

Ideology and Rhetoric:
Constructing America

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Bożenna Chylińska

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AMERICA AS IT OUGHT TO BE: THE CONFLICT BETWEEN JEWISH RHETORIC AND AMERICAN REALITIES¹

JONATHAN D. SARNA

It is a great honor for me to be here in Warsaw. My grandfather, Jacob Sarna, as well as my great-grandfather, Simha Sarna, and my great-great-grandfather, Binyamin Sarna, were born not too many kilometers from here in Lubraniec. Great Grandpa Simha moved to my great-grandmother's hometown of Konin about 1892, where my grandfather grew up. The Sarnas left Konin for London in 1913, which was enormously fortunate for me. On July 13, 1942, the last remaining Jews of Konin were murdered by the Nazis and their local collaborators.² I am the first of my immediate family ever to return to Poland. I am most grateful to the Polish Association for American Studies and particularly to Prof. Bożenna Chylińska for making my trip possible.

Your conference this year focuses on "Ideology and Rhetoric in the Construction of America." All nations, Benedict Anderson reminds us, are, to some extent, ideological and rhetorical constructs (Anderson calls them "imagined communities").³ This is particularly true of a diverse and pluralistic nation like the United States which is continually absorbing new immigrants. Generation after generation, America transforms immigrants, and immigrants, in turn, transform America. That, in a nutshell, is what makes America at once dynamic and contentious.

My topic this afternoon, however, is not America as a whole, but rather its Jewish community—itsself something of an imagined community. Jews in America today number 5-6 million (less than 2% of the American population).⁴ Some of these Jews have deep roots in the country dating all the way back to the colonial era. Others are themselves recent immigrants from the Former Soviet Union or elsewhere.

¹ This essay is based on a keynote lecture which Professor Sarna delivered at the convention of the Polish Association for American Studies, organized by Prof. Bożenna Chylińska from the University of Warsaw, and held in Warsaw, Poland, in October 2006.

² On the Jews of Konin, see Richmond, *Konin: A Quest; for the Sarnas*, see Sarna Araten, *Jacob Sarna Here and There*, 5-13.

³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

⁴ For recent estimates, see *American Jewish Year Book* 105 (2005), 101-104.

The vast majority fall somewhere in the middle; more often than not, their ancestors arrived on America's shores during the first quarter of the twentieth century (an era of large-scale Jewish immigration). The American Jewish community today is fundamentally pluralistic: it embraces Sephardic Jews whose traditions go back to Iberia; Ashkenazic Jews who trace their traditions to medieval Germany; and Mizrahi (Eastern) Jews who traces their roots to Persia and the Arab states. The American Jewish community is also religiously and culturally diverse, embracing a wide spectrum from fervently Orthodox Judaism to militantly secular Judaism and all points in between.

It may seem foolhardy to generalize about such a diverse group. Nevertheless, one can discern particular rhetorical themes that recur in American Jewish culture over a long period of time. These themes, I argue, have shaped the community's worldview, notwithstanding the fact that rhetoric and reality have diverged more than most people are willing to admit. Jewish beliefs about America, even if not quite borne out by evidence, reflect American Jews' most ardent hopes and desires. They reveal much about the America that Jews would like to construct.

I am going to focus here on three such themes, all of them characterized by the following: (1) they began prior to the Civil War and continued past World War II; (2) they were not confined to any one group of Jews (Reform, Orthodox etc.) but spanned the religious and political spectrum; (3) they helped Jews to define for themselves and for others what made the American Jewish community distinct or exceptional—different, at least in its own eyes, from Jewish communities in Europe and the Middle East; and (4) they idealized America, revealing far more about Jewish aspirations and dreams than about the realities of American life.

The first rhetorical theme is the boast that in America even a Jew can be President of the United States—this is what I like to call “the myth of the Jewish President.”⁵ Like many myths, its roots are firmly grounded in a great truth: the fact that the United States Constitution in Article VI declares that “no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.” This was a landmark in religious liberty. Every major country in the world, when the Constitution came into effect, including England, *did* require officeholders to take some kind of religious oath (“on the faith of a Christian”), thereby effectively barring Jews from public office.⁶

Even as they granted Jews legal equality, however, America's founders considered the idea of a Jewish President to be as unlikely as the idea of a Muslim President—indeed, in the public mind, the two were frequently linked.⁷ In 1788, when the Constitution was being debated in North Carolina, its governor, Samuel

⁵ See Sarna, “The Myth of the Jewish President,” 143-144.

⁶ *The Founders' Constitution*, 633-647, esp. 639.

⁷ See Spellberg, “Could A Muslim Be President,” 485-506.

Johnston, discussed and largely dismissed the possibility that “Jews, Mahometans, pagans, &c.” might ever be elected to “the office of President or other high office.”⁸ Most Americans apparently agreed, which is why the very few Jews who actually ran for public office during America’s first century experienced quite substantial prejudice.

Nevertheless, Jews exalted in the hope that in America a Jew *could* be President—the theory was far more important than the practice. In 1807, for example, Myer Moses assured an audience at the Charleston Hebrew Orphan asylum that “any among us may rise to the **first offices** in our country should we have talents and popularity to lead us to those places of honor and emolument.” He even cherished the fond hope that from among the young Jewish orphans there might spring a George Washington or a Thomas Jefferson!⁹ In 1823, Mordecai Noah, the New York Jewish editor and politician, humorously offered himself as the first Jewish President. “It would be an unanswerable proof of the perfect freedom of our political institutions,” he wrote. It would mark “the arrival of that very millennium for which we have been many years praying and paying.”¹⁰ In the middle of the nineteenth century, the Protestant novelists Joseph Holt Ingraham, impressed by Senator Judah P. Benjamin of Louisiana, ruminated about a Jewish President (“Would any man refuse to vote for him *because* he is a Jew?”).¹¹ A Jewish President became the subject of American novels in 1913 and 1978.¹² In 1964, Barry Goldwater, who was of Jewish descent, actually did run for president on the Republican ticket (prompting the humorist Harry Golden to quip that he always knew the first Jewish president would be an Episcopalian).¹³ By the late 20th century, identifying Jews talked seriously of actually becoming America’s first Jewish president.¹⁴ And in the famous 2000 election, an Orthodox Jew, Senator Joseph Lieberman, almost did become vice-president.¹⁵ But for all of the speculations and jokes concerning the first Jewish president, no Jew has ever risen to that position. Time and again, rhetoric and reality diverged.

The myth—or hope—that a Jew could become President of the United States nevertheless remains important. “America is different,” the myth cries out; in

⁸ Elliot, ed., *The Debates in the Several State Conventions*, 198-200; Sarna and Dalin, *Religion and State*, 75-77.

⁹ Moses, *An Oration Delivered Before the Hebrew Orphan Society*, 7. Italics added.

¹⁰ *National Advocate*, Oct 10, 1823, 2 c.2; see Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew*, 43-44.

¹¹ Harap, *The Image of the Jew in American Literature*, 58; see Ingraham, *The Sunny South*, 307-308.

¹² Copley, *The Impeachment of President Israels*; Halberstam, *The Wanting of Levine*.

¹³ As quoted in Will, “The Thinking Person’s Choice.”

¹⁴ See, for example, New York borough president Andrew Stein as quoted in *New York Times Magazine*, 6 November 1977, 47.

¹⁵ See my comments in *Forward*, August 11, 2000, 3.

America the highest office in the land—the seat of power—is open to Jews. This symbolizes to American Jews their equality and unlimited potential. It helps Jews and Christians coexist in a nation where both assume that anything and everything is possible. It reinforces deeply held beliefs concerning American exceptionalism. “Only in America,” Senator Lieberman declared when he was nominated.¹⁶ While something of an exaggeration—Jews have also attained high office in countries stretching from Austria to Singapore—his comment reflects a widely-felt sense that the history of Judaism in America is both special and distinct. By repeating that a Jew “can” be president of the United States, Jews suppress the question as to why, after so many years, that still has not happened.

A second theme that recurs in Jewish writing about America is separationism: the belief that in America—more than anywhere else where Jews have settled, more, indeed, than in contemporary Israel—a high wall separates religion from the state. This belief too is rooted in a great truth: the First Amendment to the United States Constitution declares that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The phrase “wall of separation” does not appear in the Constitution—contrary to what many Jews believe—but it is found in an 1802 letter from Thomas Jefferson to the Danbury, Connecticut Baptist Association, and has subsequently been invoked by the U.S. Supreme Court.¹⁷

Jews have regularly touted First Amendment guarantees as proof that America is different. As early as 1825, a Jewish immigrant named Aaron Phillips wrote back to his relatives in Bavaria that “Here we are all the same, all the religions are honored and respected and have the same rights.”¹⁸ More recently, Charles Liebman and Jonathan Woocher have described belief in the separation of church and state as part of the “civil religion” of American Jews, arousing their “deepest loyalties and passions.”¹⁹

Nevertheless, and notwithstanding all of this rhetoric, Jews have long understood that American society is a heavily Christian society, and as a result many of its norms are Christian as well. To this day, for example, numerous states restrict commercial activities on Sunday in deference to the culture of the majority. These so-called blue laws date back to the colonial Puritans who, as part of their religious

¹⁶ A film about Lieberman’s candidacy carried this same title; for information see http://www.7thart.com/joomla/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=132 (accessed November 27, 2006).

¹⁷ Jefferson’s letter to the Danbury Baptists (January 1, 1802) is reprinted in Wilson and Drakeman, *Church and State in American History*, 78-79; and was cited by the U.S. Supreme Court in the case of *Everson v. Board of Education of Ewing Township* 330 U.S. 1 (1947) at 16.

¹⁸ Quoted in Sarna, *American Judaism*, 65.

¹⁹ Liebman, “Reconstructionism in American Jewish Life,” *American*, 68; Woocher, *Sacred Survival*, 94-95.

teachings greatly strengthened observance of the Sunday Sabbath prohibiting both work and recreation on that day. Religious motivations underlay these regulation—many of which explicitly referred to Sunday as “Lord’s Day”—but they also came to be defended on the basis of social justice: they guaranteed all workers a day of rest and the freedom to attend church. Still, Jews, Seventh Day Baptists, and others who observe **Saturday** as the day of rest suffered harshly under these laws for well over a century. Where most Americans worked six days a week, they could work only five. On Saturday they rested to uphold the demands of the Lord, and on Sunday they rested to uphold the demands of the state. Immigrant and poor Jews faced a stark choice: they could either violate the tenets of their faith (by working on Saturday), or they could starve.²⁰

In 1838, Philadelphia Jews in a memorial (that exists only in a draft) questioned “the right and propriety” of a “majority, in a republican country [like America], to impose *religious* obligations upon the minority.” They sought to “prohibit any future Legislature from imposing any fine, or other penalties, upon Jews or other observers of the seventh day.”²¹ But to no avail. Over and over, Jewish efforts to overturn these laws, or to gain exemption from them, came to naught. State legislatures, state courts, and in 1961, the United States Supreme Court itself, upheld Sunday closing laws as legal. Only the advent of the five day week and pressure from large-scale merchants led to the repeal, in recent years, of many of these laws, but by no means all of them

What I find so significant is that these age-old laws, for all of the hardship that they wrought upon observant Jews, made almost no dent in Jewish rhetoric concerning religious liberty. Steadfastly, the bulk of Jews committed themselves to separationist ideals. Realities, unpleasant as Jews may have found them, did not alter their perception of what America should be. They talked as if the “wall of separation” were a reality rather than a dream.

One can witness this same curious behavior, to this day, with respect to the American national holiday of Christmas. Christmas, remember, is the only overtly Christian holiday that is a national holiday in the United States. It possesses special legal status: on Christmas, banks and commercial stores are closed and no mail is delivered. Non-Christians, like Jews and Muslims, as well as Christians who do not celebrate Christmas or celebrate it at another time—inevitably feel left out. However much Jews may imagine and argue that the Constitution separates religion and state by a high wall of separation, the annual celebration of Christmas in the United States seems to prove otherwise.²²

²⁰ Sarna and Dalin, *Religion and State*, 139-165; Finkelman, *Religion and American Law*, passim.

²¹ Sarna and Dalin, *Religion and State*, 141-142.

²² Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas*; Sarna and Dalin, *Religion and State*, 216-223.

Through the years, Jews have responded to Christmas in diverse ways. Some celebrated Christmas as a national holiday, with gift-giving and a tree, but without ascribing any religious significance to the holiday. The great Jewish Supreme Court Justice, Louis Brandeis, celebrated Christmas this way. In 1900, he reassured his young daughters, who were away visiting relatives in New York, that "the Christmas tree and Santa Claus are very anxious to see you."²³ Others have firmly rejected Christmas. "The observance of the day which marks the birth of the Savior," the American Jewish Congress insisted in 1946, "is nothing and can be nothing but a Christian religious holiday."²⁴ Of course, this fails to explain how, in a country where church and state are supposedly separated, Christmas managed to become a national holiday in the first place. Still others magnified the Jewish half-holiday of Chanukah into a kind of substitute for Christmas, with Chanukah candelabra standing opposite Christmas trees, even though Chanukah in America is not a national holiday nor does it always coincide with the Christmas season. Perhaps the most telling of all Jewish responses to Christmas is the well-known practice of escaping—to the movies, to a resort, anywhere where Christmas can be put out of mind. In so doing, Jews do not just hide from the widespread celebration of a holiday which is not theirs, they also, I believe, hide from the challenge that Christmas poses to their understanding of America itself. On all other days of the year, Jews may be able to make the case that church and state are utterly separate in America, but not on Christmas. On December 25th, more than on any other day, Jewish rhetoric and American realities diverge.²⁵

This brings me to the third and final rhetorical theme that has shaped the American Jewish community's worldview: the claim (I take this from an article on Jewish civil religion) that "There is nothing incompatible between being a good Jew and a good American, or between Jewish and American standards of behavior. In fact for a Jew, the better an American one is the better Jew one is."²⁶ I have elsewhere described this as the "cult of synthesis in American Jewish culture," the belief that Judaism and Americanism reinforce one another, the two traditions converging in a common path.²⁷

The roots of this idea are easily traced all the way back to the Puritans, who, for their own reasons and within a definite supersessionist framework, linked their experiences with those of the Israelites of old, and over time helped to define America in terms drawn from the Hebrew Bible. The compatibility that they found between

²³ *The Family Letters of Louis D. Brandeis*, 85.

²⁴ *Congress Weekly*, December 20, 1946, 3-4, as quoted in Sarna, "Is Judaism Compatible with American Civil Religion?" in *Religion and the Life of the Nation*, 160.

²⁵ Sarna, "Is Judaism Compatible With American Civil Religion," 152-173.

²⁶ Liebman, "Reconstructionism in American Jewish Life," 68.

²⁷ Sarna, "The Cult of Synthesis in American Jewish Culture," 52-79; parts of what follows are drawn from this article.

themselves and the Jews (*"New England they are like the Jews as like as like can be"*²⁸) was largely typological in nature with the Jews representing the past, and their conversion the promise of the future. Still the nexus between America and Jew had been established.

American Jews began to draw on these themes for their own purposes in the nineteenth century. Mordecai Noah, the early 19th century American Jewish leader whom we have already quoted on the presidency, argued on several occasions, in speeches directed to Christians, that the American Indians were originally Jews—descendants of the Lost Ten Tribes. He also linked the Puritans to the Jews. In a letter inviting Senator Daniel Webster to a Jewish charity dinner, for example, he reminded the Massachusetts senator that "your Puritan ancestors lived, a hundred years ago, under the Mosaic laws and flourished under the same government to which David and Solomon added power, glory and splendor."²⁹ These writings provide early examples of the political use of synthesis to legitimate Jews' place in America and to demonstrate their patriotism and sense of belonging.

The American Jewish Historical Society, founded in 1892, privileged the goal of synthesis above all others, pointing to the role of Jews in the founding of America, in the colonial era, in the American Revolution and so forth. The Society put forward a "Jewish" reading of American history that strengthened the faithful in their belief that Americanism and Judaism walked happily hand-in-hand.³⁰

Sermons reinforced this cult. One example among many I have collected is an 1891 address by Cincinnati's Rabbi David Philipson, entitled "Judaism and the Republican Form of Government." "Judaism," it concludes, "is in perfect harmony with the law of the land; the two agree perfectly because they can never come into conflict."³¹

Later twentieth century American Jewish thinkers scarcely deviated from these ideas. Arnold Eisen shows that such diverse American Jewish religious leaders as Leo Jung, Samuel Belkin, Abba Hillel Silver, Jacob Rader Marcus, Nelson Glueck, Louis Finkelstein, Simon Greenberg and Robert Gordis all argued in various ways for the compatibility of Judaism and American democracy.³²

The pre-eminent twentieth-century exemplar of American Jewish synthesis was the aforementioned U.S. Supreme Court Justice and Zionist leader Louis D. Brandeis. In the American Jewish imagination, he came to embody the pinnacle of

²⁸ Folger, *A Looking Glass for the Times* (1676) as quoted in Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 77.

²⁹ *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society III* (1903), 186-187; see Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew*, 135-137.

³⁰ Sarna, "Cult of Synthesis," 55; Gurock, "From Publications to American Jewish History," 165-172; Robinson, "The Invention of American Jewish History," 309-320.

³¹ Philipson, "Judaism and the Republican Form of Government," 53.

³² Eisen, *The Chosen People in America*, 36-40.

this ideal. Memorializing Brandeis in the *American Jewish Year Book*, the Zionist leader and jurist Louis E. Levinthal referred to synthesis over and over: "It was in his very being that these two—Americanism and Jewishness—were synthesized," he wrote of Brandeis. "He was a synthesis of two worlds."³³

American Jewish naming patterns, holiday commemorations, and folk art have similarly reflected the cult of synthesis. All paid rhetorical tribute to the proposition that the dual identities of the American Jew, simultaneously American and Jewish, were complementary and mutually enhancing. The rhetoric served as the medium through which Jews defined both for themselves and for others "the promise of American life" —a projection of the world as they wished it to be.³⁴

Reality, we have seen, was far more complicated. Christmas reminded Jews that they were a religious minority. So did the Jewish high holidays, in the fall, when a Jewish baseball player like Sandy Koufax famously had to decide whether to observe the sacred Jewish fast day of Yom Kippur or to pitch in the baseball world series scheduled for that day. (He picked Yom Kippur and his team lost the game.)³⁵ So, too, perhaps, did the fact that no Jew has ever been elected President. So more broadly, do political issues and cultural issues, and even the question of whom to marry. All belie the easy synthesis that rhetoric forged. All highlight tensions between assimilation and identity, between being an American and being a Jew.

Yet it would, I believe, be a mistake simply to dismiss these great rhetorical themes of American Jewish life as delusion and fantasy. They are too deeply rooted, too widespread, too sacred, too hegemonic (in Gramscian terms³⁶) to be trivialized or brushed aside. At a deep level, they represent the exultant hopes of the American Jewish community: the conviction that in America, more than anywhere else in the diaspora, Jews can win acceptance as equals. The America that Jews describe is, in the final analysis, not America as it is, but America as Jews think it ought to be: an America where religion and state are separated, an America where Judaism is on a par with all other faiths, an America where the loyalty and patriotism of Jews are unquestioned, an America where Jews too can dream that their child will grow up to be President of the United States. Reality?—Not yet. But for America's Jews, this does represent a noble, indeed a sustaining dream.

³³ Levinthal, "Louis Dembitz Brandeis," 49, 51; see Sarna, "The Greatest Jew in the World Since Jesus Christ, 346-364.

³⁴ Sarna, "Cult of Synthesis," 60-75.

³⁵ Leavy, *Sandy Koufax*, 169-195.

³⁶ Williams, *Keywords*, 117-118; Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," 5-27.

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