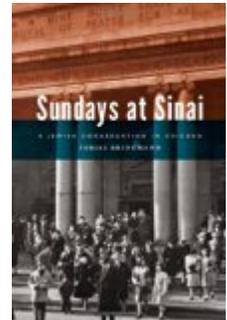


Tobias Brinkmann. *Sundays at Sinai: A Jewish Congregation in Chicago.* Historical Studies of Urban America Series. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. 384 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-07454-2.



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Sundays at Sinai is a readable and thorough history of Congregation Sinai, Chicago's radical Reform temple, from before its founding in 1861 to the 1960s, with an emphasis on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A brief epilogue brings the story up to date. Tobias Brinkmann makes extensive use of German- and English-language sources to place the history of Congregation Sinai into multiple contexts, including the growth of the city of Chicago, the German-Jewish migration networks and transnational culture in which the temple's founders moved, and the evolution of Reform Judaism. The author succeeds in shedding light on the dynamics of radical Reform as it functioned at its grassroots in a single congregation. (In his introduction, Brinkmann makes an argument for such histories, though he too easily dismisses some earlier examples for having been sponsored by their subject institutions.)

Brinkmann aims to set Congregation Sinai "against the backdrop of Chicago's rapid transformation since the 1860s and the quickly changing American religious landscape" (p. 4). How the

congregation and its members situated themselves in the city, both socially and spatially, is a major theme throughout the book—from the great fire of 1871 to the urban renewal of the 1950s and 1960s. Sinai leaders often played a prominent role in civic affairs in Chicago, a stance that Brinkmann argues arose from the congregation's radical Reform consciousness and "clear idea of *their* place in the modern world" (p. 61). Likewise, Sinai's leaders, who gradually gained wealth and status, were active in German communal affairs, though always as individuals and not as representatives of the Jewish institutions, which remained separate despite their commitment to German *Kultur*.

Indeed, Brinkmann places Sinai's early years into the German-Jewish context, both in terms of the social networks that brought its founders to Chicago and in ideological terms. The author traces Sinai's early members to the chain migration from the Hessian village of Eppelsheim. He explores the immigrants' efforts to make a living, many as peddlers who found their way to Chicago

through the city's vast midwestern hinterland. These early Jewish Chicagoans equated Germany with modernity and understood Germanness in "spiritual and transnational terms" (pp. 6-7). "Bildung" (education and "cultural knowledge") and "Verbürgerlichung" (embourgeoisement) formed important forms of cultural capital for them, and they continued to look to Germany for religious inspiration and, sometimes, for leadership. If they did not hail from Germany themselves, Sinai's early rabbis at least had thorough German education. Among those who hailed from Eppelsheim was Sinai's early rabbi and important Reform movement leader, Bernhard Felsenthal.

Sundays at Sinai uses institutional history to explore the inner dynamics of American Reform Judaism. Sinai resulted from a split of radical Reformers from Kehilath Anshe Ma'ariv (KAM), a congregation then itself on the road to Reform, though not moving fast or far enough for the dissidents. Sinai's history illustrates the conflict between the moderate American Reform movement led by Isaac Mayer Wise and radical German Reform pushed by David Einhorn, with whom Felsenthal and other Chicagoans were in direct contact. Over time, Sinai led the way in creating a form of religion it considered modern, liberal, and open. Sinai's signature reform--holding services on Sunday--further differentiated the congregation from the moderate wing of the Reform movement. But Sunday services brought Sinai into cooperation with other liberal religious groups, Unitarians in particular. Ethical Culture, however, posed a challenge. Although the radical brand of Reform Judaism espoused by Sinai and its rabbis bore much resemblance to the new humanist movement, it nevertheless remained resolutely theist. God was to be at the core of the coming universal religion.

The role of Sinai's rabbinic leadership in developing its "idiosyncratic theology" is another important theme of the book (p. 5). Early clergy such as Felsenthal and Kaufmann Kohler left their

marks on Sinai, but no one became so closely identified with the institution as Kohler's successor, Rabbi Emil G. Hirsch. Hirsch, like Kohler a son-in-law of David Einhorn, arrived at Sinai in 1880 and remained until his death in 1923. A dynamic personality and eloquent speaker, Hirsch brought new energy to Sinai, and attendance and membership grew. Thousands, Jews and non-Jews, flocked to hear his Sunday sermons. Hirsch strengthened Sinai's radical theological orientation. For him, Judaism meant the "progressive spirit of prophetism" and had nothing to do with the ritual "minutiae" of traditional Jewish law (pp. 134-135). He endorsed cremation and refused to condemn intermarriage. According to Hirsch, Sinai had a "common purpose, but no creed" (p. 141). Jesus was for him a great exemplar of modern Judaism, though certainly no messiah.

The common purpose that Hirsch proposed for Sinai had much to do with the great questions of the day. A public intellectual, Hirsch commented widely on all sorts of social, political, and moral issues. Indeed, social action was central to Hirsch's theology. He worked closely with Jane Addams, helped lead a number of local civic organizations, and pushed local Jewish philanthropic organizations to adopt modern methods of social work. Sympathetic to the labor movement, Hirsch influenced Sinai members Harry Hart and Joseph Schaffner to institute enlightened relations with the workers in their garment factories. But Hirsch opposed Zionism, rejecting the idea that the Jews were a race or nation. Brinkmann, however, concludes that Hirsch's "early and critical engagement with Zionism and Zionists and with leaders of the new immigrants can only be read as an attempt to influence the debate about Zionism and an American Jewish ethnicity. In hindsight, Sinai's rabbi appears as an influential, albeit rather reluctant harbinger of American Zionism in its formative phase" (pp. 252-253). Finally, Hirsch's pacifism and apparent pro-Germanism got him into trouble during World War I, although he professed to support the war effort once the United

States officially joined the conflict. Hirsch retained his position, but his stature was much diminished, not only by political isolation but also by ill health.

Following Hirsch's death, Sinai went through hard times and the congregation lost its central role in civic affairs. Along with other institutions in Hyde Park, Sinai was increasingly isolated from its constituency by the encroaching "Black Belt" of Chicago, and unlike KAM, joined with white efforts to keep blacks at arm's length. Moreover, radical Reform was out of style. Whereas before 1920, Sinai had been a "controversial but influential trendsetter," Brinkmann concludes, by the 1960s, "it was [a] marginal player with limited appeal" (p. 293).

The story does not end there, however. In 1998, Sinai finally moved to the Near North Side, near central shopping and entertainment districts and gentrifying neighborhoods frequented by its natural constituency. By the early twenty-first century, Sinai was a "thriving metropolitan congregation" with nearly one thousand members--still holding services on Sunday and welcoming non-Jews as well as Jews as members. Ultimately, as Brinkmann shows, Congregation Sinai rose and fell and rose again together with the city around it. This is an important monograph whose scholarly account of a particular congregation deepens our understanding of radical Reform Judaism in America.

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