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Beth S. Wenger. *History Lessons: The Creation of American Jewish Heritage.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. xiv + 282 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-14752-9.

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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Not long ago, during a synagogue scholar-in-residence program, I had an animated argument with the congregation's rabbi and his congregants. He and they were positive that Christopher Columbus was a secret Jew, and claimed that historians had proven so beyond reasonable doubt. I asserted that most historians I knew were not persuaded by the arguments for this theory. The rabbi was so sure that I was wrong that he sent me a DVD of an episode from the series *Out of Spain 1492*, hosted by Israel's former president Yitzchak Navon. The rabbi claimed the film proved Columbus was a *converso*. Of course, the documentary made no such claim. It stated that: "a whole series of studies" had attempted to "prove that Columbus was of Jewish stock"; recognized that "[t]his theory is held not only by eccentrics but also by several respected men of letters"; and concluded ultimately: "Whether Columbus was Jewish or not, there can be no argument about one issue--the role of the *marrano*s in the discovery of America."[1] So much for irrefutable proof!

I could not help recalling this heated exchange while reading Beth Wenger's sparkling and smart new book *History Lessons*. Wenger, an associate professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania and a member of the Historians' Team for Philadelphia's new National Museum of American Jewish History (as, for full disclosure, am I), has explored the fashioning of American Jewish heritage. She depicts how American Jews created popular notions about American Jewish history and culture, how they used these narratives to ease their own adjustment to American life, and how, in so doing, they asserted, with regularity and deep conviction, the "compatibility of Jewish and American ideals" and the unique "symbiosis between Judaism and American democracy" (pp. 2-3).

Focused on the "creation of a shared, usable Jewish past on American soil," Wenger reveals how Jews invented this usable past to weave Jewish contributions and thus themselves into the narratives of their adopted homeland (p. 7). Following the lead of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett,

Wenger's *History Lessons* unpacks the popular presentation of American Jewish heritage based on an array of historical texts created from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. These texts--textbooks, children's stories, poems, pageants, plays, and memorials--were largely the work of Jewish communal activists and popular writers, not professional scholars. Wenger then teases out the meanings of this cultural production, understanding how Jews' representations of their roles in founding the nation helped to ensure group survival by constructing a unique American Jewish identity. Many of these narratives were born out of a sense of Jewish vulnerability, a way of seeing that should not surprise given that the years Wenger examines saw antisemitism murderously escalate in Europe and also soar in the Jews' adopted American homeland. Wenger is also especially attuned to the "divergent readings of both American and Jewish culture" evident in this heritage. Where one stood in American Jewish life--whether those searching for a usable past were firmly ensconced among the well-to-do American Jewish elite or working-class socialists critical of capitalism's abuses--shaped the histories narrated in textbooks and stories, staged in parades and pageants, and encoded in memorials commissioned and sometimes actually built.

Wenger shows Jews determined to claim that their ancestors had been part of the nation since its beginning. Emphasizing the secret Jews on Columbus's ships connected more recent Jewish immigrants to America's discoverers. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century Jews celebrated that discovery as opening up a bright, new chapter in Jewish history, one which they deliberately contrasted against the dark miseries of Jewish suffering in Europe. Claiming that Sukkot had inspired the Pilgrims to invent Thanksgiving, Jews constructed their people as playing a foundational role in America's first national holiday. Stories depicting George Washington at Valley Forge seeing a Jewish soldier lighting Chanukah candles and becoming inspired by the soldier's tales of Judah Maccabee's victory showed Jews defending the emerging nation and also elevated Judaism to one of the new nation's founding faiths.

Many narratives emphasized Jews' military service and bravery: In 1895, Simon Wolf published six hundred pages filled with the names of every Jew he found who had ever served in the U.S. Armed Forces. In 1945, the Jewish War Veterans staged an elaborate funeral procession for the last surviving Jewish veteran of the Civil War. These narratives and performances crafted "a public image of the Jewish American citizen" and "redefined Jewish masculinity" (p. 97).

Wenger devotes an entire chapter to the myths and monuments of Haym Salomon. The claim that Haym Salomon was ***the*** financier of the American Revolution and that his devotion to the cause bankrupted him persists to this day. A student repeated it to me recently. As Wenger shows, the figure of Salomon "encapsulates virtually every key aspect of the construction of Jewish heritage in America." (p. 180). His wartime contributions and the fact that he was a practicing Jew allow Jews to claim a major role in founding the new nation and underscore that nation's acceptance of Judaism.

To her credit Wenger reads this invention of "a goodly heritage" in the context of similar claims from other American ethnic and religious groups. Although this is not a comparative study, she wants us to understand that the Jews were not exceptional in making such claims. When the Irish American fraternal order Knights of Columbus was founded in 1882, its members asserted that they enjoyed all rights as Americans because this land was discovered by one of their faith. Norwegian Americans celebrated the Norseman Leif Erickson as the real discoverer of America. Jews are not the only hyphenated Americans to profess a founding role in discovering America.

History Lessons is an impressive work of historical scholarship and cultural studies. Its writ-

ing is lively, accessible, and thankfully free of academic jargon. It will certainly find its audience among scholars of Jewish history and of American history. I happened to be reading it at the same time that I read Michael Brenner's newly translated ***Prophets of the Past: Interpreters of Jewish History*** (2010). Brenner surveys the giants of modern Jewish historiography. Wenger, by contrast, has read children's stories. Yet, I was struck by an uncanny correspondence between the two. Brenner argues that "over many generations, the historians of the Jewish past bore a considerable responsibility for the formation of the Jewish present and future." [2] Wenger has made a similar argument, that the writers and Jewish communal leaders who helped construct American Jewish heritage played key roles in shaping contemporary American Jewish identity.

I know scholars will read Wenger's book, but I do hope that it finds a wider audience. I would like the rabbi I argued with a year ago to understand the myths of American Jewish heritage and their meanings. I could see our engaging, the next time he and I meet, not in a battle over Columbus the Jew, but, if he has read ***History Lessons***, in a very different and far more fruitful discussion.

Notes

[1]. Yigal Lossin, dir., "Episode 5: 1492," ***Out of Spain 1492: A Journey through Spain with Yitzchak Navon*** (Israel: Sisu Home Entertainment, 2008).

[2]. Michael Brenner, ***Prophets of the Past: Interpreters of Jewish History*** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 219.

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