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“Sacred Songs Popular Prices”: Secularization in *The Jazz Singer*

Jeffrey Knapp

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The Jazz Singer is the archetypal narrative of secularization in American film (fig. 1).¹ Yet recent criticism has largely ignored the question of secularization and concentrated on the movie's treatment of assimilation instead. To a certain extent, *The Jazz Singer* encourages its viewers to substitute one issue for the other; as the title card reads, “Jakie Rabinowitz had become Jack Robin—the cantor's son, a jazz singer,” as if the process of secularization were no different from the process of assimilation. But Jakie's twin choices of an Anglo-Saxon name and a secular career are parallel, not identical, modifications of the life his father had hoped Jakie would lead. And neither choice amounts to the more drastic form of self-change that film scholars have usually said Jakie embraces: conversion. By relegating secularization to the status of an assimilationist subplot in *The Jazz Singer*, assimilating secularization to assimilation, recent criticism not only misjudges the relative importance of both issues in the film, it also simplifies them both, as problems in the film and as concerns in modern U.S. culture generally.

This reductiveness is hard to perceive in scholarship of such sophistication and power as the two most influential accounts of *The Jazz Singer*: Michael Rogin's *Blackface, White Noise* (1996) and Linda Williams's *Playing the Race Card* (2001). Rogin claims that his analysis of “the Hollywood Melting Pot” was “inspired” by “a single image” from *The Jazz Singer*, the movie's

1. For the many remakes of *The Jazz Singer*, see Krin Gabbard, “The Ethnic Oedipus: *The Jazz Singer* and Its Remakes,” *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago, 1996). Revealingly, Gabbard's description of *The Jazz Singer* as “a uniquely American template for dealing with Oedipal, ethnic, and racial issues” omits the question of secularization (p. 36).



FIGURE 1. An advertisement for *The Jazz Singer* in *American Hebrew*, 14 October 1927.

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final shot: “Al Jolson, born Jakie Rabinowitz in *The Jazz Singer* and reborn as Jack Robin, singing ‘My Mammy’ in blackface to his immigrant Jewish mother.” How could blackface, Rogin asks, “be a rite of passage from immigrant to American?” His answer is that blackface buries Jolson’s Jewishness under the mask of “another American pariah group” and thus transforms the marks of the Jew’s unassimilation into a fiction: “Jack Robin plays a person of color instead of being confused for one. By painting himself black, he washes himself white.”² Williams questions the completeness of the assimilation that Rogin associates with Jolson’s or Jack’s or Jakie’s blackface. While agreeing with Rogin that blackface in *The Jazz Singer* amounts to an “appropriative identification” with African Americans, who are otherwise largely excluded from the film, Williams points out that Jakie’s impersonation does not merely hide his unassimilation; on the contrary, the first scene of his “blacking up . . . trigger[s] the first explicit articulation of Jakie’s Jewishness to Mary, his gentile girlfriend.”³ Jakie’s blackface may be unconvincing as an expression of solidarity with African Americans, but it nevertheless enables him to express a racialized “sense of hurt and longing,” which Jolson himself claimed to share with African Americans (*PR*, p. 158).⁴ For Williams, Jakie’s closing “Mammy” song in particular bespeaks not only “the triumph of assimilation” but also the “loss” attending this triumph: when Jakie sings “Mammy I’m a-comin’, Oh God I hope I’m not late! / Mammy, look at me! Don’t you know me? I’m your little baby!” Williams hears “the wailing call” of the over-assimilated Jew, “a son who has wandered too far” from home (*PR*, p. 154).⁵

2. Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley, 1996), pp. 4–5, 90, 102; hereafter abbreviated *BW*. Rogin’s “Blackface, White Noise: The Jewish Jazz Singer Finds His Voice” first appeared in *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Spring 1992): 417–53.

3. Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton, N.J., 2001), p. 149; hereafter abbreviated *PR*. We briefly glimpse one African American in the film. The first time we see Mary perform, we watch her from the wings, where Jack is standing beside Mary’s African-American maid.

4. Jolson claimed that whenever he sang “Mammy” he always had “a picture in my mind of a black boy and his life story. . . . A southern Negro boy who has found life a bitter and terrible tragedy, who has been broken, abused, and who is down and out without a ray of hope left” (quoted in Herbert G. Goldman, *Jolson: The Legend Comes to Life* [New York, 1988], p. 115).

5. Susan Gubar agrees with both Rogin and Williams. “What better way for a ‘dark’ Hebrew to employ in demonstrating his not-blackness than by putting on blackface as a spectacularly theatrical act?” she asks. But “obviously,” she adds, “the black and white faces of Jack emphasize his self-division, his divided loyalties, his sense of doubleness or duplicity.” What’s more, “Jewish guilt . . . drips from this melodramatic plot, splashing over in its typical excess onto the plight of the black who is not as free as the Jew to make all these profitable compromises of assimilation” (Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* [New York, 1997], pp. 69, 72–73). Peter Stanfield also agrees with Rogin that “in *The Jazz Singer*, blackface does indeed act to produce an ersatz whiteness which invites European immigrants to measure their recently acquired status as Americans and citizens of the Republic against the black American Other.” But he anticipates Williams as well when he notes that in Jakie’s first blackface scene with Mary “we see

Neither Rogin nor Williams has much to say, however, about the scene immediately preceding “Mammy,” in which Jakie returns not just to his home but to his synagogue. Faced with the choice of singing for his Broadway audience or for his dying father, Jakie decides to abandon the stage on opening night, which also happens to be the eve of the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. Risking his assimilation along with his career, Jakie dresses himself as a cantor, takes the pulpit, and chants the prayer Kol Nidre. This was the scene that had originally ended both the short story and the hit play upon which *The Jazz Singer* was based; even in the movie, it still counts as the climax to the narrative. Yet the scene fails to register for Rogin and Williams because it fits so poorly into the theory of assimilation they both take for granted. According to Rogin, the aim of *The Jazz Singer* is total integration of the Jew into the “white supremacy” of American society; the film therefore ends, purportedly, with the “conversion” of Jakie, whom we see “giving up his Jewish faith for an American dream” (*BW*, pp. 80, 112). Williams may doubt that assimilation proceeds so cleanly for Jakie, but by treating any sign of partial assimilation in the film as an expression of loss or failure merely, she too imagines that total integration must be the film’s assimilationist goal. How then can Jakie’s success on the popular stage at the end of *The Jazz Singer* be reconciled with his equally histrionic return to his Jewishness only one scene earlier?

At the time *The Jazz Singer* was produced, not all theorists of assimilation viewed partial integration as a sign of failed Americanization; some saw it as the desired outcome of the process. In a 1924 address at Temple Emanuel that was reported in the *New York Times*, Rabbi Nathan Krass maintained that the “real meaning of assimilation” does not involve conversion at all. “Assimilation,” Krass argued, “means the taking into one’s soul” of American “political ideals” and “the adoption of the modus vivendi that best expresses these ideals. Assimilation does not mean that each religious group, Jews, Catholics, Protestants, should throw its religion into the ‘melting pot’ and wait patiently for a new religion to emerge. It does not mean that each ethnic group should surrender whatever virtues peculiarly its own it possesses and out of the ‘melting pot’ choose a fused resultant.” Without

not the exuberant and dynamic persona of earlier scenes but a cowered and pathetic figure” (Peter Stanfield, “An Octoroon in the Kindling: American Vernacular and Blackface Minstrelsy in 1930s Hollywood,” *Journal of American Studies* 31 [Dec. 1997]: 411–12). For other critics who find that Rogin’s account of blackface as the “expression of white supremacy” is “far too simplistic” (Mikko Tuhkanen, “Of Blackface and Paranoid Knowledge: Richard Wright, Jacques Lacan, and the Ambivalence of Black Minstrelsy,” *Diacritics* 31 [Summer 2001]: 18), see for example Harold Brackman, “The Attack on ‘Jewish Hollywood’: A Chapter in the History of Modern American Anti-Semitism,” *Modern Judaism* 20 (Feb. 2000): 1–19, and Joel Rosenberg, “What You Ain’t Heard Yet: The Languages of *The Jazz Singer*,” *Prooftexts* 22 (Winter 2002): 11–54; hereafter abbreviated “WY.”

saying so directly, Rabbi Krass implied that total integration would violate one of America's fundamental "political ideals," the separation of church and state. In "our democracy," he continued, which "can best be likened to a symphony orchestra, . . . diverse individualities competing for the common advancement are a greater asset than a fused, colorless, undifferentiated mass. A perfect Jew, a perfect Catholic and a perfect Protestant are three mighty forces for genuine Americanism."⁶

Krass's vision of America as a rainbow coalition of religions where "unity," not "uniformity," is the goal helps highlight the difference between two competing theories of assimilation at work in *The Jazz Singer*. At first, Jakie renounces his Jewishness in order to assimilate; but this attempt at total integration fails. In the end, as the two-part conclusion to the film dramatizes, Jakie opts for Jewishness *and* assimilation; we see him in cantorial and blackface performances, but never again as the neatly integrated Jack Robin. Jakie's tears as he sings both Kol Nidre and "Mammy" may express sorrow at what Joel Rosenberg calls the "irreconcilabilities of American Jewish life" ("WY," p. 45), but his triumph in both performances would also seem to vindicate the ideal of "diverse individualities" that Rabbi Krass defended. By promoting *The Jazz Singer* from its first short-story form and then ultimately starring in the movie version, Al Jolson actively chose such partial assimilation for himself; the movie transformed him into what his biographer Herbert Goldman calls "probably the first man of his faith well known as a Jew and idolized by the American public."⁷ Contemporary reviews repeatedly stressed that *The Jazz Singer* "is virtually the life story of Jolson," who was also the son of a cantor and had also anglicized his name along the way to Broadway fame. One *Los Angeles Times* article in 1929 perceived a doubleness in Jolson—"Asa Yoelson, 'mammy singer'"—that perfectly matched the double ending of the movie.⁸ At Jolson's funeral two decades later, George Jessel recast this doubleness in Rabbi Krass's semi-assimilationist terms: he claimed that Jolson was "the happiest portrait that can ever be painted about an American of the Jewish faith."⁹

6. "Says 'Melting Pot' Is Not For Religion," *New York Times*, 29 Dec. 1924, p. 9.

7. Goldman, *Jolson*, p. 10. For Jolson's support of "The Jazz Singer," see pp. 146–47.

8. "Jolson May Produce Films," *Los Angeles Times*, 6 Oct. 1929, pt. 3, p. 17; see also "Jolson's Life Is Copied," *Los Angeles Times*, 13 Jan. 1928, pt. 2, p. 9. Mordaunt Hall's review of *The Jazz Singer* begins, "In a story that is very much like that of his own life, Al Jolson at Warners' Theatre last night made his screen debut in the picturization of Samson Raphaelson's play 'The Jazz Singer'" (Mordaunt Hall, "The Screen: Al Jolson and the Vitaphone," *New York Times*, 7 Oct. 1927, p. 24). See also "Jolson Turns to Drama," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 Oct. 1927; "Weekly Film Pictorial Section," p. 1; *Los Angeles Times*, 26 May 1927, pt. 2, p. 8; and "Cantor Sings Famous Aria During Film," *Los Angeles Times*, 20 May 1928, pt. 3, p. 17. As Rogin notes, the original souvenir program for the movie stressed "the analogy to Jolson's own life" (*Souvenir Programs of Twelve Classic Movies 1927–1941*, ed. Miles Kreuger [New York, 1977], p. 6); see *BW*, p. 84.

9. "Thousands Mourn Jolson on Coast," *New York Times*, 27 Oct. 1950, p. 30.

So alive is *The Jazz Singer* to the possibility of harmonizing the Jewish Jakie with the American Jakie, rather than suppressing one identity for the other, that the film not only juxtaposes the cantor with the entertainer in its final two scenes but also treats the entertainer as a kind of cantor throughout. Every version of *The Jazz Singer* from short story to play to film insists on this surprising continuity between the professions of the father and the son. In a 1927 article for the weekly *American Hebrew*, Samson Raphaelson, the author of the story and play, claimed that he had taken his inspiration for *The Jazz Singer* from a 1916 performance by Jolson during which Raphaelson was moved to exclaim, “My God, this isn’t a jazz singer. This as a cantor!”

This grotesque figure in blackface, kneeling at the end of a runway which projected him into the heart of his audience, flinging out his white-gloved hands, was embracing that audience with a prayer—an evangelical moan—a tortured, imperious call that hurtled through the house like a swift electrical lariat with a twist that swept the audience right to the edge of that runway. The words didn’t matter, the melody didn’t matter. It was the emotion—the emotion of a cantor.¹⁰

As the passage acknowledges, the connection between cantor and jazz singer is not obvious; if it were, Raphaelson would not have needed an epiphany (“My God!”) to recognize it. But Raphaelson regards the very obscurity of the connection as a sign of its depth, which requires the surface disruption of blackface, “grotesque” blackface, in order to be detected.¹¹ For Raphaelson, that depth is more than racial; it is spiritual too.

Of the three main versions of *The Jazz Singer*, the film is the one that tries hardest to promote Raphaelson’s counterintuitive image of the entertainer as a clergyman. The very first title card of the movie declares, “In every living soul, a spirit cries for expression—perhaps this plaintive, wailing song of Jazz is, after all, the misunderstood utterance of a prayer.” Later, when defending himself against his father’s charge that he has chosen “to debase the

10. Samson Raphaelson, “Birth of ‘The Jazz Singer,’” *American Hebrew*, 14 Oct. 1927, p. 812. Raphaelson’s essay also appears in the movie’s souvenir program; see *Souvenir Programs of Twelve Classic Movies 1927–1941*, p. 14.

11. No character in Raphaelson’s story is conscious of the connection: “How could the old cantor, or, for that matter, Jakie himself, understand that instead of being sinful and self-indulgent, loose and lazy, this grave-eyed boy with the ways of the street was sincerely carrying on the tradition of plaintive, religious melody of his forefathers?” (Samson Raphaelson, “The Day of Atonement,” in *The Jazz Singer*, ed. Robert Carringer [Madison, Wisc., 1979], p. 151; hereafter abbreviated “A”). Similarly, in the preface to his play Raphaelson maintains that the “jazz American . . . doesn’t know he is praying” (Raphaelson, *The Jazz Singer* [New York, 1925], p. 10; hereafter abbreviated JS).

voice God gave him," Jackie insists that "it is as honorable to sing in the theatre as in the synagogue." Indeed, he declares, "My songs mean as much to *my* audience as yours to *your* congregation!" But this assurance of the spiritual meaning in jazz singing is difficult to substantiate on the level of content, as Raphaelson tacitly admits in recalling only the "emotion" that Jolson generated on stage. Conversely, Jackie's denial that he has trivialized his religious inheritance becomes harder to swallow once we learn that the name of his Broadway show is "April Follies." Yet the film remains committed enough to the task of finding the spirituality in entertainment that it tries to spread the glow of piety even over Jackie's careerism. "Would you be the *first* Rabinowitz in five generations to fail your God?" a friend of Jackie's family demands after urging Jackie to chant on the Day of Atonement, to which Jackie responds, "We in the show business have our religion, too—on every day—the *show must go on!*" The near-comic incommensurability of Jackie's religion with his father's suggests how the film's effort to preserve Jackie's Jewishness by finding the cantor in the jazz singer can have the opposite effect of flattening or hollowing out his religion—the sort of colorless fusing that Rabbi Krass feared would result from total integration.¹² But assimilation alone does not produce this homogenizing effect. Jackie might more easily have reconciled being both a jazz singer and a practicing Jew if he did not also feel the burden of sustaining a family tradition of cantorship. The same continuity that made Jolson appear only partially assimilated to Raphaelson—the cantor in the entertainer—also has the power to make Jackie seem over-assimilated—the cantor transformed into the entertainer. In each case, the crux is Jackie's *secularization* of his father's profession.

By "secularization" I mean the process not just of displacing religion but of transforming it to secular use. In *The Jazz Singer*, entertainment appropriates the emotion and mystique of religion just as African-American identity is appropriated by the Jew. The film's intense focus on Judaism, or rather on an invidious characterization of Judaism, actually facilitates this secularization. By presenting its sole representative of formal religion, Judaism, as tribal and primitive, *The Jazz Singer* depicts religion generally as tribal and primitive. For instance, the film introduces Jackie's clergyman father, "Cantor Rabinowitz, chanter of hymns in the synagogue," as a man who "stubbornly held to the ancient traditions of his race." Jackie is not only more modern than his father, whom Jackie says is "of the old world"; he is also more open, dedicated to singing for the gentile as well as the Jew. Even his

12. David W. Stowe also notes how the movie asserts a "moral equivalence . . . between Orthodox Judaism and the secular religion of show business," but he raises no questions about this equivalence (David W. Stowe, *How Sweet the Sound: Music in the Spiritual Lives of Americans* [Cambridge, Mass., 2004], p. 184; hereafter abbreviated SS).

Jewish mother Sara ends up applauding this inclusiveness in him. Echoing his universalist claim that his stage religion is a matter of every day, not just the Sabbath, Sara tearfully exclaims as she watches Jakie perform in blackface, “He’s not *my* boy anymore—he belongs to the whole world now.”¹³ In fact, the expansiveness of Jakie’s singing in comparison to his father’s accomplishes two sorts of secularization at once. First, it makes religion seem an outmoded particular that has justly been superseded by entertainment’s universal; and, second, it lays claim to this supersession by editing out the Christianity that had originally formulated the notion of Judaism as a superseded particular.¹⁴ Although Rogin argues that “anti-Semitism” is the “structuring absence” in *The Jazz Singer*—the cultural force that has been repressed so as to enable Jakie’s total assimilation—the film’s account of the Jews as a stubborn race is classically anti-Semitic (*BW*, p. 89). Christianity, however, has almost as tenuous a hold on the film as African Americans do. There are Christians in the picture, to be sure; the most salient of them is Mary, Jakie’s love interest. Yet, despite the allegorical potentiality of her name, Mary is never shown to *be* Christian. The closest the film comes to identifying her as such is when the equally allegorical-sounding Sara refers to Mary as a “*shiksa*.” The absence of Christianity from *The Jazz Singer*, so complete as to go unremarked in the criticism, may prevent the entertainment that supersedes Judaism in the film from appearing to be in any conflict with Christianity. But this absence also removes Christianity as a potential rival to entertainment for appropriating the pathos and charisma of Judaism. Raphaelson’s odd description of Jolson’s singing as “evangelical” (*JS*, pp. 114–15)—a pointedly inapt characterization of a cantorlike performance—nicely captures both the Christian valence of the spirituality that Raphaelson perceives in jazz singing and the hollowing out of Christianity as well as Judaism that makes jazz singing seem to him capable of counting as spiritual in the first place.¹⁵

13. Rogin anticipates this line of argument: “In blessing Jack’s movement from cantor’s son to jazz singer, Sara sustains his claim that entertainment was the new American religion” (*BW*, p. 96). But Rogin does not elaborate on the sort of religion that *The Jazz Singer* shows entertainment to be, aside from a form of capitalism that supplies audiences with “idols of consumption” (*BW*, p. 97). In a later chapter, Rogin makes a similarly undeveloped assertion about secularization: “*The Jazz Singer* . . . replaced Jewish communal faith with blackface as the New World religion” (*BW*, p. 204). But how does blackface count as the New World religion, and how does this religion of blackface relate to capitalism? Such questions point to the thinness of entertainment in *The Jazz Singer* as an *alternative* to formal religion.

14. Rogin notes the “shift” in the film “from Hebraic particularism to *American* universalism,” but he does not comment on his own substitution of *American* for *Christian* (*BW*, p. 97; my emphasis).

15. Raphaelson also applies the term “evangelical” to cantorlike jazz singing in the 1925 preface (*JS*, p. 10), which was reprinted in the souvenir program for the movie; see *Souvenir Programs of Twelve Classic Movies 1927–1941*, p. 14. Rogin points out that the final shot of the film evokes “Christ on the cross,” and he quotes Zelda Fitzgerald’s comparison of Jolson to Christ (*BW*, p. 111).

The movie's exclusive focus on religion as Judaism cuts two ways, however. While it helps *The Jazz Singer* represent entertainment as the universal to religion's particular, it also highlights the particularity of Judaism as a religion. (By contrast, the film's exploitation of African Americans results in no corresponding emphasis on the particularity of African-American life.) The gentiles in the audience of *The Jazz Singer* learn about cantors, prayer shawls, the Day of Atonement; four times, they see and hear a carefully re-created portion of the Jewish liturgy.¹⁶ "For great numbers of Americans," the historian David Stowe observes, "*The Jazz Singer* was the first popular window into some of Judaism's most sacred rituals" (SS, pp. 178–79). Rosenberg stresses the film's refusal to translate any of its Jewish liturgy for the audience: *The Jazz Singer*, he argues, preserves "the strangeness and opacity of Jewish religious life . . . undiluted" ("WY," p. 15).¹⁷ This lack of translation may seem to keep Judaism in its place, but it also insists, as the otherwise assimilationist Rabbi Krass had done, on the unconvertible distinctness of Judaism. Is the ultimate effect of *The Jazz Singer*, then, to undermine religion or to underscore it? In his contemporaneous review of the film for *Variety*, Sid Silverman labeled *The Jazz Singer* not a secularizing or an assimilationist narrative but "a Jewish mother-son religious story." For Silverman, the memorable ending of the film was the one in the synagogue, not on the stage. "Jolson's audible rendering of 'Kol Nidre,'" he wrote, ". . . will likely make a tremendous impression" on the audiences in "Jewish neighborhoods. . . . Or [on] any audience for that matter, as, after all, anybody's religion demands respect and consideration and when as seriously presented as here, the genuineness of the effort will make everybody listen."¹⁸ Silverman saw no necessary conflict between a particularizing emphasis on Judaism and a universalizing message of respect for "anybody's religion." Jolson himself wavered on this point; although he sanctioned publicity of the fact that he was the son of a cantor, he also distanced himself from the Judaism of *The Jazz Singer* by claiming in a 1927 interview that his "faith in a Supreme Being" did not align him with "any particular religion." At his funeral, however, Jolson's body was dressed in a prayer shawl, which the general public had seen him wear only in the cantor scene of *The Jazz Singer*.¹⁹

16. We see inside the synagogue on four occasions: when Cantor Rabinowitz sings while Jackie decides to run away from home; when Jackie recalls his father's singing while he listens to Cantor Rosenblatt; when Jackie recalls his father's singing while he studies his blackened face in the mirror; and when Jackie himself sings as cantor.

17. However, the souvenir program does end with a score of "Kol Nidre" that prints the lyrics in English as well as Aramaic.

18. Sid Silverman, "The Jazz Singer," *Variety*, 12 Oct. 1927, p. 16.

19. "Jolson Places Pathos First," *Los Angeles Times*, 31 July 1927, pt. 3, p. 13. Goldman comments on the *tallis* at the funeral: "Some thought this was hypocritical; Jolson was never a religious Jew."

2

There is an actual, not just a fictional, clergyman in *The Jazz Singer*. As ads in the fall and winter issues of *American Hebrew* announced, “Cantor Josef Rosenblatt is seen and heard on the Vitaphone during the concert scene in ‘The Jazz Singer.’” Cantor Rosenblatt was counted on to draw more than Jewish audiences to the movie. Ads for the screenings at New York’s Roxy Theater, for instance, gave Rosenblatt fourth billing after Jolson, May McAvoy, who played Mary, and Warner Oland, who played the father.²⁰ At the time, Rosenblatt was one of the most highly regarded vocalists in the country, a singer extolled by Caruso himself. He was also the studio’s first choice to play the part of Jakie’s father. While the newspapers continually remarked upon Jolson’s having served as the real-life inspiration for the character of Jakie, Cantor Rosenblatt seems to have exerted a similarly determinative influence on *The Jazz Singer*. In the original short-story version, “The Day of Atonement” (1922), the cantor father is, like Rosenblatt, a Russian immigrant; his wife refers to him as “Yosele,” which is how Rosenblatt was affectionately known to his admirers; father and son share the initials JR with Rosenblatt; and when Jakie finishes singing Kol Nidre at the end, the presiding rabbi remarks, “Even Rosenblatt, when I heard him in Moscow, didn’t give a ‘Yaaleh’ like this” (“A,” p.165).

Cantor Rosenblatt was almost as celebrated for his faithfulness to the old ways as for his singing. After a March 1918 recital in Chicago, he was approached by the director of the Chicago Opera, Cleofonte Campanini, and offered \$1,000 a performance to sing for the company. When Rosenblatt decided that it was improper for him “as an orthodox Jew to appear upon the operatic stage,” as he informed the *New York Times*, his refusal made news throughout the country.²¹ “In these days of stern materialism,” *Musical America* remarked approvingly, “it seems almost incomprehensible that any one would so recklessly discard gold and glory for a belief, a mere tradition.”²² His scruples about the opera notwithstanding, Rosenblatt had

Others answered that the *tallis* was Al’s way of reaffirming his religious beliefs” (Goldman, *Jolson*, p. 301).

20. I quote from the full-page ad, reproduced at the start of this article, that appeared in the same issue of *American Hebrew* (14 Oct. 1927) as the Raphaelson essay did; the ad also appears in previous and subsequent issues. For the Roxy Theater ads, see the *New York Times*, 27 Mar. 1928, 31 Mar. 1928, and 1 Apr. 1928.

21. “Rabbi Rejects \$1,000 Fee to Sing in Opera,” *New York Times*, 15 Apr. 1918, p. 13.

22. Quoted in Samuel Rosenblatt, *Yossele Rosenblatt: The Story of His Life as Told by His Son* (New York, 1954), p. 146; hereafter abbreviated Y. Rosenblatt’s refusal was not immediate. As he told the *New York Times* on 15 April, he was impressed by Campanini’s guarantee “that I need not remove my beard, nor sing in any performance on either Friday or Saturday, and that he would not ask me to sing any operas that would hurt the feelings of an orthodox Jew.” In a letter to the president of Rosenblatt’s congregation, Campanini maintained that “Mr. Rosenblatt personally

no religious objections to entertainment as such, or to earning money from entertainment. He had been making phonograph records since 1905, dozens of them by the time the soundtrack of *The Jazz Singer* was released in 1927.²³ He had also published his own musical compositions and arrangements. And Rosenblatt often performed commercially outside the synagogue. As his son Samuel, a rabbi, reports in his biography of his father, the cantor's "gesture of renunciation" during the Campanini episode actually caused "his services to be more in demand" than before and "his earning capacity to sky-rocket." Indeed, it "marked *the* turning point in his career" (Y, pp. 150–51, 139). A month after rejecting the Chicago opera, the cantor gave his first concert at Carnegie Hall. While his fame continued to grow, a bad investment led to Rosenblatt's bankruptcy in 1925 and to his performing in venues far less prestigious, but also more popular and lucrative, than concert halls. "News travels like lightning" in "The Day of Atonement" once "Jack Robin—the vaudeville headliner" makes his fateful decision to sing "as cantor at the Hester Street Synagogue" ("A," p. 164). Yet three years after the publication of Raphaelson's story, this seemingly implausible fiction was realized in reverse when the cantor who refused to work with the Chicago opera became a vaudevillian himself.

Rosenblatt's role in *The Jazz Singer* grew in part from his vaudeville popularity. One of his tours took him to Los Angeles, where he signed a contract to appear in *The Jazz Singer* in spring 1927. Samuel Rosenblatt paints a tellingly false picture of this contract in his father's biography. Having declined the offer to play Cantor Rabinowitz, Cantor Rosenblatt assured the film's producers (Samuel claims) that "there isn't enough money in the world to make me profane my sacred calling by putting on an act anywhere." According to Samuel, Yosele agreed only to "sing *Rachem* and several other such non-liturgical Jewish melodies for the Vitaphone production . . . provided he was not photographed" (Y, pp. 289–90). Yet Rosenblatt does in fact appear in the film. (Marc Leavey asked the cantor's grandson why Samuel should "have written otherwise;" the grandson's "response was that in all probability, Rabbi Rosenblatt may never have seen *The Jazz Singer*, as he did not commonly go to the movies.")²⁴ Rosenblatt had already been filmed for

has agreed to this proposition, under the condition that his congregation will allow him to accept." But Rosenblatt subsequently changed his mind, and the president replied, with Rosenblatt's "consent," that "the Rev. Rosenblatt's sacred position in the synagogue does not permit him to enter the operatic stage." By way of clarification, the president added, "We have, however, no objection to his singing at concerts, whether sacred or otherwise" ("Rabbi Rejects \$1,000 Fee to Sing in Opera," p.13).

23. For discographies of Rosenblatt, see Y, pp. 369–71, and *Ethnic Music on Records: A Discography of Ethnic Recording Produced in the United States, 1893 to 1942*, ed. Richard K. Spottswood, 7 vols. (Urbana, Ill., 1990), 3:1472–80.

24. Marc Leavey, website on Al Jolson, www.jolson.org

two now-lost Vitaphone shorts, singing “the secular ‘Omar Rabbi Elosor’ for Vitaphone in the spring of 1927 and ‘Hallelujah’ immediately prior to his work on *The Jazz Singer* in August.”²⁵ But since his vaudeville engagements typically involved singing in a show that included a film, the cantor had effectively been associated with movies from the time he entered vaudeville. In June 1925, for instance, Rosenblatt topped a triple bill at Loew’s State Theater in Los Angeles where the second attraction was an MGM production entitled *The Way of a Girl*, a movie that took its star Eleanor Boardman “into the haunts of metropolitan high life and low life,” including a brawl in city jail with a fellow inmate.²⁶

One might think that Rosenblatt’s professional entanglement with such disreputable material would have proven more difficult for him to reconcile with his religious scruples than the prospect of playing a cantor in *The Jazz Singer* or of appearing on the operatic stage. Yet he continued to tour vaudeville after filming *The Jazz Singer* and after taking a permanent position as cantor in Brooklyn later that same year. Rosenblatt did have his critics, even before his vaudeville career began. At the start of Rosenblatt’s European tour in 1923, the president of the Chazanim Association of England protested that Rosenblatt’s “holding . . . of public concerts at which the recital of prayers is made on a concert platform is degrading” to his “position” (*Y*, p. 235). “In his heart of hearts,” Rosenblatt’s son professed, “and as he later confided to some of his interviewers,” the cantor “agreed with his critics” (*Y*, p. 267). Second thoughts are apparent in Rosenblatt’s claim to the *Los Angeles Times* in 1928 that he had appeared and sung in *The Jazz Singer* only out of “friendship for Al Jolson.”²⁷ But for the most part Rosenblatt tried to strike a balance between his commercial and religious interests. As he explained to the *New York Times* in spring 1927 about his upcoming role in *The Jazz Singer*, “He will not play a part in the photoplay. He will merely sing and let himself be photographed for the vocalized records. Later these will be incorporated in the film story.”²⁸ Rosenblatt also declined to dub Kol Nidre for the film; the song he did record, “Yahrzeit,” was secular, modern, and Yiddish.²⁹ In commenting on his Loew’s Theater performances, the *Los*

25. Charles Wolfe, “Vitaphone Shorts and *The Jazz Singer*,” *Wide Angle* 12 (July 1990): 58–78, 67.

26. “Cantor Tenor Is Feature at Loew’s State,” *Los Angeles Times*, 7 June 1925, pt. 3, p. 19. See Reva Clar, “Cantor ‘Yosele’ Rosenblatt in Los Angeles, 1925,” *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly* 13 (Oct. 1980): 34–36.

27. *Los Angeles Times*, 4 May 1928, pt. 1, p. 9.

28. *New York Times*, 13 May 1927, p. 12. As Stowe puts it, Rosenblatt’s “career was a long exercise in triangulating the boundary of the legitimate for a cantor” (*SS*, p. 177).

29. “Vitaphone Doubling,” *Variety*, 7 Sept. 1927, p. 11; also cited in Wolfe, “Vitaphone,” p. 78 n. 29. This was not a scruple that Rosenblatt strictly observed; he often sang Kol Nidre on the vaudeville stage and in records. Spottswood lists Kol Nidre recordings in 1913, 1916–17, 1922, and 1923. See *Ethnic Music on Records*. For a transcription and translation of the song Rosenblatt does sing—Rhea Silberta’s “Yahrzeit”—see “WY,” pp. 23–24. According to Samuel Rosenblatt,

Angeles Examiner reported that “Rosenblatt refuses to let his professional engagements conflict with his religious convictions. No price that managers can offer will induce him to give a performance on Saturday, the Sabbath of his religion.”³⁰ Most conspicuously, Rosenblatt insisted on preserving the distinctness of his orthodox appearance on film and on stage. As David Olivestone observes, he became “a star of the entertainment world of the 1920s, all the while wearing his large black yarmulke and frock coat.”³¹ To assuage any religious anxieties about his commercial work, in other words, Rosenblatt chose only partial integration with his fellow performers and his popular audiences.

According to Rosenblatt’s son the rabbi, these compromises were not simply negative, a way to limit the damage that Rosenblatt’s vaudeville work inflicted on his faith and reputation; rather, they helped the cantor positively advance the cause of Judaism. “The announcements on the billboards that Josef Rosenblatt would not be heard on Friday evening or Saturday matinee, because he was observing his Sabbath, constituted a real *Kiddush Hashem*, a glorification of the Jewish religion,” Samuel claims. “What other vaudevillian would ever have caused *Inside Facts* to expound on the differences, according to the Jewish code, between travel by ship or train on the Sabbath?” (*Y*, p. 262). Rosenblatt’s defense of the faith involved more than legal observances. On the set of *The Jazz Singer*, he counteracted the view that he had left the synagogue for the stage by helping to bring the synagogue to the stage. According to the souvenir program for *The Jazz Singer*, “the aid of Cantor Josef Rosenblatt, sweetest singer of modern Israel, was enlisted” to ensure accuracy in the movie’s synagogue scenes.³² To his contemporaries, of course, Rosenblatt’s most compelling work for Judaism was his singing. Thanks to the cantor, wrote a 1918 newspaper reviewer on Rosenblatt’s “first secular concert tour,” “the great American public is being familiarized

Silberta’s “*Yahrzeit*, ending with the words of the hallowed requiem for the dead, *Kaddish*, was a favorite among [Cantor Rosenblatt’s] Yiddish selections” (*Y*, p. 183). Henry Sapoznik claims that Rosenblatt’s song was written by Peretz Sandler (see Henry Sapoznik, *Klezmer! Jewish Music from Old World to Our World* [New York, 1999], p. 119), but “*Yorzheit*” is credited to Silberta in the Warner Brothers studio file (*Jazz Singer*, p. 182), as Rosenberg notes.

30. “Cantor Feature of Week’s Bill,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, 7 June 1925, pt. 5, p. 10; quoted in Clar, “Cantor,” p. 36.

31. David Olivestone, “Standing Room Only: The Remarkable Career of Cantor Yossee Rosenblatt,” *Jewish Action* 64 (Fall 2003): www.chazzanut.com/articles/rosenblatt-2.html

32. *Souvenir Programs of Twelve Classic Movies 1927–1941*, p. 9. The actor and producer Joseph Green, who had a bit part in *The Jazz Singer*, recalled that “when we made the scenes in the synagogue, the Warner brothers, they put their father in charge—he was an elderly gentleman—and Josef Rosenblatt, the cantor, who played himself. So for that day, they refused to use English and all spoke Yiddish on the set. Even the director spoke Yiddish” (Kevin Brownlow, *Behind the Mask of Innocence* [New York, 1990], p. 419).

with the beauty of Jewish melodies” (quoted in *Y*, p. 165). Rosenblatt himself made a similar point in the foreword to his 1928 publication *Selected Recitatives*, where he claimed that he had been “moved” to write and distribute these compositions “by the double impulse of serving the needs of the Jewish Cantor and of demonstrating to the musical world at large that genuine Jewish Chazanuth can still satisfy completely even the refined taste of today.”³³ Ranging between the Jewish world in particular and the musical world at large, especially after the Campanini offer had opened doors for him, Rosenblatt expanded his repertoire to include what his son called “the musical genius of other peoples” (*Y*, p. 152). At Carnegie Hall, for instance, he mixed arias from Verdi, Halévy, and Massenet into a program of “Jewish folksongs and traditional airs of the Jewish faith.”³⁴ Expansiveness was even a distinctive quality of his voice; while noting the restriction that “the great Jewish cantor does not sing on Friday nights or Saturday afternoons,” the *Los Angeles Times* also reported that Rosenblatt “possesses a voice of a range which is said to be greater than that of any living person.”³⁵ His concert and vaudeville tours carried this voice throughout the country; Samuel calculated that, in the first part of 1924 alone, Rosenblatt’s route “covered South Bend, New York and Buffalo in January; Raleigh, Savannah, Jacksonville, Charleston (South Carolina), Miami and Portland (Oregon) in February; and Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Denver in March” (*Y*, p. 248). Above all, the cantor’s singing engagements brought Jewish sacred music to a mixed audience. As Olivestone observes, “No other chazzan has ever attained such nationwide popularity and fame among both Jewish and Gentile audiences as Yossele Rosenblatt, while remaining completely observant and retaining his position at the amud.”³⁶

3

Rosenblatt appears in a pivotal scene a third of the way through *The Jazz Singer*. While on tour with his vaudeville company, and just before learning that he has been hired to perform in a Broadway revue, Jakie walks the streets of Chicago, where Rosenblatt first achieved nationwide fame. He

33. Josef Rosenblatt, *Selected Recitatives by Cantor Josef Rosenblatt For the Synagogue* (New York, 1928), www.chazzanut.com/rosenblatt

34. “Cantor’s First Concert,” *New York Times*, 20 May 1918, p. 9. Sapoznik is thus mistaken when he claims that Rosenblatt turned down the Chicago offer “because he considered the singing of secular music incompatible with the role of the cantor” (Sapoznik, *Klezmer!* p. 85).

35. “Cantor Tenor Is Feature at Loew’s State.” See also *Y*, pp. 237–38.

36. Olivestone, “Standing Room Only.” Olivestone’s “nationwide” understates Rosenblatt’s fame. He was well known in Russia and Germany before he immigrated to America. He toured Europe in 1923, and, as the *New York Times* reports on 22 August 1923, he was offered and refused a world tour. Rosenblatt died in 1933 while visiting Palestine.

stops before a billboard advertising a “Special Matinee Last Chicago Concert Cantor Rosenblatt in Sacred Songs Popular Prices” and decides to see the show (fig. 2). We next see and hear Rosenblatt singing on stage; he is the fourth singer we have encountered in the movie, after the boy Jakie, his father the cantor, and the adult Jakie. We watch from a distance as Jakie joins the audience, and then we see him close up, absorbed by Rosenblatt. The camera moves from Jakie to Rosenblatt to Jakie, just as the soundtrack has moved back and forth between jazz singer and cantor. When the camera returns to Rosenblatt, we realize that Jakie has been reminded of his father because we see Rosenblatt metamorphose into the father, whom Jakie had last heard singing *Kol Nidre* in the synagogue while Jakie gathered his things from the family’s apartment before running away from home.

Neither the secular setting nor the secular music has prevented Jakie from imagining himself inside the synagogue, listening to his father sing. On the contrary, since the assimilated and secularized Jack Robin now attends shows rather than religious services, the only way he can see a cantor is if the cantor too has at least temporarily left the synagogue for the stage.³⁷ Rosenberg describes Jakie’s fantasized image of Cantor Rabinowitz super-



FIGURE 2. Jack Robin reading the billboard for Cantor Rosenblatt’s show.

37. At the time the scene was shot, Rosenblatt had no cantorial position; he had resigned from his Harlem congregation in 1926. See Y, p. 274.

imposed onto Cantor Rosenblatt as a “palimpsest” that displays “a sort of double cantorate—the cantorate of prayer and the cantorate of public entertainment” (“WY,” p. 27).³⁸ This doubleness, we have seen, was already a notable feature of Rosenblatt’s career. Cantor Rosenblatt not only reminds Jack of his father, then; he also prefigures the partial reconciliation between religion and entertainment that Jakie himself will enact by the end of the film.³⁹ At other times *The Jazz Singer* shows us Jakie as a spectator, enjoying the band at Coffee Dan’s or watching Mary dance, but there is no other singer we see him see, no other model for his own act, before Rosenblatt. In the diegesis of the film, Jakie’s father becomes a career model for him through Rosenblatt’s mediation. “According to music critics,” the *Los Angeles Times* reported in 1928, “the voices of Jolson and Rosenblatt closely resemble each other when they sing sacred songs.”⁴⁰ *The Jazz Singer* tries to convince its audience that an entertainer can count as a secular clergyman by first presenting a clergyman as a secular entertainer.

Rosenblatt’s significance for Jakie is of course intensely personal and particular to him. When he decides to watch Rosenblatt’s show, he parts company with a walking companion who has other plans; when he joins the audience, the camera picks him out and focuses on him; when he fantasizes about his father, the movie exchanges a long shot of Rosenblatt for a much closer and therefore more subjective shot of Cantor Rabinowitz (figs. 3–4). But Jakie himself does not focus exclusively on Rosenblatt or his father; he also sees the audience before him, and when Rosenblatt dissolves into the father, Jakie imagines that the audience too has been transformed into the worshipers he used to mingle with at the synagogue. This social dimension to Jakie’s daydreaming underscores the film’s refusal to suppose that there is any necessary conflict between the particularity of Jakie’s reaction to Rosenblatt and a more general application of this response to Rosenblatt’s audience at large. Just as Rosenblatt is a model for Jakie, so Jakie serves as a model for the audience who, thanks to Rosenblatt, can watch and listen to a cantor without having to enter a synagogue.

“Sacred Songs Popular Prices,” the billboard calls Rosenblatt’s show. In staging that show, the movie does little to avoid Cantor Rabinowitz’s charge that such commercialization drastically impoverishes the religious experience: no vestments, altar, liturgy, or choir accompany Rosenblatt on the

38. Rosenberg discusses the Rosenblatt sequence at length; see “WY,” pp. 22–29.

39. Stowe anticipates this point when he argues that Rosenblatt and Jakie each face a similar “dilemma” in the film and solve their problems in similar ways, by becoming “crossover” stars (SS, pp. 177, 184).

40. “Cantor Sings Famous Aria During Film.”



FIGURES 3 AND 4. Cantor Rosenblatt as Jack Robin sees him, an image replaced by Jack's memory of his father Cantor Rabinowitz.

stage. Raphaelson, in a stage direction to his play, characterizes Jakie's cantorlike jazz singing as a *cheapening* of religion:

His rendition is excellent jazz—that is, it has an evangelical fervor, a fanatical frenzy; it wallows in plaintiveness and has moments of staggering dramatic intensity, despite the obvious shoddiness of the words and the music. We are listening to a Cantor in blackface, to a ritual supplication on the stage, to religion cheapened and intensified by the trappings of Broadway. [JS, pp. 114–15]

Although Raphaelson at first maintains that the intensity happens “despite” the shoddiness, his second formulation posits a logical, if paradoxical, relationship between the two phenomena: religion has been “cheapened *and* intensified by the trappings of Broadway,” intensified by the contrasting cheapness of the medium. In the story “The Day of Atonement,” the shoddy trappings belong to the synagogue, and they have the same spiritualizing effect:

The low-hanging rafters of the old synagogue, the cheap, shiny chandeliers of painted gold, the faded velvet hangings on the holy vault where the parchments of the Old Testament stood, the gold-fringed, worn white-silk cloth that covered the stand in the pulpit where he prayed—these called to something surging and powerful in [Jakie], something which made his whole life since his boyhood seem blurred and unreal. [“A,” p. 165]

What catches Jakie's eye in the synagogue are the bare bones of a religion that has faded into merely ritual. But rather than exemplify the hollowing out of faith, as a secularizing critique of them would maintain, these meager remnants inspire Jakie; their cheapness or insufficiency as material correlatives transfers religion from outside to inside, to something surging and powerful *within* him.

Raphaelson's play makes Jakie's jazz singing just as inadequate to his Jewishness and therefore, strangely, just as inspiring. In place of the worn cloth and faded hangings, however, the stage version of *The Jazz Singer* offers a more portable device for stimulating religious emotion. When Raphaelson claims that in experiencing Jakie's performance “we are listening to a Cantor in blackface . . . to religion cheapened and intensified by the trappings of Broadway,” he transforms blackface into the jazz version of the synagogue's shabbiness, the abject outward foil to inward spiritual power (figs. 5–6). The movie too treats blackface this way, as “evangelical” by antithesis. Jakie's first song introduces it as the “Dirty Hands, Dirty Face” of a knee-high boy, a “little devil” in appearance who is actually “an angel of joy.” The movie's



FIGURES 5 AND 6. Jack Robin staring at himself in blackface, an image replaced by his memory of his father in the synagogue.

Rosenblatt scene suggests a further way that the stage could both cheapen and promote religion. In the theater, Cantor Rosenblatt reaches a much broader audience than he ever could in the synagogue, an audience restricted not by their particular beliefs but by their more general ability to pay—and the price of entry to the theater is “popular,” cheap.

Secularization in *The Jazz Singer* may foster the illusion of forward progress from old world to new, where religion is turned into theater. But why, the movie asks, can't theater also turn back into religion? In the film, it is an old-world perspective, the perspective of Jakie's parents, that the past must either continue unchanged or else be changed absolutely. Yet the movie repeatedly exposes claims of irreversible rupture as false apocalypses. After the father whips Jakie for his jazz singing and Jakie runs away, the mother tearfully exclaims, “Our boy has gone, and he is never coming back.” But Jakie does return, of course. At first, his father spurns him anew, this time adding “I never want to see you again,” and the mother repeats her earlier prediction, slightly modifying it to accommodate the fact that it just has been disproven: “He came back once, Papa, but—he'll never come back again.” Yet Jakie returns a second time, and with this homecoming he receives his father's blessing. No less misguided than the mother's prophecy about Jakie is the father's vow to repudiate Jakie; the Kol Nidre that Jakie later sings in his father's place is a prayer to be released from vows.⁴¹ Even the seemingly irreversible rupture of Cantor Rabinowitz's death is mitigated first by Jakie's assumption of his father's cantorship and then by the father's ghostly return to the synagogue, where he blesses Jakie's succession to the altar (fig. 7).⁴²

Discredited prophecies of absolute change are not limited to the movie's old-world Jews, moreover. Jakie's apparently gentile Broadway producer Harry Lee warns Jakie that if he abandons Harry's show on opening night,

41. The awkwardness of justifying a prayer in which the petitioner asks to be released from vows led to the Kol Nidre's being dropped from many Reformed liturgies. The first article in the *American Hebrew* issue that publishes Raphaelson's essay concerns the elimination of “the dry, legalistic, meaningless Kol Nidre” from the Yom Kippur services of the Society for the Advancement of Judaism. As the rabbi for the society declared, the aim was to rid Judaism of “all those elements which cannot stand the test of spiritualized intelligence.” One purported motive for the Kol Nidre that receives special condemnation from the rabbi also has a special resonance for *The Jazz Singer*: “All that talk about it having been recited by the secret Jews to absolve them from their acceptance of Christianity is mere rubbish” (“Dr. Kaplan Eliminates the Kol Nidre on Yom Kippur Eve,” *American Hebrew*, 14 Oct. 1927, p. 809). For texts and translations of the Kol Nidre, of the prayer as chanted in the film, and of Jolson's “mangled” version in the penultimate scene of *The Jazz Singer*, see “WY,” pp. 17–18, 19–20, 36.

42. The continuing presence of the dead in the world of the living is also suggested by the song Rosenblatt sings, “Yahrzeit,” which concerns the Jewish ceremony of remembrance on the yearly anniversary of a death. In Raphaelson's story and play, the mother declares that the face of the father on his deathbed “was white like a *Yahrzeit* candle” (“A,” p. 163.) See also *JS*, p. 111.



FIGURE 7. The ghost of Cantor Rabinowitz blessing Jakie as he chants.

"You'll queer yourself on Broadway—you'll never get another job."⁴³ Yet Harry is soon mollified enough to join Mary in listening reverentially to Jakie's Kol Nidre: "a jazz singer—singing to his God," Mary exclaims (fig. 8). Taking the place of the man and woman we merely glimpsed behind Jakie at Rosenblatt's recital, and now taking the spotlight too, Harry and Mary conspicuously exemplify a gentile audience that appreciates Jewish song. This transformation in Harry's own attitude towards Jakie's chanting signals the coming reversal of his prophecy. Despite Harry's dire prediction about Jakie's future on Broadway, *The Jazz Singer* ends with Jakie's headlining at the Winter Garden, and the movie offers no clear indication that Jakie has renounced cantoring in order to achieve this commercial success.⁴⁴

43. The film casts some doubt on Lee's apparent Christianity when the Rabinowitz family friend Yudelson reassures Sara that "Mary Dale" might not be a *shiksa* at all: "you know Rosie Levy on the theayter is Rosemarie Lee."

44. The movie reviewer for *American Hebrew* had no doubt that Jakie "is won over in the end to remain true to his Jewish traditions" (14 Oct. 1927, p. 823). Both the story and the play versions of *The Jazz Singer* end ambiguously, however. After listening to Jakie sing Kol Nidre, the Broadway impresario in "The Day of Atonement" phones a colleague to ask if he wants to "hear the greatest ragtime singer in America in the making." The story's final sentence is Lee's promise to meet his colleague "on the corner of Hester and Norfolk" ("A," p.167)—a relatively straightforward joke about the intersection of Jakie's Jewish and Anglo-Saxon identities. The play ends with Mary and Lee listening to Jakie's Kol Nidre, and Mary exclaiming, "Don't you see, Harry, it's in his blood. . . He'll *have* to come back [to the stage]," to which Lee replies, "I hope so" (*JS*, pp.152–53).



FIGURE 8. Mary and Harry overhearing Jakie's chanting.

The assumption by film critics that Jakie must have surrendered his faith for his Broadway career is therefore nothing more than speculation, although critics rarely present it as such. The guess depends in part on mere sequentiality at the end of the film, the scene in the synagogue followed by the scene in the theater. It also derives from the film's "epochal" quality as the talkie that left the silents behind.⁴⁵ The strongest reason for assuming that Jakie abandons his Jewishness is the implication in the movie that jazz singing supersedes cantoring. This displacement seems underscored by the difference between Jakie's two final performances. When Cantor Rosenblatt takes the stage, he resembles Cantor Rabinowitz so nearly that the image of one singer melts into the image of the other; but when Jakie moves from the synagogue to the stage, he casts off all signs of his Jewishness and blackens his face. The critical certitude about Jakie's complete or definitive secularization, however, cannot be explained by these formal and historical effects alone; it follows as well from the wishful thinking that continually tempts academics to assume that religion will die as modernity said it would. But secularization itself is no proof against religion, as the Cantor

45. In an advance notice of the film, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that it "marks an epoch in motion-picture production" ("Cantor to Sing on Screen in Vitaphone Film Here," 12 June 1927, pt. 3, p. 14). The souvenir program proclaimed *The Jazz Singer* "epoch-making" (*Souvenir Programs of Twelve Classic Movies 1927-1941*, p. 9).

Rosenblatt scene in *The Jazz Singer* suggests. Even Rogin acknowledges, somewhat against the grain of his argument, that the movie's "back and forth not only between sound and silence, music and intertitles, blackface and white, but also between . . . Jew and gentile" bespeaks "the movie's reversibility, its promise that nothing is fixed or lost forever." Rogin attributes this reversibility to the particular "magic" of *The Jazz Singer* as a uniquely "liminal" movie, "like no picture before or since" (*BW*, p. 116). Insofar as secularization is parasitical on religion, however, it can never escape the prospect of reversibility; the very idea of secularization as religion appropriated means that no unbreachable wall can be built between the two. Take the cantor from the synagogue to the theater and you may secularize the cantor—but you may also spiritualize the theater. In the memoirs of Gypsy Rose Lee, the most famous stripper of her day, the ex-vaudevillian remembers having appeared on the same program as Rosenblatt, whose "act" she at first knew nothing about.

The orchestra played softly as the Cantor began to sing. It wasn't a song I had ever heard before and I couldn't understand the Hebrew words but I knew he was singing about all the sadness in the world. He had the clearest, purest voice I had ever heard. There was a gentleness and strength and warmth in it. I felt that if God were to sing to us, this is how His voice would sound.

After the performance, as after every performance of his that Gypsy witnessed, Rosenblatt enacted a kind of précis of his resistance to complete integration with the vaudeville world by walking "straight across the stage and out the stage door." It left the audience wild. "Mother," Gypsy recalled, "said it was the greatest piece of showmanship she had ever seen."⁴⁶

46. Gypsy Rose Lee, *Gypsy: A Memoir* (New York, 1957), pp. 86–87; also quoted in Sapoznik, *Klezmer!* pp. 85–89.