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# TOWARD AN AMERICAN JEWISH CULTURE: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON JEWISH CONTINUITY

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A publication of the  
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*"Acquire wisdom for your soul,  
And it shall be a crown upon your head."*



# JEWISH CULTURE: ADVANCING THE CAUSE OF JEWISH CONTINUITY

A Symposium Sponsored by the  
National Foundation for Jewish Culture

*September 21, 1992 at Brandeis University*

## MODERATOR

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## Jewish Scholarship and American Jewish Continuity

*Presented by Dr. Jonathan Sarna,  
Braun Professor of American Jewish History,  
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To respond to the question that has been posed this evening — the age-old question of Jewish culture and Jewish continuity — I would like to take us all back a century to the late 19th century, a moment of crisis in American Jewish life. Never before then had the American Jewish community been challenged in so many ways. For one thing, the community faced an unparalleled stream of Jewish immigrants, most of them from Eastern Europe, where conditions for Jews had deteriorated both economically and politically. Within a few decades, America's 250,000 Jews would have to absorb more than two million Jews, for the most part Jews who differed from them both culturally and religiously. (The native Jews were overwhelmingly from Germany and central Europe; the immigrants came mostly from Russia and Eastern Europe.)

Beyond this, the American Jewish community faced a growing wave of anti-Semitism at home. Social discrimination against Jews was on the rise;

increasingly, Jews were kept out of clubs and resorts; soon quotas would also restrict them from many professions and universities. Where Jews had assumed that America was different — here finally Jews could find full equality — Jews increasingly found that America was not so different. Here, too, Jews faced confining restrictions on account of their religion.

Finally the late 19th century American Jewish community witnessed an alarming crisis of faith. A new religious movement called Ethical Culture was proving attractive to young Jews, some of whom were abandoning Judaism to join its ranks. Unitarianism too found many converts among the Jewish people. In addition, inter-marriage had begun to rise among

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scholarly research.

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native-born American Jews; even one of the daughters of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, the great founder and leader of Reform Judaism, had married a non-Jew. Suddenly, Reform Judaism found itself on the defensive: Did its brand of Jewish religious liberalism really hold the key to Jewish survival? Many Jews, particularly young Jews alarmed at the manifold challenges

that the American Jewish community faced and fearing for Judaism's survival, called for a new movement of Jewish renewal. Unless the community marshalled its resources to meet the crises of the day, they warned, Jewish continuity would be seriously imperilled.

Now, as everybody here knows, the American Jewish community met the manifold challenges of the late 19th century. Immigrants were absorbed, anti-Semitism was fought and Jewish religious life was revitalized. What I find striking, however, is the extent to which Jewish culture and particularly Jewish scholarship played a role in bringing that transformation about. One might have expected the American Jewish community to have poured all of its limited resources into organizations that directly focused on communal service for immigrants, communal defense against anti-Semitism, on synagogues to strengthening the Jewish faith. In fact, significant sums were also directed toward strengthening the fabric of American Jewish life by cultivating, amazingly enough, Jewish scholarship.

So it was, to take just to take a few examples, that the Jewish Publication Society was founded in 1888 and published Jewish books in English. The American Jewish Historical Society was founded 1892 to further the scholarly study of American Jewry's past. The year 1898 witnessed an ambitious plan to produce a full scale Jewish encyclopedia in America, a goal finally realized eight years later with the publication of one of the most significant cultural works ever produced by the American Jewish community, the *Jewish Encyclopedia*. And then in 1902 one of the world's greatest Jewish scholars, Solomon Schechter, was brought to America (at considerable expense) to preside over the newly reorganized Jewish Theological Seminary, which Schechter soon transformed into a highly important center of Jewish scholarship and creativity, complete with a great new Jewish library.

Why did the American Jewish community and Jewish leaders support these undertakings — indeed, they supported them quite handsomely even in the face of their crisis. The reason, I think, is they understood that long term solutions to the challenges of American Jewish life required long term capital investment designed to strengthen the cultural fabric of American Jewish life. Plainly and simply, they knew that if American Jewry were to continue and thrive, it needed fresh ideas — creative new solutions to daunting new problems. The old paradigms were not working, the situation for Jews in America had changed, and there was an urgent need to find new and different responses to the dilemma of Jewish continuity in the American environment.

When they invested their money, nobody quite

knew what those solutions should be, but they did know, both from their knowledge of history and from their own experience, that creative ideas depended upon scholarly research. Just as following the destruction of the Temple in the year 70, Rabbi Johanan Ben Zakkai had saved Judaism by establishing a new scholarly center in Jabneh that effectively reshaped Judaism to meet the new circumstances of the Jewish people in the first century, so American Jews required a new scholarly center to help forge a viable American Judaism for the 20th century. And that in fact is what happened; indeed, the investment in American Jewish culture and scholarship paid off handsomely; it was one of the best investments the American Jewish community ever made. A whole series of new and important ideas for reinvigorating Jewish life in America emerged — everything from American Zionism, Conservative Judaism, cultural pluralism, Reconstructionism, Hebraism and Yiddishism to the modern American synagogue-center, the Federation movement, and new forms of American Jewish communal organization. Obviously, scholars did not accomplish all of this work alone, but they did supply intellectual leadership at critical moments. The result is that Judaism in America has survived until now, and in no small measure that seems to me to have been the result of that investment in Jewish scholarship and culture that Jewish leaders made a century ago.

Now that doesn't mean that we are totally out of the woods. The American Jewish community today stands once again at a crossroads: Once again we need to search for new and creative solutions to the great challenges that Israel, the Holocaust, inter-marriage, feminism and a wide range of other contemporary movements and social phenomena pose to American Jewish continuity. There is no shortage of organizations, old and new, that seek to meet these challenges, and that is unquestionably a good thing. but as was true a century ago, and 19 centuries ago, so now we need to remember that scholars too have a critical role to play in forging solutions to these great contemporary challenges. And here the role of the National Foundation for Jewish Culture will, I believe, prove highly significant. For, if I may echo a recent reference book on American Jewish organizations:

The National Foundation for Jewish Culture has had a major impact on the life of the American Jew. With its record support of higher learning, in planning, in identifying priorities, in developing cooperative ventures, and in community service, it has taken its place among the key contributors to the survival of the American Jewish community.