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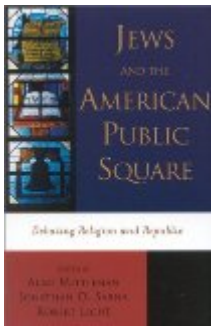

Alan Mittleman, Robert Licht, Jonathan D. Sarna, eds.. *Jews and the American Public Square: Debating Religion and Republic.* Lanham, Md. and Oxford, England: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002. x + 375 pp. $96.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7425-2123-0.

Reviewed by Daniel Greene

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In this provocative collection of essays, fourteen authors from a range of scholarly disciplines and public policy positions consider the relationship between Judaism and American public life. As Alan Mittleman explains in his well-crafted introduction, Jews have historically benefitted from the American republic's reluctance to aid or interfere with religious communities. Embracing "secular liberalism," most American Jews have advocated "freedom of religion," but also "freedom from governmental coercion or endorsement" (p. 3). Co-editors Mittleman, Robert Licht, and Jonathan D. Sarna, however, detect a sea change in late-twentieth-century America that prompted this volume as well as its companion, *Jewish Polity and American Civil Society*, both endowed by the Pew Charitable Trusts.[1] The problem is that, for an increasing portion of American Jews, "confidence in the liberal project has faltered" (p. 3). The decline of Jews' secular liberalism led to the call for new considerations of Judaism in the American public sphere. Mittleman convincingly argues that this question must move beyond relatively simple understandings of "church and state" to a more textured analysis of "religion and republic."

Essays by two leading historians of American Jewry open the book's first section, "Historical Dimensions," with mixed results. Naomi W. Cohen's essay, "An Overview of American Jewish Defense," meanders through a description of American Jewish defense organizations, including the "Big Three" -- American Jewish Congress, American Jewish Committee, and Anti-Defamation League. Cohen concludes: "defense has been more American than Jewish," (p. 43) presenting a binary that fails to adequately acknowledge American Jews' complex historic self-understanding. Cohen assumes a great deal of knowledge on the part of the reader, a problem made more acute because it is the opening essay in the book. A more expository essay, focusing on how Jewish strategies for defense have changed during the history of the republic, might have been more useful. In contrast, Sarna's historical essay is an excellent examination of Jews' historic "models of religion-state relations in the United States" (p. 48). He observes two strategies Jews have advocated in response to

"Christian America": one tactic emphasizes church-state separation and the other "stresses the broadly religious (as opposed to narrowly Christian) character of the American people" (p. 50). Sarna cogently provides historic texture to a question that readers should keep in mind throughout the remaining contributions: are Jews better off advocating strict separation of religion and republic, or can Jews fare just as well in a nation committed to religiosity in general, but to no specific religion in particular?

The broadest section of the volume, "Constitutional Dimensions," contains three essays, including Ralph Lerner's persuasive discussion of the American Founders' understanding of the relationship between religion and the public square. Lerner reminds his reader that the Founders held many "diverse opinions" about religion and the state, and that "to speak of a monolithic original intent" is "fatuous" (p. 79). He also highlights the irony that American freedom, religious tolerance, and individual rights all put in danger the "persistence or survival of a recognizably distinctive Jewry" (p. 83). Martin J. Plax examines the 1947 Supreme Court decision in ***Everson v. Board of Education of the Township of Ewing, et al.***, that advocated a "wall of separation between Church and State." He argues that ***Everson*** was a watershed decision because it depicted the United States as a "laboratory for a radical principle," specifically that the rule of law in America would be "sustained without the aid of religion" (p. 121). Marc D. Stern takes up a related question in the next essay, asking whether citizens in a democracy have a moral duty to each other without regard to religious beliefs.

Three essays under the heading "Political Dimensions" examine how Jewish concerns have been articulated in the political realm. Marshall J. Breger's contribution is written about (and for) those proverbial Washington, D.C. "beltway insiders," cataloging the alphabet soup of Jewish political advocacy organizations, such as "AIPAC, ZOA, JCPA, JINSA, NCSJ" (p. 160). Harvey Sicherman's much more coherent essay focuses on recent history, presenting the Joseph Lieberman paradox. Lieberman's 2000 vice-presidential nomination may indeed be "the ultimate sign of Jewish acceptance in America," but, at the same time, Lieberman's rhetoric and self-presentation during the campaign directly contradicted Jews' historical efforts to keep religion out of the public sphere. As Sicherman wryly notes, "American Jews wanted to see a Jew in the White House but not too Jewish a Jew" (p. 208). Sicherman rightly points to the tension between group loyalty and individual rights that was apparent in some Jews' skittish responses to Lieberman's public discourse about his Orthodoxy. Jack Wertheimer's thoughtful case-study, "The Jewish Debate over State Aid to Religious Schools," portrays a Jewish community in crisis. On the one hand day-school education is regarded as crucial to Jewish survival, yet state fudning for such institutions is contrary to the separation of religion and republic that the majority of American Jews have tended to endorse.

Two essays on the sociological dimensions of this question, by Sherry Israel and Sylvia Barack Fishman, raise the issue of changing expressions of Jewish loyalty in modern America. Israel notes that Jewish affiliation and expression may occur less frequently within a religious framework than it used to; however, she does not believe that this shift necessarily signals the demise of American Jewishness. Fishman focuses on family planning and abortion to demonstrate a "process of coalescence," in which the "texts of two cultures, American and Jewish, are merged" (p. 266). Fishman's essay provides a useful corrective to Cohen's polar understanding of Americanness and Jewishness, and echoes the idea of "synthesis" advanced by Sarna in an earlier essay.[2]

The book closes with the philosophical dimensions of strict separation between religion and republic. These three essays, especially the contribution by David G. Dalin, become somewhat

repetitive of claims made in previous pieces. In the strongest essay in this section, Hillel Fradkin examines the "confusion and even hypocrisy" (p. 313) of those Jews who publicly promote ***tikkun olam*** (repair of the world) while simultaneously arguing that overt religious expressions should be absent from public discourse. For a polemic against Jews' "public secularism," turn to the last essay by David Novak.

In this moment, when the American president advocates a role for faith-based organizations in solving social problems, and when religious organizations take full-page newspaper ads that cite Jesus in order to persuade the president to change his mind about declaring war,[3] more consideration about Americans' current and historic attitudes towards public religion and republic are welcome. This book successfully addresses that discussion for American Jews on many fronts. It may be a bit too advanced for an undergraduate audience, but a graduate seminar in American Judaism or American religion would do well to include some of these essays on a syllabus.

Notes

[1]. Alan Mittleman, Jonathan D. Sarna, and Robert Licht, eds., ***Jewish Polity and American Civil Society: Communal Agencies and Religious Movements in the American Public Sphere*** (Lanham, Md. and Oxford, England: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

[2]. Sarna, "The Cult of Synthesis in American Jewish Culture," ***Jewish Social Studies*** 5 (1998/99): 52-79.

[3]. ***New York Times*** (December 4, 2002), A33.

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