H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jonathan Sarna. *American Judaism.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. xx + 490 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10197-3.

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Published on H-SHEAR (January, 2005)

They Came–They Adapted–And They Thrived

A wonderful irony emerges from the reception of this erudite narrative of American Jewish history. "American Judaism" by Jonathan M. Sarna has recently won the National Jewish Book Award from the American Jewish Historical Society. Yet Sarna, the Joseph H. and Belle R. Braun Professor of American Jewish History at Brandeis, relates in his introduction that thirty years ago, when he first suggested working in American Jewish history, a noted sage dismissed the idea: "American Jewish history," he growled, "I'll tell you all that you need to know about American Jewish history: the Jews came to America, they abandoned their faith, they began to live like [Gentiles], and after a generation or two they intermarried and disappeared." "That," he said, "is American Jewish history; all the rest is commentary. Don't waste your time. Go and study Talmud" (p. xiii).

Undaunted, Sarna pursued his studies and has become the most learned and prolific (I don't even have to use the qualifier "perhaps") historian of American Jewry of his generation, though his is not the first generation of American Jewish historians. He follows in the giant footsteps of his mentor, Jacob Rader Marcus, father of the study of Jews in America. In the 1940s, Marcus, then a historian of medieval Jewry and a professor at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, confronted the lacuna in Jewish history of this country and began the massive enterprise of collecting data. In volume after volume, he produced the footprint that historians of American Jewry have since built upon. Other early scholars began to fill in the footprint: Hyman Grinstein, Leo Hershkowitz, Abraham Karp, Morris Shappes pioneered a field dominated by a host of antiquarian local historians. Moses Rischin told a lyrical story of early New York. Later came Eli Farber on colonial America, Deborah Dash Moore and Hasia Diner on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; Joyce Antler, Diane Ashton, Karla Goldman, and Pamela Nadell, among others, write about women, Leonard Dinnerstein on anti-Semitism, and numerous sociologists recount the story of American Jews. The field has burgeoned, and now Sarna has written a definitive one-volume history.

In addition to being the first comprehensive scholarly volume on American Jewish history, "American Judaism" differs in several respects from earlier conventions. This is an optimistic book. Its story is one of people challenged on multiple fronts, social and economic, and triumphing. This distinguishes it from previous histories that narrate a past dominated by anti-Semitism and declension. Not that these themes are absent in American Judaism; they do not govern Sarna's story. The narrative, further, is framed differently; whereas previous histories have mostly been told around turning points in Jewish immigration–the first wave, the mid-nineteenth century central European, and finally late-nineteenth-century and turn-of-the-century Eastern European waves–Sarna turns his story around the events of American history–the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, World War I. He further borrows themes from American religious history that also define Jewish history: awakenings, enlightenments, revivals are terms idiosyncratically used to explain changes in Jewish history. Likewise, Sarna compares American Jewish experience with the Christian experience, noting, for instance, where discrimination was democratically dispensed to Catholics or Quakers as well as Jews. He additionally follows the troubled and comparative transformation of European Jewish traditions in America.

Finally, Sarna has chosen to frame this messy and inchoate picture through the lens of institutions and their leaders rather than focusing on familial and economic struggles. The small penurious peddler moving to the frontier is illustrative not only of a demographic shift but also one that is geographic and religious. How does this peddler keep kosher and celebrate Yom Kippur in Montana in 1870? Sarna tells of communities developing among peddlers and their families that resolve the

individual plight into a group experience. The institutional framework provides a brilliant solution that enables the personal and local struggles to fall into place in the greater puzzle of how multiple communities of people confronted huge cultural and social displacement and harmonized their common alienation in a world of foreign ideas, behaviors and practices. It tells about successful adaptation under circumstances of extreme stress and tension. It is a Jewish story but it is also the story of many American immigrant groups.

The story begins 350 years ago as an origins story that is not really about origins. In 1654, a group of twenty-three Jewish refugees from Pernambuco in northwest Brazil arrived in New Netherlands. The immigrants had fled the Inquisition that followed the Portuguese takeover of their Dutch colony, and they sought refuge in Stuyvesant's New Amsterdam. Stuyvesant, for political and religious reasons, did not welcome these outsiders but was forced to accept them because of Jewish investors of the Dutch West India Company. They stayed for a few years and then apparently left. The reason that this origins story is misleading, as Sarna points out, is that Jews had already come to the English and Dutch colonies, some as early as Columbus, merchants and adventurers who traded and resided primarily in the West Indies, but also some few on the mainland. Thus it began; the first Jews came, a ragtag lot that marked the "push" and the "pull" components of future Jewish immigration to America.

Jews comprised a tiny fraction of the population by the time of the Revolutionary War, perhaps 1,000 to 2,500 people; there is no accurate measure before census taking became serious. Unlike other persecuted religious groups, such as Catholics and Huguenots, their experience of discrimination was less pronounced, and while their religious practice was not condoned, it was tolerated. The first synagogues were constructed. Shearith Israel in New York was the earliest in 1730, followed by Newport, Charleston, and Philadelphia. A group of Savannah Jews arrived in 1733 with Oglethorpe, only to disappear with the threat of Spanish invasion that surely meant a further threat of the inquisition to follow.

By the time of the Revolution a small Jewish population had gained a toehold in the colonies where, while they had few political rights, they nevertheless could participate in the growing economy of the New World. Still many impediments threatened their religious practice. From without the dilemmas were often insurmountable: honoring their Sabbath in a world that worshipped on Sunday; maintaining their difficult dietary laws; ultimately, intermarriage when the availability of mates was negligible. From within there were dangers as well. Along with the increased population, diversity often led to conflict. The original Sephardic (Iberian) Jews were outnumbered by late-coming Ashkenazim (of German origins); the dissolution of the authority of the "kehillah," that form of self-government within European communities, meant the breakdown of discipline and religious order; the openness of the social world, its lack of boundaries challenged the ancient traditions; and the difficulty of passing on those traditions in the face of secular opportunities. So many were the challenges to this tiny group–less than 1 percent of the population of British-America–that survival was at stake. These challenges and others remained and became more complex over time. Sarna describes how creative leaders faced these challenges by experimenting and by changing the religion, its rites, and its rules.

The demographic revolution of the nineteenth century was by far the most transformative aspect of American Jewish life. Pushed by conditions in Europe, pulled by opportunities in America, Jews arrived in great numbers. By 1820, there were 3,000 Jews; by 1840 this increased fivefold to 15,000. Revolutions and subsequent pogroms in central Europe accounted for the tenfold leap to 150,000 by 1860 and by 1877, to about 250,000. "Overall, during those years, the American Jewish population increased at a rate that was almost fifteen times greater than the nation as a whole" (p. 63). About one third came as families; most were not the poorest but the lower middle class. They settled in the eastern cities and they spread out, peddlers traveling West, some eventually opening shops in small towns as well as the metropolises of frontier states, often becoming the founders of the great department stores that carried their names.

Meanwhile leaders attempted varying strategies to maintain Jewish identity in a fluid clash of needs, ideas, and values. Sarna describes three approaches to reconcile the old traditions with the new conditions: modernization, reform, and "peoplehood." Isaac Leeser of Philadelphia, though not a rabbi (the first ordained rabbis arrived in the 1840s) advocated the regeneration of Judaism through education. Isaac Meyer Wise (also not a rabbi) went further as a reformer, introducing abbreviated services and holidays, English language, and music into the service. Rebecca Gratz founded the Sunday School movement. Still a third course, that of the "indifferent Jews" engaged in secular organizations. B'nai B'rith was founded in the 1840s as both a fraternal and philanthropic group. All the while there were efforts to unite these disparate Jewish communities. Proposals for

a chief rabbi or a synod of rabbis failed and Judaism developed congregationally.

As they had in the Revolutionary War, Jews fought on both sides in the Civil War. Though less than a quarter of the nation's Jews lived in the South, 25,000 in 1860, they shared the lifestyle and the loyalties of the Confederacy. On both sides, Jews suffered loss of life, property, and livelihoods. Unlike the Revolutionary War, where the toleration of Jews was legally mandated by the Constitution, the Civil War marked a high point in the coming of discrimination. By the late 1870s the term "anti-Semitism" (a term coined in Germany) marked the rise of scientifically based racism. While not new in America, intolerance became manifest in the exclusion of Jews from clubs, housing, public venues. It mirrored the old hatred of Jews in Europe, this time scientifically dressed up in evolutionary theory.

But the old European hatreds, too, intensified, resulting in new waves of pogroms in Eastern Europe that accounted for new waves of immigrants fleeing persecution. This time the population in America increased tenfold, so that by 1920, the size of the Jewish community was second only to that in Russia. Sarna describes the period between the Civil War and the end of World War I as one of "awakening" and "renaissance" among Jews in America, so that by the end of that era it was "rich with cultural and institutional resources.... Books of international significance flowed from Jewish presses ... world-class Jewish libraries ... Jewish scholarship ... and Jewish education" (p. 206). During this period the two great movements, Orthodoxy and Reform, became well-established on the one hand, while on the other the long-developing trend to Jewish peoplehood continued in the formation of new organizations such as sisterhoods and Zionist groups.

The twentieth century is one of triumph in America and tragedy in Europe, and the story is too complicated to summarize. Trust that Sarna does so gracefully, if occasionally hastily. Populist racism culminated in the passage of restrictive immigration laws in the early 1920s, which proved disastrous for Europe's Jews in the 30s and 40s. Institutionally, a myriad of smaller orthodox groups with eastern European roots, and numerous social and political organizations developed; Jews moved up socially and out to the suburbs. The established Orthodox and Reform movements were joined by Conservatism as a third major strain of Judaism and smaller groups, Hasidim and the Reconstruction among them. Amazingly, Sarna notes, in post-World War II America "Jews gained widespread recognition as America's 'third faith' alongside Protestantism and Catholicism," though Jews comprised but 3 percent of the population (p. 275). The postwar period was followed, too, by "revivals" and "renewals," and Sarna brings his story to the present, acknowledging the varied responses of American Jews to the formation of the state of Israel, the effects of the Holocaust on American-Jewish life and the Civil Rights movement. He includes, pridefully, the nomination of Joseph Lieberman as Democratic vice presidential candidate in 2000.

"American Judaism" concludes with a glossary of terms that might be unfamiliar to non-Yiddish or Hebrew literate readers. The bibliography is huge. It has maps, charts, and pictures that enhance the narrative. For some the book will be flawed by its approach, it emphases, its theses. I am somewhat grumpy because its institutional framework with emphasis on the public sphere limits women's visibility to public figures. Others will find the terminology off-putting: the ubiquitous revivals, awakenings, and renewals. On the other hand, Sarna eschews other useful terms like "assimilation" to describe what happened to Jews in America, or "denomination" to explain the differences between streams of Judaism. "Hybrid," a favorite term of sociologists, does not make it into the text. The early chapter tends to be New York-centric, though the rest is geographically fair. Sarna contextualizes the Holocaust; some may find it short-changed. No effort of this magnitude will satisfy all.

American Judaism is a monumental achievement. It is readable, gracefully so. And the noted sage was wrong. There was a rich and enriching story to be told about Jews in America, and Jonathan Sarna has done so. In the face of the pessimists who deride the past story of American Jews and those who fear for their future, Sarna optimistically concludes with a quote from the philosopher, Simon Rawidowicz: "If we are the last–let us be the last as our fathers and forefathers were. Let us prepare the ground for the last Jews who will come after us, and for the last Jews who will rise after them, and so on until the end of days" (p. 374).

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Citation: Edith B. Gelles. Review of Sarna, Jonathan, *American Judaism.* H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. January, 2005.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10163

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