

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO  
AMERICAN JUDAISM

Edited by Dana Evan Kaplan



2005

Afterword

The Study of American Judaism: A Look Ahead

JONATHAN D. SARNA

As the appearance of this *Cambridge Companion* amply demonstrates, the study of American Judaism has, at long last, come into its own. For much of the past half-century, scholars of American Jewish life neglected "religion" and focused upon the Jewish "people." Ethnic studies and American studies supplied the field's dominant paradigms, while religious studies, largely the province of Christians, languished in the shadows. Those who did pursue the study of the Jewish religion were, for the most part, rabbis. Trained in Classical Judaism, they examined American Judaism through the prism of Jewish texts and history, rather than through comparisons with American Protestants and Catholics. The stunning freshness of Lou Silberman's pioneering essay in 1964 on "Judaism in the United States in the Early Nineteenth Century,"<sup>1</sup> which examined the Charleston Reform Movement (1824) against the background of the rise of Unitarianism in that city, is the exception that proves the rule.

Religion is an inherently comparative subject. Unless one is familiar with at least two religious traditions, scholars like Diana Eck remind us, one cannot claim to understand even one. The best of the articles in this volume do make reference to the larger scholarship on American religion. Indeed, Jonathan Woocher's work on "civil religion" and Rela Mintz Geffen's study of "rites of passage" both apply to the study of Judaism concepts initially developed by scholars working in far different arenas. It is precisely this kind of cross-fertilization that the study of American Judaism demands.

Here I want to suggest five new directions for students of American Judaism to pursue. While in some cases familiar to students of American religion, these approaches and subjects have not been closely examined within American Judaism, and are not much reflected in this volume. They represent an agenda for the future.

(1) *Studies of religious practice.* "We know next-to-nothing about religion as practiced and precious little about the everyday thinking and doing of lay men and women," historian David Hall writes in a path-breaking volume entitled *Lived Religion in America*.<sup>2</sup> While his volume focuses on Catholics

and Protestants, the situation with respect to American Jews is no better. How have American Jews distinguished Shabbat from the rest of the week? How have they celebrated such widely practiced holidays as Passover, the High Holidays, and Chanukah? How have they conducted themselves in synagogue? How have they marked their homes as Jewish homes? A thick descriptive literature (as opposed to the prevailing prescriptive literature) would serve as a useful first step in answering such questions, but as readers of Robert Orsi's classic studies of *The Madonna of 115th Street* (1985) and *Thank You, St. Jude* (1996) know, to properly understand "lived religion" one must also pay attention to history, cultural context, gender, class, and the interrelationship of religion and life. Several articles in this *Cambridge Companion*, as well as studies by Jewish social scientists like Samuel Heilman and Riv-Ellen Prell, have begun to address aspects of religious practice, but unanswered questions abound. Until we do know more about the day-to-day religious lives of America's Jews – their rituals, their customs, the traditions that they have maintained and transformed over time – our understanding of American Judaism must remain woefully incomplete.

(2) *Studies of the Jewish book in America.* Jews have long prided themselves on being "the people of the book," but the role of books in American Jewish religious life has scarcely been examined. We know something about Jewish Bible translations, the history of the prayer book, the spread of Jewish libraries, and the growth of Jewish publishing in America.<sup>3</sup> But we know exactly nothing about Jewish scribal arts – the creation of handwritten Torah scrolls and of other handwritten ritual objects critical to Jewish religious life – and next-to-nothing about the production and distribution of printed sacred works like the Hebrew Bible, the Talmud, the Code of Jewish Law, and the mystical Zohar. A remarkable website ([www.hebrewbooks.org](http://www.hebrewbooks.org)) has recently made available on-line some 1280 Hebrew-language "*seforim*" (religious books) such as sermons, rabbinic responsa, and sacred commentaries published in America since 1860. The subculture of Orthodox Jews who wrote, read, published and distributed these books, however, has scarcely been penetrated by scholars, nor do we properly understand what the mere existence of this literature reveals. Robert Singerman's magisterial bibliography of *Judaica Americana* published in 1900<sup>4</sup> discloses that hundreds of volumes of Jewish religious literature likewise appeared in English and German in America, some of it dating back even earlier than 1860. This literature spans a much broader theological spectrum than its Hebrew counterpart, and was composed by a different group of Jewish religious leaders. But it too lies virtually unexplored. Even the contemporary Jewish publishing phenomenon known as The ArtScroll Library ([www.artscroll.com](http://www.artscroll.com)) – notwithstanding the remarkable range and distribution of its works – has largely

been ignored by students of American Judaism. Insights from scholars dealing with subjects like the "history of the book" and the development and spread of "Christian publishing" suggest possible avenues for future research. For now, though, even as Jewish books in America continue to proliferate, the study of the Jewish book in America languishes from neglect.

(3) *Local and Regional studies.* Anyone who travels across the United States knows that Judaism differs from region to region and from place to place across the land. The practice of Judaism in the synagogue and in the home, the relationship of Jews one to another and outwardly to their neighbors, the demands made upon rabbis, the public face of Judaism – all these (and more) look and feel different depending upon whether one is in the South, the West, the Midwest or the East, and likewise as one moves within each particular region of the country. Factors such as geography, culture, immigration patterns, the size, density, and make-up of the Jewish community, and the religious character of the general community help to explain these differences. They distinguish Judaism in New Orleans from Judaism in Atlanta or Miami, and account for the discernible religious differences that transform the character of local Judaism as one moves southwestward in Ohio from Cleveland to Columbus to Cincinnati or northwestward in California from San Diego to Los Angeles to San Francisco. The literature on American Judaism, taking its cue from the broader literature on American religion,<sup>5</sup> rarely notices or explains such differences, positing instead a homogenized "American Judaism" drained of enlivening regional and local flavorings. Community and synagogue histories, for the most part, are too narrowly conceived to focus upon questions of distinctiveness. But in the end, all religion, like all politics, *is* actually local. Understanding such local and regional variations – customs, practices and preferences; social and class composition; religious and cultural norms; everything, in short, that shapes the character of local and regional religious life – would help us to paint a richer, more nuanced, and more finely-grained portrait of American Judaism than any we now possess.

(4) *Transnational studies.* Students of American Judaism, like their counterparts who study other ethnic and religious groups in America, easily fall prey to the "fallacy of tunnel history." They pay all-too-little attention to the world at large and are (to use the current buzzword) frustratingly "internalist." This is particularly lamentable in the case of American Jews, who have always maintained close, even intimate family ties to Jews throughout the diaspora and in Israel. Paradoxically, while Judaism itself is the paradigmatic "transnational faith" – transcending borders and committed to the idea that all Jews, wherever they may live, are interconnected – those who study modern Judaism tend in their approaches and outlooks to be

much more provincial. The same problem besets the study of American Catholicism, which has been perceptively criticized by a recent scholar for divorcing the faith "from its international matrix, the original and enduring context that preserved its distinctiveness and ensured its survival as a minority faith in the United States."<sup>6</sup> A transnational understanding of American Judaism would explore more closely the involvement of European and, more recently, Israeli Jewish leaders in Jewish religious life in America – and vice versa. It would examine the ties linking American Jewry with the other major communities within the English-language Jewish diaspora: Canada, the Caribbean, England, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. It would reinterpret the role of rabbis and scholars who repeatedly crossed borders in search of learning, collegiality, and employment, and whose correspondence and publications likewise spanned the globe, shaping different Jewish communities' images of one another. In short, a transnational approach would remind us that American Judaism was never "an island entire of itself," and would help to restore American Judaism to its rightful place within a global universe.

(5) *Studies of Secular Judaism*. "The concept of religion," the great historian of American religion, Sydney E. Ahlstrom, wrote in 1972, "must be extended to include 'secular' movements and convictions, some of which opposed or sought to supplant the churches." "Agnosticism," he observed, "does not preclude religiosity and moral seriousness."<sup>7</sup> The study of American Judaism must likewise extend to include secular movements, particularly since they embraced, at their peak, tens of thousands of Jews and influenced far more. Socialists, Communists, Hebraists, Yiddishists, Zionists, Culturalists, Humanists, as well as self-proclaimed secularists, agnostics and atheists all insisted that Jewish life could thrive in America even in the absence of synagogue attendance, ritual practice, and traditional forms of Jewish education. Some of America's foremost Jews – Louis Brandeis and Abraham Cahan, for example – were devotedly secular. Unfortunately, secular forms of Judaism have not yet found their chronicler, so we know all too little about their history, their leading personalities, their many conflicting ideologies, their values, their folk practices, and their "sacred" texts.<sup>8</sup> What we do know is that Jewish secularism has played a significant role in the history of American Judaism – one that deserves to be better understood and appreciated.

If it does not reflect these proposed future directions for the field, *The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism* does summarize much of what we know today as we mark Judaism's 350th anniversary on American soil. Looking ahead to the 21st century, a new and exciting era of creative scholarship awaits, taking its cue from the variable, vital, frequently chaotic, and always kaleidoscope configurations of American Judaism itself.

## Notes

1. Lou H. Silberman, *American Impact: Judaism in the United States in the Early Nineteenth Century*. The B. G. Rudolph Lectures in Judaic Studies (Syracuse: 1964), reprinted in A. Leland Jamison, *Tradition and Change in Jewish Experience* (Syracuse: Syracuse University, 1978), 106–140.
2. David D. Hall, *Lived Religion in America: Toward A History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), vii.
3. Jonathan D. Sarna and Nahum M. Sarna, "Jewish Bible Scholarship and Translations in the United States," *The Bible and Bibles in America*, ed. Ernest S. Frerichs (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 83–116; Sharona R. Wachs, *American Jewish Liturgies* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1997); Dana Evan Kaplan (ed.), *Platforms and Prayer Books* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002); Robert Singerman, "Books Weeping for Someone to Visit and Admire Them: Jewish Library Culture in the United States, 1850–1910," *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore* 20 (1998), 99–144; Jonathan D. Sarna, *JPS: The Americanization of Jewish Culture 1888–1988* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988); Jonathan D. Sarna, "Jewish Publishing," *A History of the Book in America*, vol. 4, eds. Carl F. Kaestle and Janice Radway (forthcoming).
4. Robert Singerman, *Judaica Americana: A Bibliography of Publications to 1900* (2 vols. New York: Greenwood Press, 1990).
5. A new series of volumes entitled "Religion By Region," edited by Mark Silk for Altamira Press, promises to address regional differences in American religion.
6. Peter R. D'Agostino, *Rome in America: Transnational Catholic Ideology from the Risorgimento to Fascism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 6.
7. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New York: Yale University Press, 1972), xiv.
8. Saul L. Goodman (ed.), *The Faith of Secular Jews* (New York: Ktav, 1976) is the best English-language source.