From Synagogue-Community to Community of Synagogues: A Turning Point in American History

by

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Introductory Remarks by
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The inauguration of any chair provokes celebration because the University has an important new resource for its principal business, the creation and transmission of knowledge. Inauguration of a chair also celebrates a commitment to future generations of students and scholars — and to the community outside the University's walls. The inauguration of the Belle and Joseph Braun Chair in American Jewish History is an occasion for particularly sweet celebration. After all, this chair will promote teaching, learning, research and scholarship in an area that is at the very core of this University's being.

We gather today not merely to celebrate; we gather in order to learn from the first Braun Professor of American Jewish History. We have an opportunity to preview what generations of Brandeis students will treasure — the powerful wit, driving curiosity and uncompromising erudition of Jonathan Sarna. In short, we will have a chance to watch a brilliant historian at work.

His writing testifies to Jonathan Sarna's ability to divine what most of us cannot: how the details of everyday life, how the details of everyday decisions, how the details of religious and civic life, illuminate the major social and ethical issues that challenge Jews in America and, indeed, have challenged people everywhere, at all times.

More than twenty centuries ago, Marcus Tullius Cicero characterized history as a witness that testifies to the passing of time, illumines reality, vitalizes memory and provides guidance in daily life. The historical craft of the first Braun Professor of American Jewish History more than satisfies Cicero's demanding criteria. Jonathan Sarna's work illumines a fading reality, vitalizes the most meaningful of memories, and provides needed and welcome guidance in daily life.
Inaugural Lecture by

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I am deeply moved and immensely grateful for this very great honor. I have to confess that I am full of doubts as to whether I deserve it, but happily some of those who bestowed it upon me are former teachers of mine. I long ago learned never to argue with them.

I am also immensely grateful to the late Joseph H. & Belle R. Braun, and to Mr. Larry Glick, who is with us today, for making this chair possible. Both Mr. Braun and Mr. Glick made their careers in the service of American law. They continue a remarkable American Jewish tradition of lawyers who, in addition to their legal work, have made valuable contributions to American Jewish life and to the study of American Jewish history. The American Jewish Historical Society, located on this campus, was founded, in part, by lawyers with this same set of commitments. Of course, the lawyer whom we most recall for his service to American law and to American Jewish life — a man who deeply appreciated the significance of the study of American Jewish history — was none other than Justice Louis D. Brandeis, for whom this university was named. It is wonderful to see us continuing this great Louis Brandeis tradition this afternoon.

I am particularly honored that my parents could be here today. This year marks twenty-five years since my father came to Brandeis University to serve as professor of Bible. Brandeis has been very much a part of our family ever since: both my brother and I attended university here, and now my son, the third generation, is on campus every day studying hard at the Lemberg Child Care Center.

The establishment of the Braun Chair in American Jewish History, which we honor this afternoon, is to my mind a significant turning point in the history of Jewish Studies here at Brandeis as well as an important development in the field of Jewish Studies as a whole. It symbolizes American Jewish history’s coming of age, and our determination here at Brandeis, in association with the American Jewish Historical Society on this campus, to become the center of this vital field, to train the men and women who will teach American Jewish history around the country and the world, and to provide intellectual leadership to the field through well researched books, articles, conferences, seminars, and lectures. There does not currently exist a university-based center of this sort: we have a magnificent opportunity to create it. I hope that we can take advantage of that opportunity in the years ahead.
Brandeis, of course, already has a great tradition in the study of American Jewish history and life, thanks to the pioneering work of my teachers here: Leon Jick, Marshall Sklare, and the late Ben Halpern, as well as Nathan Kaganoff and Bernard Wax of the Historical Society. Moreover, there, I believe, more scholars on this campus who have devoted at least part of their lives to the study of American Jewry than may be found anywhere else in the world—people in NEJS, History, American Studies, Political Science, literature, Sociology and so on. These are the resources on which I hope we can build. With God’s help I believe that Brandeis can become a truly world class center of American Jewish studies—a goal. I might add, that I am confident Justice Louis Brandeis himself would wholeheartedly have endorsed.

I thought that it would be appropriate today, having spoken about a historic turning point here at Brandeis, to look back at an earlier turning point in American Jewish history, one that to my mind has not been sufficiently explored and yet is of supreme importance, for it set the stage for the development of American Judaism as we know it. I refer to the move that took place in the second quarter of the nineteenth century in every major American city where Jews resided in substantial numbers—the move from synagogue-community to community of synagogues, truly one of the transforming events of American Jewish religious history.

To understand the change that took place requires first a bit of background. American synagogues were organized from the very beginning, probably as early as the 17th century, as full-scale synagogue-communities, called in each case kahal kadosh or kehillat kodesh, the holy community—that is what the prefix “k.k.” stands for in front of so many American synagogue names. What Jews meant by this was precisely what was meant in Europe by the same term: an all-embracing institution that both controlled every aspect of Jewish life and commanded allegiance from every Jew dwelling or sojourning within its ambit. Worship, life-cycle events, education, charity, kashrut, intra-Jewish disputes—anything, in short, affecting the life and well-being of Jews was part of the synagogue-community’s domain and fell under its responsibility. In a sense, the synagogue was the functional equivalent of the established church in the colonies which likewise had broad responsibilities, was organized hierarchically, and enjoyed monopolistic privilege. The advantages of this system, from a Jewish point of view, were considerable: the synagogue-community was an efficient means of meeting the needs of an outpost Jewish community. It promoted group solidarity and discipline, evoked a sense of tradition as well as a feeling of kinship toward similarly organized synagogue-communities throughout the Jewish world, and enhanced the chances that even small clusters of Jews, remote from the wellsprings of Jewish learning, could survive from one generation to the next.

The theory of the synagogue-community—the idea that each Jewish community should have one synagogue to which all Jews belonged and deferred—maintained its hold on American Jews throughout the colonial period, and for almost half a century even after the American Revolution. To be sure, in the wake of the Revolution, synagogues did become more democratic. They extended membership to
all Jewish males, not just those with property, and at least one congregation even set forth a detailed bill of rights for its members (the right to vote, the right to speak out at meetings, the right to be selected for synagogue honors, and so forth.) By 1805, synagogues had also stopped assigning seats on a strict hierarchical system, according to the social stratification of the community — the most important member receiving the best seat, the poorest and least consequential member the worst — and instead opened the seats up for purchase, so that in theory a poor person could put money away and buy the best seat in the house. This was yet another effort on the part of the American synagogue to conform to the democratic ethos of the larger society. But voluntaryism — specifically, the idea that Jews were free to belong to the synagogue community or not, and that disaffected Jews could withdraw and open up a competing synagogue — this idea, basic to American notions of religious freedom, had not taken hold at all, although that was the way that American Protestantism basically operated. Indeed, as late as 1820, the Charleston congregation, Beth Elohim, in its constitution, explicitly forbade competition:

No person or persons shall be sanctioned to combine for the purpose of erecting any other Synagogue or for uniting in any other unlawful Minyan, within five miles of Charleston; nor shall any person or persons, under the jurisdiction of this Congregation, be permitted under any pretence whatever to aid, join, or assist at any such unlawful Minyan or Combination. [Rule 8]

Shearith Israel Congregation in New York did not explicitly bar other minyanim, but it did require every Jew in NY, even non-members, to pay a 10 dollars per annum assessment. The law, incidentally — in case there are any New Yorkers in the room — remains on the congregation's books, so if you have not paid your assessment recently, I am sure that the congregation will be pleased to accept it.

Historical accuracy requires me to admit that by 1820 there had, in America, already appeared at least two exceptions to the hegemony of the synagogue-community. One was actually in Charleston where for a brief period in the 1780s the congregation split into two, one Portuguese, and the other German; but they were soon reconciled and the old structure was restored. The other and more significant exception took place in Philadelphia, where an Ashkenazic congregation — the first German synagogue in America — The Hebrew German Society Rodeph Shalom, was organized in 1802 (an antecedent minyan may have existed as early as 1795), making Philadelphia the first American city with two synagogues: Mikveh Israel and Rodephi Shalom. The Philadelphia situation, however, is unique because the Sephardic synagogue community, established in the American Revolution, had practically collapsed by the 1790s: Mikveh Israel had fewer than a dozen paying members at that time. So while this does adumbrate later developments, we are not dealing with the kind of conscious movement of dissent against traditional synagogue authority that we do find in the 1820s, the period to which I now turn.
The 1820s were a remarkable era in American Jewish history, paralleling a remarkable era in American history generally, the period of the Second Great Awakening and the beginning of the Jacksonian age. The Jewish community was still small — three to six thousand — but more of them than ever before were native-born. This was a decade when Jews began moving in a serious way to the west, a decade that saw a few extraordinary Jews emerge in American cultural and political life, and a decade that witnessed the first serious writings by American Jews on Judaism, largely polemical and apologetic pieces designed to counter Christian missionaries.

This was also the decade that witnessed the breakdown of the synagogue community in the two largest American Jewish communities of that time: New York and Charleston. The details of what happened in each of these communities have been ably recounted by Professor Jick in his The Americanization of the Synagogue and need not long detain us. In New York, a group of ambitious young Jews, mostly from non-Sephardic families, petitioned Shearith Israel’s leaders for the right to establish their own early worship service on Sabbath morning, run much less formally than the synagogue’s, with time out for explanations and instruction, without a formal leader and, revealingly, treating rich and poor alike [There are, to my mind, obvious parallels here to developments in early 19th c. Protestantism, although in some ways it sounds like they wanted to form a 1980s style Chavurah.] The petition of the young Jews was denied. The congregation made no effort to accommodate them, and so in 1825 they withdrew and formed a new congregation, B’nai Jeshurun, New York’s first Ashkenazic synagogue. Revealingly, they justified their secession on two grounds: First, on American grounds — the fact that “the wise and republican laws of this country are based upon universal toleration giving to every citizen and sojourner the right to worship according to the dictate of his conscience.” And second, on Jewish grounds, the fact that “the mode of worship in the Established Synagogue [note that term!]...is not in accordance with the rites and customs of the said German and Polish Jews.” Between them, the two arguments undermined the whole basis for the synagogue-community: and they did so with such rhetorical power that, two full decades later, Jews in Cincinnati, Ohio and Easton, Pennsylvania, who likewise were breaking away from established synagogue communities, borrowed the identical wording employed here (without of course giving credit) — powerful evidence, to my mind, that we are dealing in this period with a conscious movement from one mode of community to another, and not just with a series of random events.

Moving now to Charleston, we find some close parallels to the New York situation. Again the challenge came from young Jews, many of them native born, dissatisfied with synagogue life, heavily influenced by Unitarianism, and yet still deeply concerned about Jewish survival. They too petitioned for change — much more radical changes than those sought by the young Jews of New York — including an abbreviated service, vernacular prayers, a weekly sermon, and an end to traditional free will offerings in the synagogue. When their petition was dismissed out of hand they too seceded, in 1825, to form what their constitution called The Reforme-
Society of Israelites for Promoting True Principles of Judaism According to its Purity and Spirit — a forerunner of American Reform Judaism.

Much more could be said about these twin revolutions of 1825, why they occurred, why they occurred when they did, and the important differences between them. But my interest here is in the impact of these events. How did these challenges to the synagogue-community’s authority affect the subsequent history of American Judaism?

First, the secessions undermined the authority of the synagogue community, as well as the ideology that had sustained it. Henceforward, in larger communities, dissenters no longer needed to compromise their principles for the sake of consensus: they felt free to withdraw and start their own synagogue, which they did time and again. In New York, there were 2 synagogues in 1825, 4 in 1835, 10 in 1845, and over 20 in 1855. By the Civil War, every major American Jewish community had at least 2 synagogues, and larger ones like Philadelphia, Baltimore or Cincinnati had 4 or more.

Second, this new situation meant that, for the first time, synagogues competed with one another for members and for status. They thus had a new interest in attracting new members and in keeping existing ones satisfied. In community after community we see that synagogues emulated one another’s successes, exploited each other’s failures, and instituted sometimes dramatic changes to stave off membership losses. In Cincinnati, for example, the two major congregations — Bene Israel, and Bene Jeshurun, founded 17 years apart, moved for much of their history in lock-step with one another. When one introduced a change, the other followed; when one faltered, the other rose: each was, at different times, the leading synagogue in the city. Nationwide, this dynamic greatly strengthened American Judaism, for it meant that synagogues compensated for each other’s weaknesses. Jews dissatisfied by one synagogue could usually find another — or found another — that was more to their liking. Moreover, competition encouraged the creation of a full spectrum of American synagogues — a spectrum that eventually extended from ultra-Orthodox to radical Reform, each one appealing to its own group of supporters. This is a development that, I think, helped to prevent the kind of bifurcation between religious Jews and secular Jews that occurred elsewhere.

Third, the breakdown of the synagogue community altered the balance of power between the synagogue and its members. Henceforward, synagogues needed members more than members needed any particular synagogue. Before, when there was but one synagogue in every community, it could set standards and enforce them through coercive means — violators were fined, denied synagogue honors, and in extreme cases (very rare in America) they were excommunicated. Now, members facing punishment had the option of joining a different synagogue. As a result, the whole system of fines and punishments soon fell into disuse, and coercion gave way to persuasion. Particularly in larger communities, synagogues became more concerned with attracting members than with keeping them in line.
Fourth, the breakdown of the synagogue-community brought to an end the era of Sephardic hegemony in the American synagogue, an era that had lasted for well over a century after the Sephardim lost their numerical superiority. [It is now estimated that the Ashkenazim predominated in the community from about 1720.] As long as each community had had but one synagogue, Ashkenazim generally deferred to the Sephardim, not without tensions, for the Sephardim were the founders who had set the community's pattern: there were, in addition, economic and status considerations involved. Once members began to break away and set up their own synagogues, as in the case of New York, the principle of majority rule came into operation, and as a result practically all of the new synagogues that arose after 1825 were in one way or another Ashkenazic in custom; some followed the German variant, some the Polish variant, some the English variant; but they were not Sephardic.

Finally, the breakdown of the synagogue community brought about a total reorganization of America's Jewish communities along new, non-synagogue lines. Increasingly, synagogues came to represent not unity but diversity in American Jewish life; they reflected ritual, ideological and region-of-birth differences and promoted multiformity, or if you will, pluralism. To bind the community together, promote unity, and carry out some of the functions that the now delimited synagogues could no longer handle required new organizations capable of transcending these differences. So, beginning in the 1840s, new philanthropic, fraternal and defense organizations — B'nai B'rith, the Hebrew Benevolent Societies, the Board of Delegates of American Israelites, and others — moved in to fill the void. They sought to unite the community on a non-religious basis, emphasizing shared values and a common sense of peoplehood. From this time on, the structure of the American Jewish community effectively mirrored the federalist pattern of the nation at large: synagogues represented diversity in Jewish life, communal organizations (and today federations) symbolized unity in Jewish life, and the community as a whole balanced precariously between them. This has been, overall, a valuable tension in American Jewish history.

My time has run out, so let me just say that the transformation that I have been discussing here — what I called earlier the shift from synagogue-community to community of synagogues, with all of its implications — is to my mind, for reasons that I hope are now at least somewhat more clear, a defining moment in the history of American Judaism: perhaps the key moment, in the long process that Professor Jick has dubbed "The Americanization of the Synagogue." The transformation itself was astonishingly rapid, so much so that its proper significance has largely been overlooked. This is unfortunate, for the lasting legacy of this transformation is the broad structure of American Judaism as we still know it today.

Thank you very much.