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# American Idyll

*Jonathan D. Sarna*

**American Judaism: A History**

*Yale University Press, 2004,  
512 pages.*

*Reviewed by Jerome A. Chanes*

“If Europe were to become a prison,” mused the poet Heinrich Heine, “America would still present a loophole of escape.... Then may the Jews take their harps down from the willows and sit close by the Hudson to sing their sweet songs of praise and chant the lays of Zion.” Spoken

nearly a century before his country marched six million European Jews to their deaths, Heine’s words proved prophetic. Come to America they did—and they have been singing its praises ever since.

The contemporary historiography of the American Jewish experience—a reflection of the ways in which Jews in different decades looked at the society around them and at themselves—begins in 1957 with Nathan Glazer’s popular *American Judaism*, which integrated the history of American Judaism into the sociology of American religions. This was

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followed by Henry Feingold's *Zion in America* (1974), which placed American Jewish history in the context of American political history, and by Abraham Karp's *Haven and Home* (1985), which, introducing a sense of social history to American Jewish history, argued that Jews flourished in America as much on account of American ideals as on account of their own religious values and traditions. Arthur Hertzberg's idiosyncratic but thoughtful *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter* (1989) was the first to analyze the contemporary debate over Jewish continuity in the United States from a historical perspective, and constituted a major statement against "transformationalism." The regnant ideology at the time, transformationalism insisted that the Jewish community was not disintegrating, but merely *transforming* the ways in which it expressed its Jewishness. Howard Sachar's massive *A History of the Jews in America* (1992)—journalistic and readable, albeit replete with factual errors—was the first to explore in detail post-1940 developments. Finally, Hasia Diner's *Jews of the United States: 1654-2000* (2004) "collapses" the German Jewish and eastern European waves of immigration, suggesting a continuity between the two.

Jonathan Sarna's magisterial *American Judaism* in some ways completes

the circle, returning to where Glazer began. Sarna aims to refract American Judaism through the prism of American history, and in so doing to gain insight into how American Jewish life developed. An estimable agenda, indeed, and Sarna—a professor at Brandeis with some twenty books under his belt—succeeds estimably.

Sarna roots his study firmly in the context of American religion, borrowing the constructs developed by Sydney Ahlstrom in *A Religious History of the American People*, the most important of which is that the study of religion must be situated in a historical framework. For Sarna, this means the obverse as well: Positioning history in a *religious* framework. Sarna eschews the telling of the narrative in terms of generations of American Jews, and borrows instead from the anthropologists and sociologists of religion the vocabulary of "awakening" and "renewal." Sarna uses these constructs to narrate the story of the American Jewish experience, from that of the individual Jews who settled in America before 1654 to the well-organized community that today exercises clout well beyond its numbers.

*American Judaism* is superb on a number of counts. First, Sarna's literary facility enables him to develop details—many of them minute—without boring the reader in the least.

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Sarna's book is a cornucopia of little-known, often exotic, facts, like a discussion of the anti-Semitic strain in Abolitionist rhetoric and the involvement of many Abolitionist leaders in missionizing. As a result, even Jewish leaders who wholeheartedly opposed slavery never identified themselves as Abolitionists prior to the Civil War. Further: In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Amsterdam, few women attended synagogue services; in New York, however, where Protestant women frequented church, Jewish women became synagogue-goers, and seating became an issue. These and numerous other examples add to the breadth and depth of Sarna's book. Although Sarna wisely chooses "forests" over "trees," there are plenty of "trees" in *American Judaism*, and they are what give the narrative its singular fascination for the general reader and the scholar both.

The chapter in *American Judaism* that is in some ways the best also turns out, in others, to be its weakest. In the eighty-three exceptionally concentrated pages of "Renewal," Sarna weaves together the complex story of the evolution of American Jewry after World War II. The reordering of denominational strengths, the struggles within the movements, the migration of Jews from city to suburb, the revitalization of Jewish education, the startling revelations from

demographic studies, and the reshaping of relations between Jews and non-Jews—these and more are explored in a *tour de force* of historical writing.

But "Renewal" also points up some of the problems with Sarna's book. For example, on the question of the Orthodox-Conservative divide in the mid-twentieth century, Sarna identifies two issues—the *aguna*, or the woman whose husband refuses to give her a writ of divorce, and the *mehitza*, or physical division between the sexes in synagogue—as having been determinative. But the defining issue that separated a mid-century beleaguered Orthodoxy from Conservative Judaism was in fact the matter of driving to synagogue on the Sabbath. With the increasing suburbanization of the 1950s, many traditional Jews chose to forgo the *halachic* prohibition on driving on the Sabbath in order to attend services. The rabbinic bodies of the Orthodox and Conservative movements each undertook to determine how best to respond. Conservative lawmakers, mindful that congregants were doing it anyway, sanctioned driving on the Sabbath, but only to and from synagogue. The Orthodox position held, in effect, "We know that everyone is doing it, but we will not sanction an activity that we deem counter to *halacha*." This, far more than the separation

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of women in synagogue or the issue of the *aguna*, resulted in the radical break that today separates the two movements. Yet to this crucial development Sarna devotes but one sentence.

Other errors of fact in *American Judaism* are minor, but troubling: The important Jewish feminist group Ezrat Nashim, which would ultimately be responsible for many advances in the participation of Jewish women in ritual life, was not a group of “young Conservative women”; it was successful precisely because the original cadre consisted of women drawn from all three denominations, including Orthodoxy. Furthermore, it is not clear to me that many serious social scientists accept the 1.7- to 7-percent figure Sarna cites for intermarriage during the first half of the twentieth century. Intermarriage was relatively rare, but it was not *that* rare; it was just hidden. And Sarna has an uncharacteristically tin ear in singing the praises of those courageous Jews involved in the struggle for civil rights. Courageous they were; but at bottom Jews were involved in civil rights not because they were liberal (they were), or because it was the right thing to do (it was). Jewish involvement in civil rights was rooted instead in Jewish self-interest, in an accurate discernment that the struggle was crucial for Jewish security, as well. Finally, the idea that

the “communal focus on Israel and the Holocaust began earlier [than 1967]” is just plain wrong. Israel was simply not high on the priorities of the American Jewish communal agenda, and the Holocaust was not on the agenda at all, before 1967. In fact, the Six Day War radically changed the nature of the communal agenda by for the first time placing Israel and the Holocaust firmly in American Jewish consciousness.

Errors of omission are no less troubling. For instance, absent is any discussion of Yiddish literature in America, or the dozens of Yiddish newspapers representing every conceivable political and religious persuasion, which both mirrored and fueled social patterns in the first decades of the twentieth century. The great ideological battles over using Yiddish as a vehicle for assimilation into American society (the socialist *Forverts'* position) versus the use of the Yiddish press as a means of enhancing a particularist Jewish cultural identity (the communist *Freiheit's* view) reflected a larger debate within American Jewish immigrant society in the early decades of the twentieth century, and would have been worth exploring.

Some of these are quibbles; as comprehensive as it is, in a book of *American Judaism's* scope it is not

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possible to include everything. What are *not* quibbles, however, are the glaring omissions, in an otherwise comprehensive treatment of American Judaism, on religious matters and personalities. Sarna's discussion of contemporary American Judaism, to begin with, lacks any serious discussion of theology. What is found here is cursory and off-the-cuff. Missing are American religious leaders such as Rabbi Eliezer Silver, who helped shape twentieth-century American Orthodoxy; Eliezer Berkovits, who spent many years teaching in America before immigrating to Israel; Michael Wyschogrod; Richard Rubenstein; and Irving Greenberg, who collectively contoured a theology for contemporary Jews. Rubenstein, for example, was the first to insist that the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel be viewed in *theological*, and not merely historical, terms—a commonplace today, but radical when he first articulated his views. Moreover, the numerous pages on the teacher, theologian, and social activist Abraham Joshua Heschel are limited to his major contributions to social activism. But whatever Heschel's intellectual legacy may or may not be—and there is plenty of debate on that—he most certainly had an impact on American Jewish religious life, and his theological contributions are worth more than the eleven words

allotted them in *American Judaism*. Finally, journals such as *Judaism* (for some years the pre-eminent intellectual journal in American Jewish life), *Tradition*, *Conservative Judaism*, and the *CCAR Journal* helped establish the intellectual and theological linkages that were crucial to the maturing of American Jewish thought.

All this would be less than significant were it not for the fact that Jonathan Sarna chose to title his book *American Judaism*. Indeed, this is a book that is, more than anything else, about the development of the institutions and thrusts of American Jewish religion, and about the personalities and publications that were the engines that drove this development. The argument here is that *how* the theology was contoured had a major impact on the history of the movements, and by extension on the American Jewish experience.

Ultimately, Sarna's peroration is surprisingly optimistic. He sees the continually "vanishing" Jew as instead continually reappearing, and indeed flourishing. Revisiting our quick tour of American Jewish historiography, we might ask whether Sarna is not really a "neo-transformationalist" himself—after all, the transformationalists' assertion that there are many gateways to being Jewish in America, apart from the ritual or religious one, finds a home in these pages. Above

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all, Sarna seems to be saying, let's not worry too much about the Jewish future. "American Jews," he reassures us, "will find creative ways to maintain and revitalize American Judaism." In any case, however uncertain Jews are in the 350th year of their experience in America in the face of the two contradictory trends of assimilation and revitalization, America is no longer just Heine's "loophole of escape"; it is

not just another haven for Jews on the run. As Jonathan Sarna demonstrates in his wonderful retelling, it is a place that is, and will continue to be, profoundly hospitable to Jews.

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