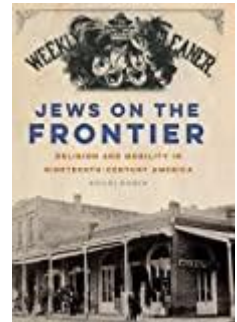


**Shari Rabin.** *Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America.* North American Religions Series. New York: New York University Press, 2017. viii + 193 pp. \$37.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4798-3047-3.



**Reviewed by** Mara Cohen Ioannides (University of Missouri, Springfield)

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**Commissioned by** Kelly K. Sharp (Furman University)

Shari Rabin's *Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America* is a new interpretation of Jewish American life. Rabin encourages the reader to rethink two important questions: what is the frontier and how did Jews in the nineteenth century address Judaism? The combination of these two reconceived notions is a powerful lens for understanding American Judaism in both the past and the present. Rabin uses the moving of the frontier westward as part of the story. As the edge of America moved west, American Jews became spaced further apart. It is this physical distance between the Jews that Rabin addresses in her book.

The book is divided into three parts and each of these into two chapters. Part 1, "Movement and Belonging," is about Jewish immigrants finding their place in American society. Part 2, "The Lived Religion and American Jews," focuses on how Jews struggled to overlay their religious practices on the lifestyle of an American in the far reaches of America. The final part, "Creating an American Judaism," examines how the factors of mobility

and American individualism influenced the development of American Judaism.

One of the key points that Rabin discusses is mobility. The ability for a Jew to travel wherever they chose when they chose was a new concept to European Jews, who were bound by laws that required them to get permission to leave their community of residence for any reason. Thus, the freedom of movement had a significant impact on the creation of American Judaism. This is a large part of the discussion that Rabin introduces to her readers in the first chapter and returns to throughout the book. Far-flung Jews had to reconceptualize their Judaism and forward-thinking rabbis scrambled to help them. How Jews during western expansion addressed kashrut (food laws) and holiday observance when they were alone or without a religious leader is, as Rabin argues, an important part of how modern American Judaism developed.

This mobility also influenced community opinions on interfaith marriages, which are ad-

dressed in chapter 3. Rabin discusses the problems of a Jewish man marrying a non-Jewish wife (traditional Jewish law dictates that only those of a Jewish mother are Jewish); however, how this affected the development of modern notions of acceptance of non-Jewish partners is not fully developed. It was nice to see Jewish men who “married out” and still raised their Jewish children as Jews presented in this book and the conflicts this caused in their local Jewish communities. Oftentimes, it is presumed that lone Jewish men who married out left Judaism but Rabin’s work shows this was not always the case. The connection that is missed is the lack of rabbis to perform conversions that led to this problem.

Readers will be pleasantly surprised by some of the discoveries in chapter 4. Here Rabin shows that Jews desperate for theological discussion joined churches just to have some social contact and read more than just Jewish theologians. Many Jews wanting a Bible bought versions containing both the Old and New Testament because they were more affordable. This also made Jews of the frontier far better at understanding their Christian neighbors compared to their European counterparts who often had not read the New Testament.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this work is the third section, which examines how all these influences created the American Judaism of now. In American urban areas, Jewish communities were typically made up of immigrants from the same European town or region. These communities drew a particular set of traditions from this shared place of origin. However, those who traveled to the frontier did not have the luxury of living in a Jewish community made up of individuals from a shared background. To create the required minyan (ten adult men needed to form a prayer group), European cultural rivalries could no longer stand. These frontier Jews had to be more accepting of otherness. Rabin titles her fourth chapter “A Congregation of Strangers” to

address this very issue. Since Jewish groups in Europe rarely had new members as there was little mobility permitted, they had not developed a way to integrate new practices into their community. In the New World, a Jew was often a stranger among strangers trying to work with them to create a religious community. This helped create a more diverse mode of practice in the more rural areas. This in turn influenced how Jews accepted interfaith marriages, how they observed kashrut, and even how and when they observed holidays.

For scholars of American history, American religion, and American Jewish studies this is an important read. What we often forget is that western expansion was more than just an economic and colonizing event. The importance of mobility and vast distances that limited the creation of religious communities was part of this period and had a profound and lasting influence on Judaism in the New World. This is an important book that will hopefully begin some new discussions about the American religious landscape.

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