

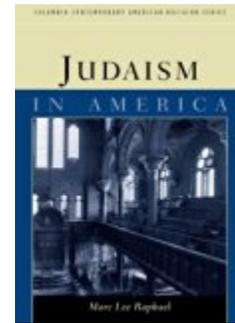
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Marc Lee Raphael. *Judaism in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. 234 pp. \$48.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-12060-9; \$27.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-12061-6.

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## American Judaism 101

Marc Lee Raphael's *Judaism in America* is a welcome addition to the Columbia Contemporary American Religion series, which offers introductions to significant religious bodies found within the American religious landscape. In this volume, Raphael familiarizes his readers with the major tenets of Judaism and the history of its denominations, and provides his own insights as to what the future might hold for the six million self-professed Jews currently living in the United States.

While a daunting project, Raphael delves directly into the major topics underlying both the study of American Judaism and the contemporary American Jewish landscape. Chapter 1 takes on the question as to what American Judaism actually is, including a discussion of the boundaries between the terms "Jewish" and "Judaic," two words often misused by Jews and non-Jews alike. One can be Jewish without affirming the belief system of Judaism. In fact, Raphael notes that only half of the American Jewish population claims membership in a synagogue. While his book focuses more on those who affiliate with one of American Judaism's denominations, he also takes care to mention those who consider themselves Jews, yet do not adhere to any Judaic practices in their daily lives.

Before looking at the historical developments of American Judaism, Raphael offers a succinct and helpful guide to the beliefs, holidays, and life cycle events that constitute the core of Judaism around the world. Readers are not only introduced to the Jewish view of revelation

and authorship of the Torah, but also learn how each of the different movements within American Judaism interprets these concepts. Variations in denominational observance of festivals and life cycle events are also carefully documented within the text.

Raphael next provides a brief synopsis of the historical developments of Judaism in America. While his attention to the similarities between American and European religious innovations within Judaism is well rooted, more attention should have been paid to the simultaneous structural and aesthetic changes occurring in America's Christian denominations, which, as scholars like Leon Jick and Alan Silverstein have demonstrated, heavily influenced the beginnings of the Reform movement in American Judaism.[1] Isaac Meyer Wise, whom Raphael describes as the "architect of the central institutions of Reform" (p. 150), based the structure of the Central Conference of American Rabbis on governmental bodies found in the Unitarian movement. Also, because many early synagogues took their leases from defunct churches, they had to adapt Jewish religious practices to new spatial realities including family pews or even a leftover organ, which were two of the many new elements introduced to American Judaism's Reform movement during the last half of the pivotal nineteenth century. These significant early connections between American Judaism and Christianity receive a small paragraph in Raphael's work.

One of the book's greatest strengths is Raphael's abil-

ity to weave almost every group and overseeing body of American Judaism into one concise narrative. His breakdown of the different denominations' governing structures and operations is particularly insightful, as is his attention to groups usually missing from the historical record of American Judaism, such as Hasidic sects and converts, or "Jews by choice." Raphael also devotes a chapter to individuals responsible for some of American Judaism's greatest innovations, including women such as Rebecca Gratz and Henrietta Szold. Leaders like Gratz and Szold, who contributed to the development of American Judaism through their commitment to Jewish education and American women's Zionism respectively, often go unnoticed by studies of American Judaism that focus solely on the synagogue experience.

While Raphael's inclusion of those overlooked by previous studies proves useful, he sometimes slips into stereotyping his subjects. For example, when discussing the ordination of women rabbis, he writes that, "women rabbis introduced much more hugging and kissing when congregants ascend the pulpit, and this has characterized congregational worship everywhere now for the past two decades or so" (p. 70). While he possibly noticed this practice through his observations at over one hundred U.S. synagogues, such generalizations undermine and trivialize many of the other contributions of women to the rabbinate, which Raphael also documents.

The penultimate chapter of the book is titled "The

Future of American Judaism," which is a bit surprising given historians' general reluctance to venture into the realm of guessing. Raphael certainly acknowledges the difficulty in making such predictions and mostly limits himself to discussing some of the more potent issues on the landscape of American Judaism that remain far from resolved. He rightly targets subjects such as the place of gay and lesbian rabbis and congregations within the mainstream denominations of Judaism (currently the Reform and Reconstructionist movements recognize both), the inclusion of "Jews by Choice" into congregational settings, and the often times conflicted relationship between American Jews and Israel, among other topics.

Readers who expect historiographic debates surrounding the history of American Judaism and discussions of both historic and contemporary conflicts between the various denominations of Judaism will not find them. However, Raphael's work offers an excellent overview of the transformation of Judaism in the United States and should be instructive for academic and general readers interested in the field.

#### Note

[1]. Leon A. Jick, *The Americanization of the Synagogue, 1820-1870* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 1992); and Alan Silverstein, *Alternatives to Assimilation: The Response of Reform Judaism to American Culture, 1840-1930* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994).

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