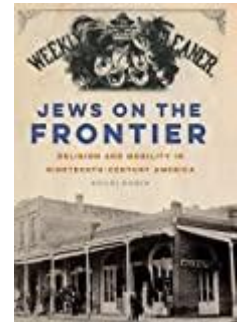


Shari Rabin. *Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America.* North American Religions Series. New York: New York University Press, 2017. viii + 193 pp. \$37.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4798-3047-3.



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“The year 1877—or 1881, the beginning of extensive pogroms in Russia—was not the real beginning of American Jewish history” (p. 144). This quote perfectly captures part of Shari Rabin’s mission in *Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America* as she explores the development of Jewish life before the start of eastern European Jewish immigration to the United States. American Judaism is often treated as a more recent phenomenon, with much of the scholarly focus going to the communities that emerged in the wake of the new immigration era in the 1880s through the 1920s, yet Jews have continuously resided in what would become the United States since 1654. *Jews on the Frontier* breaks away from this traditional view to explore how Jews engaged with their Judaism while living outside of major Jewish communities. Rabin argues that it was the mobility of many nineteenth-century Jews that facilitated the creation of a distinctive American Judaism. She also works to situate the development of Jewish life outside of the East

Coast where most immigrants first arrived in the United States.

Jews in the Frontier is divided into three parts, with each containing two chapters in addition to an introduction and conclusion. “Part I: Movement and Belonging” provides much of the social and economic context surrounding Jewish life in Europe and the United States. “Part II: The Lived Religion of American Jews” explores the realities of Judaism as practiced by westward-moving Jews who did not have regular connections to coreligionists. Last, “Part III: Creating an American Judaism” demonstrates how Jews constructed new community bonds when having to build congregations from scratch. These parts are not in chronological order, reflecting the structure of nineteenth-century American Jewry; congregations did not develop simultaneously or at the same pace. Some cities had fully established synagogues by the mid-century while other Jewish communities’ ritual activities were limited to burial practices. Rabin strengthens her discussion by incorporating information from a wide geographic range of com-

munities such as Kentucky, Iowa, Texas, and New Mexico to name a few. The multitude of locations enables her to illustrate that despite the differences among communities there were still wider trends that could be observed across the country. Additionally, Rabin's inclusion of these different communities demonstrates that they did not exist in isolation but engaged in national Jewish conversations.

The concept of a frontier serves as a driving force in Rabin's discussions. She acknowledges that while the title *Jews on the Frontier* evokes Frederick Jackson Turner's "deterministic formulation," it refers more to a notion of "the conceptual and physical space where groups in motion meet, confront, alter, destroy, and build" put forward by Sander Gilman (quoted, p. 6). Utilizing this concept of a frontier opens the possibilities for discussion within the book. This more abstract definition allows Rabin to include communities in places that might no longer have been considered the frontier in the period she considers, such as Atlanta in the 1860s. While such locations did not qualify in the American mind as the "frontier" in terms of an unknown wilderness, they still served as meeting points for different groups of people who previously had had no contact with each other. While Rabin herself does not speak about border communities, her use of Gilman's definition would be beneficial to discussions on Jewish migration to borderland regions such as the US-Mexico borderlands, which still experiences the meeting of various ethnic and religious groups.

The freedom of mobility permitted to Jews in the United States contrasted immensely with their old lives in Europe. Rabin explains that throughout European history, Jews faced restrictions on their movements, often being forced to live in ghettos and receive permission from government officials to travel because of their religious classification as Jews. *Jews on the Frontier* constantly reinforces that, due to the lack of legal religious classification among American residents, adher-

ence to Judaism did not limit mobility. However, Rabin recognizes that freedom of mobility was not permitted to all American residents and citizens. For instance, Native Americans and African Americans found their movements increasingly legally restricted as Anglo Americans sought more control over them, while numerous state governments also prohibited settlement by Mormons, although Rabin does not go into the specifics about why Mormons faced such backlash despite their whiteness (p. 22). She emphasizes that Jews faced few restrictions on their mobility because they had become recognized as white, arguing "Jews, no less than their Protestant neighbors, took this imperial expansion for granted" and ignored the horrific violence that made it possible (p. 128).

My main critique of *Jews on the Frontier* is its lack of discussion on how exactly Jews became classified as white during a period in which one's skin color alone did not guarantee whiteness. It seems like a logical conclusion today that European Jews would have been considered white, but other groups such as the Irish, who are now undeniably white, were considered second-class citizens throughout much of the nineteenth century. Those more familiar with the scholarship on the formation of American Jewish identity likely understand this negotiation, but it is not obvious to every potential reader. Nonetheless, *Jews on the Frontier* offers a crucial examination to help diversify the field.

Rabin analyzes how American Jewry struggled to create a unique identity throughout the nineteenth century as the Jewish population increased. She frequently discusses Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise of the Reform movement, who sought to create a unifying rite, or "*minhag* America," throughout the 1850s (p. 52). Such a notion would have served to create more unity among American Jews, but as Rabin notes, it was an impossible task. Without getting too in-depth into the differences between Ashkenazi and Sephardic customs, *Jews on the Frontier* demonstrates how congrega-

tions had to adapt to varying challenges brought on by their specific locations. Jews in Davenport, Iowa, adopted Wise's *Minhag America* in 1873, stating that they had searched for years for such a prayer book. Rabin notes that Wise's work was far from the only prayer book on the market, with others, like Benjamin Szold's *Israeliteish Prayerbook for Household Practice*, providing liturgies for the various needs that mobile Jews would need when they were off on their own (p. 87). Jews found themselves with different spiritual needs depending on where they were and how many fellow coreligionists were nearby.

Adherence to Halacha, or Jewish law, may have been the primary goal for Jewish immigrants to the United States when it came to religious observance; however, many mobile Jews learned that this was a nearly impossible task. Rabin includes the reflections of a Union soldier named Marcus Spiegel, who rarely observed Shabbat during his military service but once stumbled upon fellow Jews who invited him to a Shabbat lunch at a Jewish boardinghouse, and then two years later while serving in Baton Rouge found himself invited to the home of a local Jew for Shabbat dinner (p. 38). These rare moments for Spiegel and numerous other Jewish soldiers who served on both sides of the Civil War exemplify how Jews had to change their practices to fit into American society. Rabin states in her introduction that *Jews on the Frontier* is heavily supported by qualitative rather than quantitative data, which allows readers to better connect to the experiences of mobile Jews through various individual stories.

The book devotes ample time to the importance of Jewish and non-Jewish fraternal societies to Jews in building bonds with non-Jews as well as establishing a network for fellow Jews. The Masons typically become heavily associated with Protestantism, but Jews frequently joined their ranks across the country. Rabin states that "civic and political participation was a social pleasantry, but it was also an economic necessity," meaning

that Jews had to participate in fraternal orders such as the Masons to strengthen their business prospects (p. 36). Jews also utilized fraternal structures to create their own organizations such as B'nai B'rith that allowed members access to all lodges. Additionally, Rabin discusses how the formation of Jewish mutual aid societies helped provide health and life insurance to community members, a common phenomenon among immigrant communities although the book does not get into how widespread such societies were.

Overall, *Jews on the Frontier* is a compelling book about the process of Jews adapting to American life during the nineteenth century. Rabin could have contextualized the Jewish experience alongside those of other minorities; however, this does not detract much from Rabin's overarching argument of mobility playing a central role in the formation of American Judaism. *Jews on the Frontier* serves to fill in chronological and geographical gaps in the current Jewish historical scholarship.

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