



Jonathan D. Sarna. *Coming to Terms with America: Essays on Jewish History, Religion, and Culture.* A JPS Scholar of Distinction Series. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021. Illustrations. xxiv + 399 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8276-1511-3.

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Jonathan D. Sarna is the Joseph H. and Belle R. Braun Professor of American Jewish History and the director of the Schusterman Center for Israel and, for six years, was chairman of the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, all at Brandeis University. Over the past four plus decades, he has written and edited more than thirty books, the most important of which is his scholarly and well-written *American Judaism: A History* (2004). Sarna is considered by his peers to be the leading contemporary historian of American Jews and American Judaism, is frequently the go-to person when the American press seeks an authoritative opinion on an issue of the day, and has mentored many of the leading up-and-coming American Jewish historians.

This volume contains fifteen of Sarna's most important essays written over the past four decades and now revised to incorporate new information and to reflect the latest trends in American Jewish historiography. These lively, engrossing, and informative essays discuss a variety of topics and issues, including American Jewish publishing, the Jews of Boston and Cincinnati, American Jewish culture, Judaism in America, American anti-semitism, problems with Christian missionaries,

and church-state relations, and should be of interest to specialists in both American and American Jewish history.

A book containing such disparate essays presents a problem for any reviewer. Do the essays have a central theme and do they reflect a distinctive historical sensibility so that they can be reviewed as a unit? In *Coming to Terms with America*, the essays in fact hang together quite well. Their central premise is that of "encounter," namely, how Jews interacted socially, politically, religiously, and culturally with other Americans, "sometimes borrowing from them, sometimes resisting them, but never ignoring them," in a setting that both offered "new opportunities and also posed new challenges" (pp. xiii, xvii). This interaction was reciprocal: America influenced Jews, while Jews, in turn, influenced America, and this was done in an exceptional country and by an exceptional people. Sarna is not, of course, the first person to note the unique opportunities and challenges stemming from the unprecedented freedom and equality Jews experienced in America, but few historians have examined them with such verve and insight.

The book is divided into three parts. The first section, "Straddling Two Civilizations," contains six chapters, which explore the cultural encounter between America's Jews and the host country on both a national and local level. The essay "The Democratization of American Judaism," for example, perceptively shows how the dispersal of Jews throughout the country, the impact of the American Revolution, the decentralized nature of American religion, and the shortage of respected rabbinic authorities created a vacuum that was filled by the laity and in which dissenters were able to voice their discontents. By the early nineteenth century religious reform was in the air within the tiny Jewish population.

The second section, "The Shaping of American Culture," has three chapters examining in depth what Sarna describes as a Jewish renaissance during the late nineteenth century. Here he discusses the founding of the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1886, the Jewish Publication Society in 1888, the American Jewish Historical Society in 1892, and Gratz College, the Jewish Chautauqua Society, and the National Council of Jewish Women in 1893, and the launching of numerous Jewish periodicals and newspapers. This renaissance was prompted in part by the massive immigration of Jews from central and eastern Europe, which had commenced in the 1880s. Sarna continues his focus on the nineteenth century in his final section, "When Faiths Collide," which contains six essays. Here he examines the unsuccessful Christian efforts to convert America's Jews, the origins of American antisemitism, and the distinctive approach of America's Jews to church-state issues.

Taken together, these fifteen essays provide an excellent starting point for understanding how Jews came to terms with America. "Informed by the past, shaped by the present, and inspired by visions of an idyllic future," Sarna declares, this is "a process that never ends" (p. xxiv). I hope that Sarna will trace this process into the twentieth

and twenty-first centuries in a future collection of essays.

America's Jews, Sarna notes, have faced the challenge of integrating their Jewish and American identities, of straddling two civilizations and creating a "unum" out of a "pluribus." "While apologists insisted that there could be no contradiction, that being a better Jew made one a better American and vice versa," Sarna writes, "Jews learned from experience that reality was far more complicated" (p. xvii). This reality is most fully examined in "The Cult of Synthesis in American Jewish Culture," the book's initial and arguably most important essay. This essay, which originally appeared in 1999 in *Jewish Social Studies*, explores how America's Jews during the nineteenth century attempted to legitimize their status as true-blue Americans by emphasizing the Old Testament's roots of American religion and politics, denying that the United States was a Christian nation, arguing that America's Indians were descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes, and showing that America's Jews and Judaism were fully compatible with America's democratic principles. This came to fruition in the early twentieth century when Louis D. Brandeis, the first Jew to serve on the Supreme Court, fused Western culture, Hebraism, and Zionism into an amalgam of Americanism and Jewishness. When a small group of Jewish philanthropists decided to fund an American Jewish university after World War II, it was not surprising that they named it after the jurist or that Sarna would become one of its most distinguished faculty members.

By and large, Sarna believes, the various interactions between Jews and America have been advantageous both to Jews and to other Americans, and American Jewish history has been essentially a success story. Here, and elsewhere, Sarna rejects the jeremiads bemoaning the condition of American Jewry. American Jews, it has been said in countless sermons and newspaper editorials, have been in a headlong flight from normative

Judaism, endogamy, and Jewish identity. In starting out in an academic career, Sarna was advised not to make the history of American Jews his primary interest since this would be akin to the study of necrology. Rather, Sarna claims, American Jews have been very creative in maintaining, reforming, and revitalizing Judaism in confronting the challenges of American life. They have cast aside old paradigms and reinvented Judaism to make it more appealing and sensitive to modern concerns. The history of American Jews, he emphasizes, is a story of both assimilation and revitalization, and for him the revitalization has been far more important than the assimilation.

In *Coming to Terms with America*, there are no laments about intermarriage, the declension of Jewish culture and religion, assimilation and acculturation, and the failure of America's Jews to replicate the world of their fathers. Perhaps at no other time was the prognosis for American Jews more pessimistic than in the late nineteenth century. Jewish leaders in both Europe and the United States feared that the massive numbers of Jewish immigrants from central and eastern Europe would acculturate and assimilate and only a remnant would retain a durable Jewish identity. In America, wrote Rabbi Jacob David Willowski, who served briefly as a rabbi in Chicago early in the twentieth century, Jews have "prospered and won respect from the people. But the ways and customs of this land militate against the observance of the laws of the Torah and the Jewish way of life" (p. xxi). In fact, Sarna says in his introduction, "confounding those who predicted gloom and doom, the late nineteenth-century American Jewish community experienced surprising bursts of new life" (p. xx). Such bursts, he notes, have appeared throughout the history of America's Jews right up to the present day.

Sarna has not been the first historian to paint an optimistic portrait of the American Jewish past and to emphasize the "exceptional" history of the United States and its Jews. Oscar Handlin titled his

history of America's Jews *Adventure in Freedom: Three Hundred Years of Jewish Life in America* (1954) and said that this adventure was a product of "diversity, voluntarism, equality, freedom, and democracy." [1] But have Sarna and other historians been correct in arguing for American Jewish exceptionalism? In a much-debated and provocative essay, Tony Michels, a prominent historian of American Jewry at the University of Wisconsin, questions the paradigm of both American and American Jewish exceptionalism. "If the case of American uniqueness writ large has lost much of its persuasiveness," he says, "then American Jewish exceptionalism might also require reevaluation." He notes that political inclusion, economic mobility, social integration, urbanization, and acculturation characterized the history of Jews in Europe as well as in America, and that antisemitism was far more prevalent in America than historians have generally assumed. [2]

What was exceptional for America's Jews, Michels argues, was only the post-World War II era, and he suggests that "Jewish historians would do well to retire American exceptionalism." He realizes, however, that his is a minority position. Most American Jewish historians, and this certainly includes Sarna, have believed that the major theme of American Jewish history was, to quote Michels, a "fruitful accommodation and exchange between Jews and a predominantly hospitable society. The image of America that emerges from American Jewish historiography is that of a tolerant, pluralistic, and democratic country, blemished in certain regards and at certain times, but progressively inclusive and egalitarian." [3] Indeed, *Coming to Terms with America*, especially as seen in such essays as "Jewish-Christian Hostility in the United States," may be seen as a refutation of Michels's rather dark view of American Jewish history. "At any given moment in American history there has been reason for despair and reason for hope," Sarna says. "American Jews have experienced trouble from Christians, but they have enjoyed manifold blessings from them as well" (p.

248). Sarna is clearly in the camp of those who hope.

If, despite Michels, the history of America's Jews has actually been exceptional, it is partially because exceptionalism has been so important in the history of America. J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur asked in his 1782 book, *Letters from an American Farmer*, what is arguably the most important question in all of American history: "What then is the American, this new man?" "He is an American," de Crevecoeur said, "who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, received new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds." [4] For two and a half centuries, Americans have delighted in their newness. The Great Seal of the United States proclaimed that it was a "novus ordo seclorum"; Ralph Waldo Emerson advised his Harvard listeners in 1837 to reject "the courtly muses" of Europe and predicted that "our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions, that are around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests." [5] Henry James agreed as to the newness of America. He named the protagonist of his 1877 novel, *The American*, Christopher Newman, signifying that the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus had led to the creation of a new man and a unique country. America's Jews have thus never been more American than when they embraced this new order of the ages, left behind their own "sere remains," and became a new man (and woman).

If America was the land of the self-made man, it was also the land of the self-made Jew. Anzia Yezierska, a Jewish immigrant writer of the early twentieth century, noted that "In the old countries things are more or less settled," but "In America the soil is young, and the people are young blossoming shoots of a new-grown civilization." [6] It is precisely these themes of newness and adaptability that stand out in Sarna's various essays. Amer-

ica's Jews, he shows, created new religious forms, new cultural institutions, and new social and religious values, all the while retaining their ethnic and religious identities and rejecting the designs of Christian missionaries. In a 1917 novel, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Abraham Cahan's eponymous character described America as a land of marvelous transformations. The same thing can be said of Sarna's Jews, and this is why their history, when illuminated by a master historian, is so interesting.

Notes

[1]. Oscar Handlin, *Adventure in Freedom: Three Hundred Years of Jewish Life in America* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1954), 260.

[2]. Tony Michels, "Is America 'Different'? A Critique of American Jewish Exceptionalism," *American Jewish History* 96 (September 2010): 208.

[3]. Michels, "Is America 'Different'?" 221, 223. See also David Sorkin, "Is American Jewry Exceptional? Comparing Jewish Emancipation in Europe and America," *American Jewish History* 96 (September 2010): 175-200; and Rachal Gordan, "The Sin of American Jewish Exceptionalism," *Association of Jewish Studies Review* 45 (November 2021): 282-301. For a convincing case for American Jewish exceptionalism, see Hasia R. Diner, *How America Met the Jews* (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2017).

[4]. J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, "Letter III - What Is an American," in *Letters From an American Farmer* (London: T. Davies, 1782), avalon.law.yale.edu.

[5]. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," 1837, emersoncentral.com, 2, 20.

[6]. Anzia Yezierska, *How I Found America: Collected Stories of Anzia Yezierska* (New York: Persea Books, 1991), 143. Originally published in *Children of Loneliness* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1923).

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