.

Sonneschein's Jewish short stories were all published in *The American Jewess* from 1895 until 1899 and were most certainly addressed to Jewish readership. Interestingly, though Sonneschein left Europe at an early age and spent the majority of her adult life in America, most of her stories are set up in Europe and depict Jews living in Prague, Temesvár, in Moravian and Slovakian towns or in other European cities. Some were translated from German to English, although Sonneschein's English was fluent. Her political and educational sketches, however, were all written in English. Probably the tales were written before her immigration to America and published much later or perhaps setting her stories in Europe and writing some of them in German allowed the writer some sense of geographical and temporal distance, and thus a nostalgic and at times retrospective view on the recounted events.¹ Several stories ("Three Kisses," "Jew and Magnate," "A Modern Miracle"), though depicting realistic characters, embody some folk tale or Jewish Halachic features, such as the mythical figure of a witch in "A Modern Miracle" or the mother's vow in "Three Kisses," which might have Talmudic or Biblical roots.

Though most of Sonneschein's fiction is set in Europe, it deals with issues that may have been of interest to both her Jewish and non-Jewish American contemporaries, such as the conflict between a woman's wish to comply with male and religious patriarchy versus her wish to assert free-will; or, socio-economic gaps that dictate one's inclusion into, or

exclusion from, societal groups; or, Jews' and Gentiles' tolerance/intolerance toward intermarriages.

"Three Kisses" tells the story of a young, prosperous, and pious Jewish couple, Miriam and Jacob Falk. During the first five years of their marriage, they lose four babies, dying a few days or weeks after birth. The mother is "completely broken down by the weight of her grief" ("Three Kisses" 76), and no words of consolation can bring solace to her ailing soul. Feverish, sick, and heartbroken, she zealously prays to God, and eventually makes a vow that if her next baby survives, she will kiss him just thrice during his/her lifetime (when s/he is one year old, on his/her *barmizvah/ batmistvah* day and on his/her wedding day).ⁱⁱ In her agitated, grief-stricken, and almost delirious state, Miriam believes that God has punished her for the excessive kissing and pampering of her deceased newborns. Several years later, when lying on her deathbed she confesses:

I vowed to my God a sacrifice such as only a mother who continuously hopes can make. In that desperate hour I racked my brains to learn why I had been inflicted with Heaven's scourge. I had nothing to reproach myself with ... it resounded in me suddenly like a revelation that I kissed and caressed my scarce-born children too idolatrously. Such caresses, which are only the natural vent of a mother's loving heart, seemed then to my over-excited brain a mortal sin ... I swore with a loud voice that I would kiss my next child ... only thrice in his whole life. ("Three Kisses" 81)

The nineteenth century's "Cult of Motherhood" was closely associated with the "Cult of True Womanhood," a term coined by Barbara Welter in 1966. Thus, motherhood was the role to which every woman aspired. A woman who neglected this function was viewed as an "unnatural" woman, lacking proper moral and physical development. In Judaism, the mother's role is probably of even a greater significance than in Christianity, since motherhood ensures the continuity of the Jewish people, given that the baby's religion comes through matrilineal descent.ⁱⁱⁱ In her journalistic oeuvre, discussed later in this paper, Sonneschein often praises Jewish women's motherly devotion. In the tale, Miriam Falk, a pious Jewess, decides to take resolute action and make a vow, believing that this time God will listen to her prayer and will save her newborn child. She does it without involving her husband or other family members, thus

exemplifying a feminist stance. Paradoxically, in her attempt to become a mother (in line with the “Cult of Motherhood”) Miriam challenges one of the four principles at the heart of the “Cult of True Womanhood,” namely, submissiveness. While her husband’s sole roles are limited to the ministering of the babies’ burial ceremonies and providing for the household, Miriam acts on her own, without asking his advice or permission. Ironically, this act of defying female submissiveness brings about the realization of Miriam’s dream of becoming a mother. The next baby, born a year after her fourth son dies, survives, and grows to be a healthy and lively boy, the heart of the Falks’ household. The mother keeps her promise and does not kiss or caress her only child, in spite of her great suffering, described as a “horrible torture when I [Miriam] could not respond to the innocent childish prattle with a caress, when I had to remain cold and indifferent to the sweetest, most endearing words of my only darling” (“Three Kisses” 81).

The Jewish religion is very strict in its preservation of one’s vows^{iv} and Miriam Falk, similarly to the biblical Hannah, has no intention of breaking hers, even at the price of deep motherly anguish and the harsh criticism pointed at her by female relatives and associates. In the eyes of the community, Miriam’s vow turns the previously loving and tender mother into an “unnatural” one.

The narrator’s sincere sympathy toward the ailing mother is contrasted with the harsh criticism pointed at the Jewish women surrounding her. Miriam’s sister-in-law, Aunt Schoendel, and her cousin Guetel show no mercy to their ailing relative; “‘Cruel mother,’ ‘Stony heart,’ were the mildest terms in which Aunt Schoendel spoke of her sister-in-law,” says the narrator. They also defamed her publicly: “The scandal-mongers and coffee sisters of the congregation soon spoke of nothing but of the singular aversion which Frau Falk entertained for her only child. No one could comprehend how such a pious and charitable woman could be hard-hearted only to her charming boy” (“Three Kisses” 79). The taunting becomes even more violent when the same aunt instructs the six-year-old Herman to slyly steal a kiss from his mother’s lips, leaving the mother deeply shaken and distressed.

It is noteworthy to mention that female friendship in the nineteenth century was often built around a strong pattern of single-sex networks, networks that were supportive and institutionalized in social conventions. In her journalistic essays, discussed later, Sonneschein endorses female associations and mutual support. According to Smith-Rosenberg, pre-twentieth-century friendships remained almost unchanged from the 1760s to the 1880s, a period when “continuity, not discontinuity, characterized this female world” (“The Female World” 10). Smith-Rosenberg also contends that “these supportive networks were institutionalized in social conventions or rituals which accompanied virtually every important event in a woman’s life, from birth to death” (“The Female World” 9).

Sonneschein’s criticism of the lack of female companionship and compassion reappears in her Sketch, “A Fin De Siècle Meeting,” published in Volume 6.5 of *The American Jewess* in 1898. The sketch sarcastically criticizes the unspeakable tactlessness of the female members of “the reduced seventy-five, the remnant of the Four Hundred of New York.”^v These seventy-five patronesses,

the cream of the *crème de la crème*, had recognized the fact that they would be a thousand times sweeter and fairer if enveloped by the mantle of charity. So they decided to bring that cloak into fashion. The result was simply marvelous. The ladies threw themselves into the attitude necessary for those who really wish to undertake hard work and mean to do much good. (“A Fin de Siècle Meeting” 209, original italics)

Sonneschein’s takes the irony to a higher level when giving the would-be benefactresses such ironic names as Mrs. Tenderheart, Mrs. Moneybag, and the leader of the pack, Mrs. Klondike (a name of a card game). While discussing their society’s agenda, arguing pro and against “preventive philanthropy,” they cruelly humiliate the organization’s secretary, an impoverished woman, the only salaried member of the club. Driven by long-forgotten romantic enmity between the bankrupt secretary and the affluent, diamond-clad Mrs. Klondike, the latter excludes her rival from being a full member of the club. The move provokes laughter and frolicking from many distinguished ladies, and the assembly sojourns when “liveried lackeys, carrying silver trays, brought in dainty

refreshments, which acted like oil poured on troubled waters. And patient philanthropy blushed” (“A Fin de Siècle Meeting” 213).

Such an outspoken criticism of the hypocrisy of the various female philanthropic societies (Jewish and non-Jewish) as well as “the scandal-mongers and coffee-sisters of the [Jewish] congregation” in “The Three Kisses” may well explain Sonneschein’s address at the Press Conference at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893.^{vi} In her speech, “Newspaperwomen in Austria,” Sonneschein asserts the need for establishing a women’s magazine, devoted not just to art, literature and fashion, but covering a wide range of topics of female stirring “mutual interest, [and intended for] the sisters dwelling throughout the length and breadth of the country” (“Review of the National Council” 189). In a review published in *The American Jewess* in 1895, Sonneschein endorses Jewish women’s “sisterhood” and countrywide collaboration so as “to further religion, and to cultivate the better knowledge of our ancestral faith ... To unite women in voicing opportunely the questions agitating Judaism and humanity” (“Review of the National Council” 191). Neither a radical feminist, nor a suffragist, Sonneschein calls for female unity and cordiality.

Hostility and disaccord also dominate Sonneschein’s novella “A Modern Miracle.” At the heart of this story stands another vow, this time, unlike the one in “The Three Kisses,” a vow that is broken. Israel Ben-Levy, a seventeen-year-old Jewish youth, living in a little town Zomra in Slovakia, falls in love with Ilma Holsy, a Gentile servant girl. Israel and Ilma never “gave a thought to the old or the faith. Their faith was in each other” (“A Modern Miracle” 2), until the youth’s father sends Israel to Pressburg to learn in a Yeshiva and become a Rabbi. Several years pass and Israel returns to town as a Rabbi, married to a Jewish woman. Ilma, who has been waiting all these years for his return, decided to avenge her former lover: “It was then that the passionate love of the Christian was transformed into boundless hatred for the Jews” (“A Modern Miracle” 3). Ilma finds a refuge in an isolated hut in the woods and soon becomes the town’s fearful witch, brewing draughts for thieves, assassins, and distressed lovers. Meanwhile, Israel and his wife die. Ilma, who can no longer hurt her former lover, turns her revenge at the town’s Jews, looking for an opportunity to destroy Israel’s father, the town’s Rabbi, his

grandson (Israel's son), and the whole community. Consequently, Ilma forcefully retains a young Gentile girl in her hut and spreads a blood libel, claiming the girl was kidnapped and killed by the Jews who, for their Passover rituals, need "Christian blood that ascends straight to Jehovah's nostrils" ("A Modern Miracle" 8). Ilma plots to poison all the bread loaves Jews will buy the day after Passover, thus whipping out the whole community. Eventually, the plot is discovered, and the Jewish community is saved owing to the Rabbi's resourceful action of extending Passover for another day, thus preventing the sale of the poisoned bread.

The novella, besides being another "ghetto-story"^{vii} or one more "blood-libel tale,"^{viii} has much wider political and socio-economic implications in the context of Sonneschein's work and in the framework of the Zionist movement's activity at the time. Being a fervent Zionist and social leader, Sonneschein firmly believed that European Jews must immigrate to Palestine and to leave behind Ghetto life, anti-Semitic blood libels, enduring persecution and economic hardships. Notably, Sonneschein participated in the first and second Zionist Congress.^{ix} In 1889, she was first introduced by her nephew to a prominent journalist, Theodore Herzl. According to Carole S. Kessner, "because of her association with Theodor Herzl, Rosa became a committed Zionist — not a particularly popular stance among Reform Jews in the 1890s"^x (Kessner 329). In July 1897, a month before the first Zionist Congress took place, Sonneschein published in *The American Jewess* an article entitled "Anti-Semitism and Zionism," in which enthusiastically supports Herzl's endeavor to bring Jews back to Israel. "Dr. Herzl," she writes, "the most notable leader of this movement [Zionism], is an enthusiast, an organizer, orator, author and poet. It is he who has been most actively engaged in awaking in the Jewish heart the long-cherished hope of a return to Palestine" ("Anti-Semitism and Zionism" 156). In the same article and in several others, Sonneschein explains and justifies the importance of the Zionist dream, especially since Jews in Europe, and especially those living in Eastern Europe, have been persecuted for hundreds of years. She also opposes those who contended that Eastern European Jews, when immigrating to America or Argentina, might improve their socio-economic status and might attain freedom and well-being. Moreover,

while many American Jews believed that donating to various charitable societies aimed at financially supporting the Jewish newcomers from Russia would suffice in solving the latter's hardships, Sonneschein held quite unpopular ideas, presuming that such Jews would be better off in Palestine. "What is the life of the poor Russian Refugee in America?," asks Sonneschein, and then replies: "For the most part those Russian Jews are more wretched than they have been under Russian tyranny. They are strangers in a strange land and outcasts among their own people. In their self-created Ghetto they work hard and incessantly in poverty, hunger and dirt" ("Anti-Semitism and Zionism" 158).

In her article "Zionism," published in March 1898, Sonneschein claims that "Zionism is today an economic measure – a necessary move to find a home for persecuted Israel" ("Zionism" 271). In the same article, she condemns the American Reform Jewry (though she considers herself a Reform Jew) for obstructing the way of Jews to Palestine since the former, in her opinion, are afraid that Israel will enforce Orthodox Judaism. In a series of rhetorical questions, such as, "Where is the Jew who will blame a Jew for living like a Jew?," Sonneschein passes harsh judgment on the hypocrisy of her Reform associates who, on the one hand, seemingly promote liberal social and religious ideas and advocate the establishment of various benevolent societies aimed at supporting Jewish refugees. On the other hand, ironically, while busying themselves with the question of which stream in Judaism will dominate in Israeli society they fail to see the larger picture of the Jews' suffering and persecution both in Europe and in America.

In another article, also entitled "Zionism," published in September 1898, a few days before the gathering of the second Zionist Congress, she criticizes "almost the entire American Jewish press [that] flanked against Zionism, almost the entire American Jewish pulpit antagonized it" ("Zionism" 6). In addition, she voices several issues that may impede the Zionist movement's success, one of which being the intermarriage of Max Nordau: "Dr. Herzl will this time hold a much more difficult position than last year [during the first Zionist Congress in 1897]. Nordau's intermarriage has undoubtedly implanted distrust among the masses, and

the nimbus of a latter-day Messiah has ceased to glorify the head of that leader" ("Zionism" 5).

Both in her essays and in fiction, Sonnenschein, though a liberal Jew belonging to the Reform Movement, unmistakably opposes intermarriages between Jews and Gentiles. Nordau's intermarriage to a Danish woman was, according to Sonnenschein, a barrier to the former's recognition as a Zionist leader. In another essay entitled "The American Jewess," published in 1898, when describing the modern Jewish woman, Sonnenschein appreciatively declares that the American Jewess is

untrammelled by religious ceremonies and free from superstition. No intellectual despotism crushes her independent thought. She prefers to be a part and parcel of humanity rather than a chattel of her religion. Nevertheless, she is loyal to her faith and race, and is not favorably disposed to intermarriage. ("The American Jewess" 207)

In her fiction, the dangers of intermarriage are even more apparent than in her journalistic work. In "A Modern Miracle" the projected, though later annulled marriage between the Gentile Ilma and the Jewish Israel almost destroys the entire Jewish community of Zorma. In "Jew and Magnate," intermarriage is presented as a problematic venture, probably since it is based on a Jewish wife's betrayal of her virtuous Jewish husband and her subsequent marriage with a Gentile. The story depicts the extremely beautiful Lena Lehman, "one of the handsomest and most graceful brides seen in the city of E ... six years later the mature woman fairly dazzled the eyes that beheld her rich and radiant beauty" ("Jew and Magnate" 3), who at the age of seventeen marries her cousin Felix Costa, a loving husband and a honorable member of the local Jewish community. Unfortunately, the marriage does not yield children. At one of the society balls, held in the vicinity, Lena falls in love with the local Magnate, the rich and powerful Hungarian Baron Jokai Teloscy, who reciprocates her love. Their love is so consuming that "once brought together, [they] seemed to melt and fuse their affluence of affection into a wealth of love ... The rich resources of their heart had never been used by either" ("Jew and Magnate" 3). When discovering his wife's exchange of letters with the Baron, Felix Costa refuses to take part in a duel proposed by his rival. Instead, he visits the town's Rabbi who, after lengthy religious

deliberations, agrees to annul Felix and Lena's marriage. Felix, a righteous man, is not willing to destroy Lena's reputation. Hence, he tells the Rabbi that childlessness is the reason for their divorce. The Rabbi's condition for consenting to the divorce is Felix's promise to remarry, a promise that is soon fulfilled. The turning point of the story is brought up in the final paragraph: "There is a good deal in a name, if bestowed with a purpose. The baby heir of the vast estate of the Toloscy's is just now able to pronounce his full name, Felix Costa de Teloscy" ("Jew and Magnate" 7). In an ironic twist, the son of Felix Costa and his new Jewish wife, Charlotte Lesser, become the heirs of the title and the state of the Hungarian count and Lena, Felix's former wife, who converted to Catholicism upon marrying the Count, as the second marriage of Lena to the Count does not yield children.

The narrator suggests that intermarriage guarantees neither happiness, nor progeny. Lena, though in love with the Count, has been through tremendous suffering for breaking her marital vows to Felix while Felix is rewarded when marrying a young and beautiful Jewish wife who bears him a son. In addition to implying that "Biblical Justice" or "Poetic Justice" is at play, the narrator comments on the possible setbacks of intermarriage. In spite of her tolerant views expressed in numerous editorials in *The American Jewess*, where Sonnenschein advocates women's intellectual and professional progress and articulates keen praise of the "New Woman," her disapproval of intermarriage remains intact. It may be assumed that Sonnenschein, a daughter of a renowned Rabbi, Hirsch Baer Fassel, and the wife, though later a divorcée, of Rabbi Solomon Sonnenschein, the rabbi of congregations at Warasdin, Prague, New York City, and the Congregation Temple Israel in St. Louis, does not dare to challenge traditional Jewish views pertaining to intermarriage.

It may also be speculated that Rosa's divorce, at that time a rare and disreputable affair that attracted lots of negative rumors, prevented her from expressing nonconformist views.^{xi} Rosa, though quite certainly abused by Solomon, as testified by her grandson,^{xii} agreed to divorce the former without receiving alimony, probably since she did not want to involve her four children in a scandalous divorce. Paradoxically, however, as Martha Baker contends, Rosa, "an outrageous cigar-smoking radical

who generated spicy gossip” (Baker 1), who traveled around the world and publicly articulated progressive political, economic, and social assertions pertaining to the rights of women, immigrants and the poor, was reluctant to oppose patriarchally-governed Jewish religious authorities, both with regard to intermarriage and to her own rights as a divorcee.

Sonneschein’s ambivalence or confusion regarding the rights of women and feminism is apparent not only in her fiction, but also in many of her editorials and articles. For instance, on the one hand, she urges women to observe *Shabuoth* “with true religious fervor” because it is the only Jewish holiday that regards women as men’s equivalents. On the other hand, in the same article, she laments that “every woman prefers to be the queen of the home than a slave to business, but, unfortunately many men force women to become bread winners” (“The Editor’s Desk” 102-103). Then, in another editorial, dated November 1897, she instructs working women to demand the same salaries as men for performing the same job, claiming that “female wage-earners alone are to blame for fact that they receive wages lower than men,” since they do not demand equal pay, thus “reduc[ing] the value of their own skill ... becoming the dreaded and disliked competitors of men” (“Editorial” 93). Paradoxically, while fervently supporting working women, Sonneschein critiques “brainy women” or “college-bred girls” who study in order “to ape man” and who “in the effort to imitate masculine modes they successfully maneuver to lose valuable and fascinating femininity; thus repelling their own sex, without attracting the other” (“Editorial” 555). It is clear that if women are to demand the same wages as their male counterparts, they need education, so why does she censure “college-bred girls”?

It seems that Sonneschein often promotes contradictory agendas – her zealous Zionism often clashes with Reform Movement’s opposition to Zionist vision. Her enthusiastic support of the “New Woman” disagrees with more traditional roles she assigns to women, as reflected by emphasizing women’s place as homemakers and model mothers. Mothers, she explains, have a duty to prepare their daughters for motherhood, the most dignified task of women: “To be childless is a misfortune, for any married woman to want no children is a crime, sooner or later punished by the retributive justice of outraged nature” (“Editorial” 99). Regarding

women's employment outside the home sphere, Sonneschein writes: "[A] woman must live? She works to live and whether it impairs her moral or physical nature or not the battle must be fought. Few are the women who fight such battles for pleasure or pastime" ("The Woman Who Talks" 52). Again, Sonneschein contradicts herself; she praises women who choose to work for the benefit of their communities, women who participate in political activities, and women (like herself) who are engaged in literary, political, and journalistic endeavors, thus greatly contributing both to their individual and communal progress. On the other hand, she maintains that there are hardly any women who enjoy their work. It seems that "feminism" for Sonneschein does not exist as a movement aimed at liberating women from patriarchal oppression or at promoting women's self-development. Instead, by romanticizing lower-class women's existence, she seems to appreciate women's liberation only when a woman needs to support herself economically in the absence of a male provider.

Moreover, while Sonneschein (in her short stories "A Modern Miracle" and "Between Two Worlds" as well as in her essay "Anti-Semitism and Zionism") blames the "old world" (Europe) for its intolerable anti-Semitism, and, conversely, in several editorials praises America for its tolerance toward Jews, in some of her short stories, as is the case with "Engaged Not to Be Married" and "Between Two Worlds," she describes harsh anti-Semitic sentiments of Americans toward Jews, including references to such centuries-old common racial stereotypes such as "the Jewish Nose," which is callously ridiculed by the elite members of American society. How can these apparent ambiguities in Sonneschein's work be explained?

There is obviously no clear-cut answer to this question, but several assumptions can be made about such inconsistencies. The last two decades of the nineteenth century brought sweeping social, economic, and ideological changes worldwide, which made this era a confusing moment for all intellectuals, artists, and writers, since a variety of traditional values have been shattered. Furthermore, we should not forget that as a Jew living in Europe, Sonneschein definitely was exposed to, and even probably affected by, anti-Semitic sentiments. Her absorption as a new immigrant in America (being at the same time a foreigner, a Jew, and a

female artist, hence, making her thrice “the Other”) might have also been paved with hardship, thus contributing to her unsettled standpoints. Additionally, Sonneschein’s conflicting ideology might be explained by religious confusion caused by her exposure (at her father’s home) to the practices of Conservative Judaism while her husband, Rabbi Solomon Sonneschein, adhered to Reform Judaism. Finally, Sonneschein’s inconsistent views with regard to feminism and the role of women at the fast-changing American society might be better explained when relating to some biographical details. Sonneschein, an obedient daughter, married at the age of seventeen, after her father, in a quite liberal gesture at that time “permitted her to reject the first two marriage proposals that he suggested to her when she was sixteen. He did tell her, however, that he would draw the line the third time ... The third choice, insisted Rabbi Fassel, was to be final” (Kessner 326).

Unluckily, “the third choice was ... by far the worst of the three,” Rosa later told her grandson, David Loth (“Notes on the Marital Discord”). During the first four years of her marriage, she bore three children, the fourth being born five years later in the States. As a mother of four young children and a full-time Rebbitzin, an occupation that usually involved deep involvement in the community’s matters, Sonneschein found it hard to pursue her literary or creative career, which might explain her ambiguity and inconsistencies when referring to issues pertaining to women’s liberation and feminism. Noteworthy is that the onset of Sonneschein’s literary and journalistic career coincides with her separation from Solomon and with the period when her children were either in their late teens or older. Thus, seemingly, for her, the idea of combining motherhood and an artistic endeavor seemed unattainable.

As its title indicates, Sonneschein’s short story “Between Two Worlds” amply exemplifies some of the above-mentioned conflicting notions present in her editorials and articles, this time, however, depicted in a fictional work. The plot moves from New York City to a steamer crossing the Atlantic to Europe and concludes in New York City. “Between Two Worlds” tells a story of a wealthy and beautiful American widow, Mrs. Alwood, a “leader among the Four-Hundred of New York, who, though democratic in principle, believe in blue blood as thoroughly

as does the ancient nobility of Europe” (145) and her five-year-old son, Freddy. In the following scene, while on a steamer to Europe, the little boy is lost. The anxious mother approaches a sympathetic man who, when noticing her distress, immediately sets to find the lost boy. The man turns to be a Jewish American engineer, Mr. Bamberg, traveling to Prague to visit his elderly mother whom he has not seen for many years. Mrs. Alwood, her female cousin, and especially little Freddy befriend Mr. Bamberg, who throughout the whole journey becomes a sort of surrogate father for the little boy. The story moves to Prague, to the house and neighborhood of the elderly Ms. Bamberg, a widow who decided to remain in Europe, rather than joining her son in America. The houses on Breite Gasse Street in Prague

tell[s] of human wretchedness and persecution; for they are of the Ghetto, which the Nemesis of the time has given as an abode to the descendants of the common people who so unmercifully persecuted the former inhabitants; today the scum of Prague lives in the densely built-up old Ghetto of the Jews ... But some of the wealthiest Jewish families despite these surroundings, still dwell in the old homesteads. (“Between Two Worlds” 146)

The grim description of the Jews’ former persecution and of the depleting Ghetto is suddenly enlivened by the narrator’s unanticipated assertion that at present, the Jews who remained in the neighborhood feel that “the flag of tolerance and freedom [is] waving” (“Between Two Worlds” 146). Again, Sonnenschein’s description is contradictory. While she acknowledges the European Jews’ persecution and suffering, she optimistically suggests that anti-Semitism belongs to the past. At the same time, as mentioned above, she enthusiastically supports Jews’ emigration to Palestine, considering Eastern European anti-Semitism an incurable disease. All at once, the tale may be considered as one belonging to the then popular genre of “Ghetto stories,” but also differing from it.^{xiii} Like many “Ghetto-stories,” Sonnenschein describes the Jews’ bleak past and provides minute details about their daily lives. Moreover, as in many such stories, the tale romanticizes and nostalgizes the Jewish bygone communal life. On the other hand, while the “Ghetto-stories” genre is often employed to emphasize the difference between the harsh anti-Semitism

Jews were subjected to in present-day Europe and the liberal atmosphere they benefited from in their adoptive land, America, in Sonneschein's tale, European anti-Semitism is a thing of the past. It surprisingly turns out, when reading the anti-Semitic portrayal of Jews in "Engaged Not to Be Married," that some well-educated and seemingly liberal Americans are heavily prejudiced against Jews. The Jews are satirized, laughed at, and are depicted by Miss Merrell, Mrs. Alwood's cousin, as plotting to "Judaize the [whole] world" ("Between Two Worlds" 155). According to this young and, in her words, broadminded woman, the Jewish

husbands deal in diamonds, and the wives bedeck themselves with them. Even their infants sport the precious stone, and methinks it grows with them, for I have often observed the heavier a Jewish woman is the heavier are her diamonds. ("Between Two Worlds" 154)

Mrs. Alwood is not less prejudiced when claiming that Cleopatra's fame is exaggerated and her "beauty is as much a myth as Israel's mission" ("Between Two Worlds" 154). The comment is even more alarming, since the poisonous arrows are not directed at particular Jewish women, but towards the whole Jewish nation. This anti-Semitic remark reflects a deep-seated stereotypical stance toward Jews, disturbingly articulated by apparently educated and advanced Americans.

Upon discovering that Mr. Bamberg is a Jew, both women are astonished, but do not retract, considering Bamberg a case when "the rule [with regard to Jews' avarice and vulgarity] is only proven by the exception" ("Between Two Worlds" 154). The journey ends tragically when the steamer crashes, causing the death of more than two hundred passengers, Miss Merrill being one of them. Mr. Bamberg succeeds in pushing Mrs. Alwood to the last boat, instead of jumping in and saving himself. In the last effort to bravely save Mrs. Alwood's little boy, Freddy, both the man and the boy die, missing the last lifeboat. The widow's grief is evidently inconsolable, but her gratitude to Bamberg for his selfless heroism makes her leave New York several months after the disaster and travel to Prague to meet Mr. Bamberg's mother, to whom Mrs. Alwood shows great kindness. As a widow and a mother who has recently lost her own son, the compassionate Mrs. Alwood does not tell

the elderly woman about the latter's son's death. Instead, she acts as the son's messenger, bringing the elder lady flowers and money from her son. When back to America, Mrs. Alwood sends money and letters to old Mrs. Bamberg on a monthly basis, pretending these letters are set by the latter's deceased son.

When read in the context of the anti-Semitic prejudice, expressed by Mrs. Alwood and her cousin before they got acquainted with the noble and selfless Bamberg, this sentimental and tragic tale suggests that stereotypes, though deeply-rooted, may be eradicated if Jews and Gentiles get to know each other better. Stereotypes, the narrator suggests, derive from ignorance and lack of rapport between people. The story's ending, despite being tremendously agonizing, holds some hope that human goodness and compassion may bridge the gaps which were artificially created by religion, nationalism, ignorance and prejudice.

Rosa Sonneschein's "Between Two Worlds," like some of her other tales and editorials, clearly points to the confusion the writer experienced as a transition figure. Rosa moved to America as a young woman, but could not forget her European roots and hence, she visited her native land at least once a year. She came from a traditional Jewish family, though quite a liberal one, but married a Reform Rabbi whose religious and political credos differed from hers. She was a passionate Zionist at a time when many American Jews overtly opposed the Zionist movement. In some of her editorials, she promoted feminist views demanding equal pay for women and challenging the patriarchal governance in synagogues. She also advocated Jewish women's equal participation in prayers and religious ceremonies. Furthermore, one of the major goals of *The American Jewess* was to promote talented but often less known female writers and poets. On the other hand, she encouraged women to stay at home and be model housewives and mothers at the expense of personal development and professional fulfillment. Nevertheless, in her private life, Rosa did not comply with the restrictions she advocated for other women; she was a divorcée, smoke cigars, and when still married, she was often seen with male escorts at public venues. Moreover, she led a successful career outside home and frequently traveled alone to Europe.

Nevertheless, we should not forget that Rosa Sonneschein was a pioneer both in her roles as a speaker for women's rights and as an editor of the first Jewish journal addressed to women and concerned with burning political, economic, and social issues relevant to women. In spite of the inconstancies present in her rich oeuvre, she definitely was a harbinger of liberalism, equality, social change and, no less significantly, of Jewish national pride and Zionism.

Notes:

ⁱ According to Hess et al., in their Introduction to *Nineteenth-Century Jewish Literature: A Reader*, the "Ghetto story" was a predominantly Jewish version of the village folk tale genre. Featuring habitual Jewish life in the past in great detail made the Ghetto seem an "otherworldly, fantastical place" (Hess et al. 15).

ⁱⁱ Miriam Falk's vow may remind the reader of the vow made by the Biblical Hannah. Hannah, a barren wife of Elkanah, has been praying for years for a child. Like Miriam Falk, she prayed, fasted and observed all Jewish traditions, but all actions were to no avail. During her last visit to the temple in Shiloah, Hannah made a heartbreaking vow – if a baby boy is born, he will be sent to Eli, the high priest, to become a man of God: "And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the LORD, and wept sore. And she vowed a vow, and said, O LORD of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the LORD all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head" (*English Standard Version, The Book of Samuel* 1.10-11).

ⁱⁱⁱ According to Meir Soloveichik, in the picture painted by the *Midrash*, the Jewish mother emerges as the savior of the Jewish family. Here, too, we see the fundamental connection that the sages drew between motherhood and Jewish continuity. Jewish women are depicted as keepers of the most basic trust, that of preserving and continuing Jewish life from one generation to the next (Soloveichik 107).

^{iv} The great significance of the vow and the grave consequences, if it is not kept, are shown by the fact that a whole tractate of the *Talmud*, consisting of eleven chapters in the *Mishnah* and ninety-one folios in the *Gemara*, is devoted to the topic. In *Deuteronomy* 23:21, it is stated that "When thou shalt vow a vow unto the Lord thy God, thou shalt not slack to pay it: for the LORD thy God will surely require it of thee; and it would be sin in thee."

^v The term "Four Hundred of New York" was coined by Samuel Ward McAllister in 1892. McAllister, who considered himself as a connoisseur of the New York society, published an article in the *New York Times* entitled "The Only Four Hundred," in which he listed the richest and most influential people in that City. The list served as guidelines for New York City's *salonnières* and society women

when inviting guests, but elicited criticism from intellectuals and writers, such as O. Henry.

^{vi} The National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) was founded following the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, where Sonneschein delivered her speech, “Newspaperwomen in Austria.” Sonneschein enthusiastically supported the establishment of NCJW and her journal, *The American Jewess*, frequently reported about its activities. It should be noted that in 1879, Sonneschein founded in St. Louis what is considered to be the first Jewish women society, *The Pioneers*, mainly aimed at discussing intellectual and literary subjects.

^{vii} According to Kenneth H. Ober, “The German Jewish Ghetto story (a fixed term for this literature, although most of the examples are actually set in East European *shtetls*), defined generally as a short story (sometimes, but rarely, a novel) written by a Jew, realistically describing personally experienced Ghetto or *shtetl* life during the period roughly from the middle of the nineteenth century until the First World War, enjoyed a widespread popularity not only among Jewish readers, but also among non-Jewish ones, for the latter of whom, clearly, they were primarily written” (Ober 71).

^{viii} A “Blood libel” is “a term now usually understood to denote the accusation that the Jews — if not all of them, at all events certain Jewish sects — require and employ Christian blood for purposes which stand in close relation to the ritual, and that, in order to obtain such blood, they commit assault and even murder” (Richard Gottheil, Hermann L. Strack, and Joseph Jacobs. “Blood Accusation.” *Jewish Encyclopedia*. New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1901–1906. Web. 10 Apr. 2020).

^{ix} One hundred seventy-seven delegates participated in the First Jewish Zionist Congress held in August 1897, seventeen of whom were women. Rosa Sonneschein was one of them. Female participants could attend the various meetings but were not allowed to vote. Women gained full membership and voting rights a year later, at the second Zionist Congress. “*Zionist Congress: First Zionist Congress and Basel Program*.” Web. 18 Oct. 2019.

^x According to Berel Wein, the most ardent opponents of Zionism were the Reform Jews who feared that Zionism may compromise their stance as good Americans, good French, good Englishmen, etc., since the local population might accuse them of dual loyalty. <https://www.jewishhistory.org/political-zionism/> Web. 19 Oct. 2019.

^{xi} On September 5, 1892, *The New York Times* reported about the Sonnescheins’ scandalous divorce, writing as follows: “Something over a year ago a sensational story got into the papers involving a rabbi and a beautiful blonde widow. All the rabbis in town [Saint Louis] joined in demand for the publication of the name of the rabbi, and it was made quite plain that Sonneschein was meant. Shortly afterwards he resigned his charge here and went to Europe, and it was stated at the time that he never intended to return to St. Louis. His wife did not go. Soon after a report reached here that he was in an asylum in Germany for some mental trouble. This was denied and foreign papers received here contained glowing

accounts of lectures delivered by him. Now comes the announcement that on his arrival here suit of absolute divorce will be entered on the grounds of desertion. Mrs. Sonneschein is visiting friends in Chicago. It is said she will file across suit there. Mrs. Rosa Sonneschein is one of the most beautiful women even in St. Louis and is highly cultured. She has literary talent and has written several short stories that have brought her more than local fame" (*The New York Times*, Sept. 5, 1892, 5).

^{xii} Solomon Sonneschein studied in Boskowitz, Moravia, where he received his rabbinical diploma. Later he studied in Hamburg and at the University of Jena, where he obtained his Ph.D in 1864. However, apparently, despite the university education he retained, as his grandson, David Loth, later put it, "a peasant coarseness that no amount of exposure to cultivated society ever completely eradicated" ("Notes on the Marital Discord of Solomon and Rosa Sonneschein" 3).

^{xiii} According to Kenneth H. Ober, "authorial attitudes range from the serene, nostalgic, and sentimental through the comical or whimsical to the negative, pessimistic, and almost brutal. The danger inherent in the last-named viewpoints is, of course, that they tend to provide the anti-Semites with ready ammunition. That such was not the intent of the authors goes without saying; every one of these writers was and remained a devout Jew" (Ober 70).

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