In *Coming to Terms with America*, Jonathan Sarna gathers fifteen of his previously published articles and chapters written over the course of three and a half decades, between 1981 and 2016. Part of the Jewish Publication Society’s Scholars of Distinction Series, the book both rightly honors one of the leaders in the field of American Jewish history, and also provides easier access to some (and only some) of his important contributions. (Jonathan Sarna follows his father, the Bible scholar Nahum Sarna in the series, probably the only parent/child pair so honored.) Taking a wide range of sources, from personal bookplates to communal prayers, as his evidence, Sarna shows how American Jews accommodated, adopted, and challenged aspects of American culture as they “straddled two civilizations” (p. xvii). Most of the essays concern the nineteenth century, with occasional forays backward to the colonial period, and forward into and through the twentieth century. One strength of the book is that it shows how Jewish efforts to create an American-Jewish synthesis a century or two ago remain relevant to today’s communal, religious, and identitarian concerns.

Sarna sees the question of how to be both fully true to Jewish tradition and fully part of the American nation as the central issue that American Jews have grappled with. One response has been to create what he calls the “cult of synthesis,” which he defines as “the belief that Judaism and Americanism reinforce one another, the two traditions converging in a common path” (p. 3). This belief was manifested through the creation of new Jewish rituals for American holidays, especially those like Thanksgiving and July 4th that could be interpreted as secular or broadly ecumenical expressions of an open American nationalism that included Jews and members of other minority faiths. At times, American Jews sought to prove that the republican form of government originated in Judaism. They also emphasized Jewish contributions to the rise of the American nation—from Columbus’s journey to the Revolution—often in ways that now seem embarrassing as these events have come to be associated with colonialism, slavery, and even genocide.

One interesting chapter concerns the evolution of Jewish prayers for the government, long a staple of the Jewish liturgy. As Sarna writes, it became immediately obvious after the colonies declared independence that the synagogue proclamation of allegiance to the king had to go. Instead, prayers for the welfare of the government became depersonalized, directed toward offices rather
than individuals. And, over time, exclamations of the greatness of the sovereign disappeared, to be replaced by expressions of hope for “peace and goodwill” (p. 53) among the nation's diverse citizenry, and divine guidance for the nation's leaders. Although Sarna writes that many synagogues dropped the prayer for the government after the 1960s, many not only still recite it but also continue to rewrite it to reflect the needs and sensibilities of the moment.

Jews' adoption of the “values of the American Revolution—liberty, freedom, and especially democracy” (p. 28)—also led to changes in the organization of the Jewish community itself. Community members challenged the authority of its leaders to make rules concerning who could belong; how religious needs, from kosher meat to burial, would be provided for; the place (literally) of women in the synagogue; and other matters. Sometimes these challenges led to schisms, and in the voluntaristic American atmosphere, not only the number of synagogues and communal structures but their variety expanded, with some of the new organizations appealing explicitly to the values they saw embodied in the US Constitution.

American Jews also faced pressure from the outside. Christian missionary efforts, often with at least nominal sponsorship of prominent figures, called into question the Jewish claim to equal belonging. So did the Protestant majority's strained efforts to reconcile its images of the “mythical Jew” (who might be a noble herald of ethical monotheism, or even of Christ, or an evil Christ-killer) and the “Jew next door” (who might be the same as the mythical Jew or different, a venal worshipper of mammon or an okay regular guy) (pp. 201-218). The worst was when the government, on the local, state, or national level, explicitly adopted Protestant Christianity as its official culture. This was most pronounced in the public schools, in correctional facilities, in the military, and, not least of all, in symbolic public pronouncements. Then, Jews feared that they could not really be fully equal citizens of a Christian republic.

But, though Sarna does not shrink from describing the difficulties, he takes an optimistic stance overall. American Jews met repeated challenges, often through cultural innovation. In replying to missionaries, they articulated new justifications for continued Jewish observance and distinctiveness. They established charitable institutions, new forms of organization, and supplemental schools. They published books, magazines, and newspapers, from the popular to the densely scholarly. Often Jews patterned these efforts after Christian models but infused them with Jewish meaning. In a chapter on the late nineteenth century, Sarna shows that concern for rising anti-semitism led to a Jewish spiritual revival that percolated up from the grassroots and helped create “a new Jewish cultural center in America to succeed that in Germany” (p. 144).

At times, Sarna's analysis hints at a kind of American exceptionalism very much out of style in the field of American Jewish history today. When the state itself does not interfere, he contends, Judaism does just fine in the “marketplace of religion” (pp. 249-260). And despite occasional hostility from the Christian majority, American Jews have established good relations with many of their neighbors and carved out a place for themselves in the broader American culture. In this, Sarna argues, they were aided by the Constitution's enshrinement of freedom of religion, by the country's religious pluralism, by the culture of voluntarism, by the need for political coalition building, and by overt efforts at interfaith organizing.

Sarna provides plenty of evidence for his position, and argues it in a clear and accessible style. Coming to Terms with America offers in one place fascinating chapters in American Jewish history, and especially the history of American Judaism.
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