

American Judaism in Historical Perspective

David W. Belin Lecture in American Jewish Affairs

10

Presented March 8, 2003
at the
Jean and Samuel Frankel Center for Judaic Studies
The University of Michigan

American Judaism in Historical Perspective

Jonathan D. Sarna

Ann Arbor
Jean and Samuel Frankel Center for Judaic Studies
The University of Michigan
2003

Jean and Samuel Frankel Center for Judaic Studies
3032 Frieze Building, The University of Michigan 48109-1285

©2003 Regents of the University of Michigan, Jean and Samuel Frankel
Center for Judaic Studies. For copyright permissions, contact the Frankel
Center for Judaic Studies.

Printed in the United States of America.

Sarna, Jonathan. 1955 –
American Judaism in Historical Perspective

ISBN 1.881759.09.1

\$5.00

Foreword

The David W. Belin Lecture in American Jewish Affairs provides an academic forum for the discussion of contemporary Jewish life in the United States. It was established in 1991 through a generous gift from the late David W. Belin of Des Moines and New York. Mr. Belin, who in six and a half years earned undergraduate, master of business administration, and law degrees from the University of Michigan, all with high distinction, had a distinguished legal career including public service as Counsel to the Warren Commission Investigating the Assassination of President Kennedy and Executive Director of the Rockefeller Commission Investigating the CIA. He also served the American Jewish community in a variety of leadership positions at the national level and was the founder of the Jewish Outreach Institute. In endowing this annual lectureship, he stated that his primary motivation was "concern for the future of American Jewry, both from the perspective of Jewish Americans as well as from the perspective of all Americans in light of the manifold contributions that Jews have made to the growth and development of our wonderful nation." David Belin passed away on January 17, 1999.

Dr. Jonathan Sarna is one of America's foremost commentators on American Jewish history, religion, and life. He is the Joseph H. and Belle R. Braun Professor of American Jewish History at Brandeis University and served for six years as chair of its Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies. He now chairs the Academic Advisory and Editorial Board of the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati. He has written, edited, or co-edited seventeen books. Dr. Sarna has conducted extensive research on the history of American Judaism, which he is currently preparing for publication for Yale University Press. The volume will be the first full-scale history of American Judaism in half a century.

Todd M. Endelman
William Haber Professor of Modern
Jewish History
Director of the Jean and Samuel Frankel
Center for Judaic Studies

I

Thirty years ago, when I first became interested in American Jewish history, I mentioned my interest to a scholar at a distinguished rabbinical seminary and he was absolutely appalled. "American Jewish history," he growled, "I'll tell you all that you need to know about American Jewish history: The Jews came to America, they abandoned their faith, they began to live like *goyim*, and after a generation or two they intermarried and disappeared." "That," he said, "is American Jewish history; all the rest is commentary. Don't waste your time. Go and study Talmud."

I did not take this great sage's advice, but I have long remembered his analysis, for it reflects, as I now recognize, a long-standing fear that Jews in America are doomed to assimilate, that they simply cannot survive in an environment of religious freedom and church-state separation. In America, where religion is totally voluntary, where religious diversity is the norm, where everyone is free to choose his or her own rabbi and his or her own brand of Judaism – or, indeed, no Judaism at all – many, and not just rabbinical school scholars, have assumed that Judaism is fated sooner or later to disappear. Freedom, the same quality that made America so alluring for persecuted faiths, also brought with it the freedom to make religious choices: to modernize Judaism, to assimilate, to intermarry, to convert. American Jews, as a result, have never been able to assume that their future, as Jews, is guaranteed. Each generation has had to wrestle anew with the question of whether its own children and grandchildren would remain Jewish, whether Judaism as a living faith would end and carry on as ancestral memory alone.

Many readers surely recognize this assimilationist paradigm. It is a close cousin to the secularization thesis that once held sway in the study of religion. In American Judaism, it might be called "the myth of linear descent," the belief that American Jews start off Orthodox, back in the immigrant generation, and each subsequent generation is a little less Jewish in its observance until that inevitable day when a descendant intermarries and ends up marching down the aisle of a church. We can all point to families where this has actually happened: the Gratz family, the Schiff family, the Warburg family. It has happened too in many lesser known Cohen, Levi, and Israel families in Ann Arbor and elsewhere.

"Will the Jews continue to exist in America?" Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg asked forty years ago in 1963. "Any estimate of the situation based on an

unillusioned look at the American Jewish past and at contemporary sociological evidence must answer flatly – no ... History, sociology, and the emptiness of contemporary Jewish religion all point in the same unhappy direction.”¹ Actively by choice, or passively through inaction, assimilation has been widely assumed to be unavoidable. My field of American Jewish history, if not a complete waste of time, is viewed as a foredoomed enterprise.

Yet, the history of American Judaism, at least as I have come to understand it while researching *American Judaism: A New History* (Yale University Press), is in many ways a response to this ongoing fear that Judaism in the New World will wither away. Over and over again, I found Jews rising to meet the challenges both internal and external that threatened Jewish continuity, sometimes, paradoxically, by promoting radical discontinuities. Casting aside old paradigms, Jews transformed their faith, reinventing American Judaism in an attempt to make it more appealing, more meaningful, more sensitive to the concerns of the day. They did not always succeed, as the many well-publicized accounts of eminent Christians whose parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents turn out to have been Jews amply attest. But the story of American Judaism, at least as I recount it, is still far from the stereotypical story of “linear descent.” It is, instead, a much more dynamic story of people struggling to be Americans and Jews, a story of people who lose their faith and a story of people who regain their faith, a story of assimilation, to be sure, but also a story of revitalization.

Let us consider a few examples. In the 1820s, some highly motivated and creative young Jews in the two largest American communities where Jews lived, New York and Charleston, moved to transform and revitalize their faith, somewhat in the spirit of the contemporaneous Second Great Awakening. They hoped, in so doing, to thwart Christian missionaries, who always insisted that in order to be modern one had to be Protestant, and they sought most of all to bring Jews back to active observance of their faith. They felt alarmed at the spirit of Jewish “apathy and neglect” that they discerned all around them. Chronologically, their efforts paralleled the emergence of the nascent Reform movement in Germany, where Jews, “convinced of the necessity to restore public worship to its deserving dignity and importance,” had in 1818 dedicated the innovative Hamburg Temple. Their efforts also paralleled developments in Curaçao, where in 1819 more than one hundred Jews, unhappy with their cantor and seeking a new communal constitution “in keeping with the enlightened age in which we live,” had separated themselves from the organized Jewish com-

munity rather than submit to its authority. In both of these cases, revealingly, government officials had intervened and effected compromise.² In America, where religion was voluntary and established religious leaders could not depend upon the government to put down dissent, innovators faced far fewer hurdles.

The young people in New York, “gathering with renewed arduor [sic] to promote the more strict keeping of their faith,”³ formed an independent society entitled *Hebra Hinuch Nearim*, dedicated to the education of Jewish young people. Their constitution and bylaws bespeak their spirit of revival, expressing “an ardent desire to promote the study of our Holy Law, and ... to extend a knowledge of its divine precepts, ceremonies, and worship among our brethren generally, and the enquiring youth in particular.” Worship, they insisted, should be run much less formally, with time set aside for explanations and instruction, without a permanent leader and, revealingly, with no “distinctions” made among the members. The overall aim, leaders explained in an 1825 letter, was “to encrease [sic] the respect of the worship of our fathers.”⁴

In these endeavors, we see all of the themes familiar to us from the general history of American religion, not only in that era but in many other eras of religious change including our own: revivalism, challenge to authority, a new form of organization, anti-elitism, and radical democratization. Given the spirit of the age and the fortunate availability of funding, it comes as no surprise that the young people plunged ahead, boldly announcing “their intention to erect a new Synagogue in this city,” which would follow the “German and Polish minhag [rite]” and be located “in a more convenient situation for those residing uptown.”⁵ On November 15, 1825, the new congregation applied for incorporation as *B’nai Jeshurun*, New York’s first Ashkenazic congregation.⁶

In Charleston, where a far better-known schism within the Jewish community occurred, one finds several close parallels to the New York situation. Again the challenge to the synagogue-community came initially from young Jews, born after the Revolution. Their average age was about thirty-two, while the average age of the leaders of the *Beth Elohim* congregation approached sixty-two. Dissatisfied with “the apathy and neglect which have been manifested towards our holy religion,” somewhat influenced by the spread of Unitarianism in Charleston, fearful of Christian missionary activities that had begun to be directed toward local Jews, and, above all, like their New York counterparts, passionately concerned about

Jewish survival, forty-seven men petitioned congregational leaders to break with tradition and institute change.⁷

Two-thirds of the Charleston reformers were native-born and most were people of comparatively modest means who participated in local civic affairs. According to one account, almost three-quarters of them were not paying members of the synagogue. In Charleston, as so often in the history of American Judaism, change was stimulated by outsiders. The reforms in traditional Jewish practice that the reformers sought to introduce, moreover, were far more radical than anything that had been called for in New York. They advocated, among other things, an abbreviated service, vernacular prayers, a weekly sermon, and an end to traditional free-will offerings in the synagogue. When, early in 1825, their petition was dismissed out of hand, they, anticipating the New Yorkers by several months, created an independent Jewish religious society, the Reformed Society of Israelites for Promoting True Principles of Judaism according to its Purity and Spirit—a forerunner of American Reform Judaism.⁸

This is not the place for a full-scale discussion of how young Jews in New York and Charleston transformed American Judaism and helped to shape the pluralistic, competitive model of Judaism that we know today. What is important, for our purposes, is that Jews who formerly had not been interested in Jewish religious life became interested in the 1820s, and that Jewish life, as a result of their efforts, became stronger and more diverse. We have independent confirmation of some of these trends from Rebecca Gratz of Philadelphia, the foremost Jewish woman of her day and a perceptive observer: “Our brothers have all become very attentive to shool [synagogue] matters...,” she wrote in an 1825 family letter, “they rarely omit attending worship. We all go Friday evening as well as on Saturday morning—the [women’s] gallery is as well filled as the other portion of the house.”⁹ Note that in this revival, as in all subsequent ones, women numbered significantly among those affected by the new religious currents.

The 1820s marked the first revitalization of Judaism that I know of in America, stimulated by young, native-born men and women concerned that Judaism would not survive unless they initiated change. But it was certainly not the last. I have written elsewhere about the immensely influential American Jewish awakening of the late nineteenth century. This revival was spawned not by East European Jews but by American-born Jews like Cyrus Adler and Henrietta Szold on the East Coast and Ray Frank on the West Coast, along with others who grew alarmed at evidence of assimila-

tion in American Jewish life: religious laxity, intermarriage, interest in Ethical Culture, and the like. Spurred also by the growth of antisemitism in this era, they created what they called alternately a “revival,” an “awakening,” and a “renaissance.” If I may be permitted to quote myself for a moment:

A major cultural reorientation began in the American Jewish community late in the 1870s and was subsequently augmented by mass immigration. The critical developments that we associate with this period—the return to religion, the heightened sense of Jewish peoplehood and particularism, the far-reaching changes that opened up new opportunities and responsibilities for women, the renewed community-wide emphasis on education and culture, the “burst of organizational energy,” and the growth of Conservative Judaism and Zionism—all reflect different efforts to resolve the “crisis of beliefs and values” that had developed during these decades. By 1914, American Jewry had been transformed and the awakening had run its course. The basic contours of the twentieth-century American Jewish community had by then fallen into place.¹⁰

The late-nineteenth-century awakening does not fit into the standard paradigm of American Jewish history. Central European Jews, all of us were taught, assimilated out of existence: how, then, could they have staged a revival? Rather than exploring this paradox (or altering the paradigm), most accounts of American Jewish life simply ignore these developments altogether and focus on East European Jewish immigration instead.

For me, however, the late nineteenth-century awakening illustrates a major theme in American Judaism: the fact that repeatedly, down to our very own day, American Jews have creatively *adapted* their faith to their new environment. Reshaping Judaism in response to challenges from within and from without, they have time and again revitalized their faith, strengthening it, sometimes in surprising and unexpected ways that have brought Jews back into synagogues and produced children more religiously knowledgeable and observant than their parents. The fear that Judaism would not survive unless it changed certainly underlay many of these developments. But, in retrospect, the many creative responses to this fear, the innovations and revivals promoted by those determined to ensure that American Jewish life would continue and thrive, seem to me of far greater historical significance.

II

Another theme which I find central to the history of American Judaism is the fact that, for the major part of American history, Judaism has been the nation's largest and most visible non-Christian faith. Every Jew, every synagogue, every Jewish organization, periodical, and philanthropy has served as a conspicuous challenge to those who sought to define the nation (or its soul) in restrictively Christian terms.

From their very first steps on American soil, back in 1654, Jews extended the boundaries of American pluralism, serving as a model for other religious minorities and, in time, expanding the definition of American religious liberty so that they (and other minorities) might be included as equals. Recall that Peter Stuyvesant, the dictatorial director-general of New Netherland and himself an elder of the Reformed Church and the son of a minister, sought to compel the Jews to depart. His mission was to establish order among the citizenry, to combat "drinking to excess, quarreling, fighting and smiting." Seeking to promote morality and social cohesion, he looked to enforce Calvinist orthodoxy while rooting out nonconformity.¹¹

This explains why Stuyvesant sought permission from Amsterdam to keep the Jews out. The Jews, he explained, were "deceitful," "very repugnant," and "hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ." He asked the directors of the Dutch West India Company to "require them in a friendly way to depart" lest they "infect and trouble this new colony." Revealingly, he warned in a subsequent letter that "giving them liberty we cannot refuse the Lutherans and Papists." Decisions made concerning the Jews, he understood, would serve as precedents and determine the colony's religious character forever after.¹²

Largely for economic reasons (as well as the fact that Jews numbered among its principal shareholders), the Dutch West India Company turned down Peter Stuyvesant's plea. They ordered him to permit Jews to "travel," "trade," "live," and "remain" in New Netherland, "provided the poor among them shall not become a burden to the company or to the community, but be supported by their own nation." After several more petitions, Jews secured the right to trade throughout the colony, serve guard duty, and own real estate. They also won the right to worship in the privacy of their homes, which, according to some accounts, is more than the Lutherans were permitted to do.¹³

The opening of the colony to Jews, just as Stuyvesant feared, soon

determined policy for members of the colony's other minority faiths as well. "We doubt very much whether we can proceed against [these faiths] rigorously without diminishing the population and stopping immigration which must be favored at a so tender stage of the country's existence," the directors admonished in 1663 after Stuyvesant banished a Quaker from the colony and spoke out against "sectarians." "You may therefore shut your eyes, at least not force people's consciences, but allow every one to have his own belief, as long as he behaves quietly and legally, gives no offense to his neighbor and does not oppose the government."¹⁴ Under the British, who took New Amsterdam in 1664 and renamed it New York, this policy was maintained. In the 1740s, the city boasted houses of worship for Anglicans, Dutch Calvinists, French Huguenots, German Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers, and Jews.¹⁵

Following the American Revolution, Jews once again played a role in ensuring that religious liberty was not restricted to Christians alone – sometimes, as in New York, simply by being present. It is probably no accident that New York, the most religiously pluralistic of the new states, was the first to grant "free exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship, without discrimination or preference" to all its citizens, Christian and non-Christian alike. Pennsylvania's new constitution was more restrictive, requiring officeholders to "acknowledge the Scriptures of the old and new Testament to be given by divine inspiration." But after several widely-publicized petitions from Jews, that clause was dropped in 1790. The United States Constitution, of course, followed the most liberal state precedents, and, thanks to Charles Pinckney of South Carolina (another state with a visible Jewish community), it explicitly included the words "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the authority of the United States." Revealingly, the only petition concerning religious liberty that reached the federal Constitutional Convention, meeting in Philadelphia, also came from a Jew, Jonas Phillips, who memorably declared that "the Israeletes will think them self happy to live under a government where all Relegious societys are on an Eaqueel footing."¹⁶

A Virginian who called himself "A Social Christian" probably reflected the views of many dissenters when he publicly opposed the granting of full equality to non-Christians. "The bulk of this community are Christian," he observed, "and if there be a few who are Jews, Mahomedans, Atheists, or Deists amongst us, though I would not wish to torture or persecute them on account of their opinions, yet to exclude such from our publick offices

is prudent and just; to restrain them from publishing their singular opinions to the disturbance of society, is equally sound policy and a necessary caution to promote the general good; nor is it sinful or tyrannical to compel them to pay towards the support of religious worship, though they do not join it." That view, however, did not prevail, even in "Social Christian" home state of Virginia. Instead, in 1786, the General Assembly of Virginia finally enacted the bill for religious freedom proposed by Thomas Jefferson seven years earlier: "That no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities."¹⁷

The famed correspondence between Jews and George Washington went even further in defining the place of Judaism in the New Nation. The address of the "Hebrew Congregation in Newport" to the president, composed for his visit to that city on August 17, 1790, following Rhode Island's ratification of the Constitution, paralleled other letters that Washington received from religious bodies of different denominations and followed a long-established custom associated with the ascension of kings. Redolent with biblical and liturgical language, the address noted past discrimination against Jews, praised the new government for "generously affording to all liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship," and thanked God "for all of the blessings of civil and religious liberty" that Jews now enjoyed under the Constitution. Washington, in his oft-quoted reply, reassured the Jewish community about what he correctly saw as its central concern—religious liberty. Appropriating a phrase contained in the Hebrew congregation's original letter, he characterized the United States government as one that "gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance." He described religious liberty, following Thomas Jefferson, as an inherent natural right, distinct from the indulgent religious "toleration" practiced by the British and much of enlightened Europe, where Jewish emancipation was so often linked with demands for Jewish "improvement." Finally, echoing the language of the prophet Micah (4:4), he hinted that America might itself prove something of a Promised Land for Jews, a place where they would "merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid."¹⁸

Bigotry and persecution, of course, did not thereafter miraculously disappear. American Jews continued to have to fight for their religious rights well into the twentieth century, and manifestations of anti-Jewish prejudice have continued to the present day. But important changes nevertheless took place. Slowly, America came to understand itself in broader and more inclusive religious terms that pushed beyond the perimeters of Christianity. Abraham Lincoln's memorable phrase in the Gettysburg address, later incorporated into the pledge of allegiance, was this "nation under God." Thanks to the efforts of interfaith organizations around World War II, terms like "Judeo-Christian" came into vogue. Will Herberg, in a best-selling book published in 1955, described a "tripartite scheme" of American religion: "Protestant-Catholic-Jew." All of these terms signified Jews' new-found acceptance in the world of American religion, their emergence, in less than two hundred years, from a curiosity into America's "third faith." No longer were they grouped, as they had been in the colonial mind, with exotic religions and non-believers, as in the well-known colonial-era phrase "Jews, Turks and infidels." Instead, by the late twentieth century, they emerged as acknowledged religious insiders.¹⁹ The fact that among the Democratic candidates running for the presidency in 2004 we have Connecticut Senator Joseph Lieberman (an Orthodox Jew), Vermont Governor Howard Dean (the husband and father of Jews), and Massachusetts Senator John Kerry (the grandchild of Jews) surely testifies to the enormous transformation that America has experienced over the past three hundred and fifty years (even the past fifty!).

"Only in America," the journalist Harry Golden proclaimed in a best-selling book of that title published in 1958. Senator Joseph Lieberman echoed that comment when Al Gore nominated him for the vice presidency in the 2000 election. While something of an exaggeration—Jews have also been nominated for and attained high office in countries stretching from Austria to Singapore—"only in America" reflects a widely-felt sense that the history of Judaism in the United States is both special and distinct: "America," as the saying goes, "is different." And in many ways it *is* different. Discrimination and persecution, the foremost challenges confronting most diaspora Jews through the ages, have in America been far less significant historical factors than democracy, liberty of conscience, church-state separation, and voluntarism. Emancipation and enlightenment, central themes of Jewish history in Europe, have also been far less central to the history of the Jews in the United States. That, incidentally, is why histori-

ans of modern Judaism from Heinrich Graetz onward have had trouble with American Judaism: it does not fit neatly into the field's established rubrics. Expulsions, concentration camps, and extermination, of course, have never been part of American Jewish history at all. By contrast, in America, as nowhere else to the same degree, Judaism has had to adapt to a religious environment shaped by the denominational character of American Protestantism, the canons of free market competition, the ideals of freedom, and the reality of diversity. What is distinctive in American Judaism is largely a result of these factors.

III

Let me say a further word concerning the subject of diversity, a third theme in my history of American Judaism, and one, to my mind, that has been absolutely central almost from the very beginning. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, every known colonial American Jewish community included both Sephardim and Ashkenazim, and was comprised of Jews who came from widely scattered backgrounds. By 1790, the United States census recorded Jews who had been born in England, France, Germany, Holland, Poland, Portugal, and the West Indies, as well as in the American colonies, a mix that mirrored the composition of the late-colonial Jewish community as well.²⁰ The Sephardic form of Judaism predominated, as it always had in North America, but from the early eighteenth century onward the preponderance of colonial Jews were actually Ashkenazim or people of mixed background. Within every community, even within many individual families, a full gamut of religious observances and attitudes could be found, a spectrum ranging all the way from deep piety to total indifference. In the years following the American Revolution, Jacob Rader Marcus found that "there were almost as many Judaisms as there were individuals."²¹ In matters of religious practice, as in so many other aspects of life during the early republic, individual freedom reigned supreme, setting a pattern that would govern American Jewish life forever after.

Jewish life in America became even more diverse following the migration of tens of thousands of Central European Jews from Bavaria, Western Prussia, Poland, and Alsace between 1820 and 1880. During that time, America's Jewish population ballooned from about 3,000 to around 250,000. Immigrants spread out across the length and breadth of the country, reaching all the way to California. Already by the Civil War, the number of organized Jewish communities with at least one established Jewish institution had reached one hundred and sixty, distributed over thirty-one states and the District of Columbia. Jews moved into every region of the country and lived in more than one thousand American locations during this period, wherever rivers, roads, or railroad tracks took them. Like the bulk of immigrants to America's shores, then and later, they pursued opportunities wherever they found them.²²

During this era, the diversity of American Jewish life was often reflected in the diversity of American synagogues, each committed to a different minhag, or rite, such as the German rite, the Polish rite, the English rite,

and so forth. By the Civil War, every major American Jewish community had at least two synagogues, and larger ones, like Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Cincinnati, had four or more. Jewish leaders regularly expressed impatience with all these divisions and pressed for unity. They argued that what Jews held in common was far more important than the liturgical differences that divided them, and they condemned the situation in cities like New York where five or more Jewish rites competed. But since similar divisions characterized any number of American religious groups—French Catholics and Irish Catholics worshipped apart, so did Lutherans of different backgrounds, and in one Cincinnati county there were four different Baptist churches reflecting four different points of origin—arguments for unity frequently fell on deaf ears. In some Jewish circles, in fact, the smorgasbord of worship choices even drew praise, perhaps a reflection of new marketplace values. “The Israelites living here come from various countries,” one immigrant wrote back to his relatives in Bamberg approvingly. “Everybody can choose freely where or in which synagogue he wants to be enrolled.”²³

Actually, numbers of Jews chose not to enroll in any synagogue whatsoever. In America, unlike in Germany, the state placed no pressure on Jews to affiliate with a religious community, and in any case, thousands of Jews had settled in remote areas where no synagogues could be found. Even in Cincinnati, where four synagogues did exist by mid-century, twenty-two percent of the city’s Jews were estimated to be unaffiliated. Nationally that figure stood much higher. According to the 1850 census, only thirty-five percent of America’s Jews could even be accommodated within America’s synagogues: there were but 17,688 seats for some 50,000 Jews (and some of those seats regularly sat vacant).²⁴ Discounting the smaller congregations that the census missed, and the young children who would have been left at home, it seems reasonable to assume that as many as half of America’s Jews were unaffiliated at mid-century. Jewish leaders took this to be a matter of grave concern.

Diversity, many at the time believed, posed a threat to the longtime viability of the American Jewish community. They looked to unify Jews through an overarching authority (“chief rabbi”), a conference of rabbis, or perhaps a unified prayer book, what Isaac Mayer Wise called *Minhag Amerika*. Without unity and centralized authority, they warned, Judaism would decline. Like so many before and after them, they feared that America would prove to be a land that was good for Jews but bad for Judaism.

Paradoxically, though, diversity triumphed, for mid-nineteenth century

Jews pursued three different strategies to try to ensure Judaism's survival. Some argued that Jews themselves needed to be "regenerated" through greater emphasis on Jewish education and the strengthening of Jewish religious life. Others insisted that Judaism as a religion was at fault and needed to be "reformed." Still others felt that community and kinship, rather than rituals and faith, should form the new basis for Jewish life; they sought to unite Jews around ties of peoplehood.

The first strategy, perhaps best articulated by the great Orthodox Jewish leader Isaac Leeser, advocated tradition in an American key. He called for greater emphasis on Jewish education, decorum, aesthetics, an English-language sermon, but nothing that deviated from Jewish law. Years after he himself had passed from the scene, those whom he influenced continued to pursue the goal of an americanized traditional Judaism, insisting that Judaism's future depended upon the education and uplifting of American Jews rather than upon any fundamental changes to Judaism itself. A later generation would call this modern Orthodoxy.²⁵

The second strategy, made famous by the great Reform Jewish leader Isaac Mayer Wise, presumed that Judaism itself needed to change in order for it to survive. Reformers urged Jews to abandon rituals that seemed incompatible with modernity and to adopt innovations that promised to make Judaism more appealing and spiritually uplifting, like shorter services, vernacular prayers, organ music, and mixed seating. "We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state," the famed 1885 Pittsburgh Platform of Reform Judaism declared. "Their observance in our days," it continued, "is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation." Reformers advocated thoroughgoing reforms—the removal of what they saw as Judaism's accumulated "defects and deformities"—to keep Judaism alive and lure young Jews back to the synagogue.²⁶

The third strategy aimed at preserving Judaism in America rejected the synagogue altogether and focused on ties of peoplehood as the unifying element in Jewish life. This idea found its most important institutional expression in the Jewish fraternal organization B'nai B'rith (literally, "sons of the covenant"), established in 1843. The preamble to the order's original constitution carefully avoided any mention of God, Torah, ritual commandments, or religious faith, but stressed the importance of Jewish unity: "B'nai B'rith has taken upon itself the mission of uniting Israelites in the work of

promoting their highest interests and those of humanity." While synagogues divided Jews and alienated some of them altogether, B'nai B'rith argued that fraternal ties—the covenant (b'rith) that bound Jews one to another regardless of religious ideology—could bring about "union and harmony."²⁷

The three strategies put forth to save American Judaism, in addition to being three means of achieving a common preservationist end, also reflected deep uncertainty surrounding the central priorities of American Jewish religious life. Which of their core values, Jews wondered, should be priority number one: (1) to uphold and maintain Judaism's sacred religious traditions, (2) to adapt Judaism to new conditions of life in a new land, or (3) to preserve above all a strong sense of Jewish peoplehood and communal unity? Many Jews, traditionalists and reformers alike, actually cherished all three of these values. The history of American Judaism is replete with oscillations back and forth among these priorities, a reflection of tensions, deeply rooted within Judaism itself, between the forces of tradition and the forces of change, between those who supported compromise for the sake of unity and those who insisted upon firmness for the sake of principle.

IV

Looking back, these tensions may be seen to have been highly beneficial. Proponents of different strategies and priorities in America Jewish life checked each other's excesses. Together they accomplished what none might have accomplished separately: they kept American Judaism going. But it is important to recognize, at the same time, that this benefit came at a steep price. Often, and even to this very day, American Jewish religious life, because of its great diversity, has seethed with acrimonious contention, the unseemly specter of Jews battling Jews.

With so many bitter divisions in Jewish life—between the different religious movements and among them; between Jews of different backgrounds and ideologies; between in-married Jews and intermarried Jews; matrilineal Jews and patrilineal Jews; straight Jews and gay Jews; born Jews and converted Jews; American Jews and Israeli Jews; committed Jews and indifferent Jews—some have questioned whether Jews can remain a united people at all in the twenty-first century. Knowledgeable observers have foreseen “an unbridgeable schism” in Jewish life, “a cataclysmic split,” “the bifurcation of Jewry.” Well-regarded volumes on contemporary Judaism carry titles like *A People Divided* and *Jew vs. Jew*.²⁸

Issues like patrilineal descent, the ordination of openly gay rabbis, the sanctioning of same-sex marriages, and the ordination of women feed the “culture wars” within American Judaism. Ugly local disputes, many of them involving Orthodox efforts to find accommodation for their religious needs and lifestyle choices, also publicly pit Jews against one another, sometimes even in court. Some Orthodox Jews, in response to these developments, question whether rabbis should perform marriages between Orthodox and Reform Jews. Some Reform Jews, in response to these same developments, question whether intermarriage with a liberal non-Jew is not preferable to marrying an Orthodox Jew. Even the Torah itself no longer provides a basis for Jewish unity. Once, synagogues across the spectrum of Jewish life used the same Torah text and commentary, a volume edited in England by the American-trained Chief Rabbi Joseph H. Hertz. In the twenty-first century, Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Judaism each offer congregants their own movement's text and commentary on the Torah and view those produced by the other movements with disdain.²⁹

For all of these dangers, however, Jewish unity is far from dead. In fact, as America moves back to the center politically, signs within American

Judaism suggest a parallel return to the “vital center” and a shift away from the divisive struggles of earlier decades. Independent day schools, transdenominational high schools, nationwide programs of adult Jewish learning, the revitalized Hillel programs on college campuses, the Birthright Israel travel initiative, and an array of other local and national activities aimed at revitalizing American Judaism all look to bring Jews of different religious persuasions together. Threats to the State of Israel and fears of rising worldwide antisemitism likewise promote a sense among American Jews that they need to find ways to communicate and cooperate with one another across the various religious streams, distances and differences notwithstanding. The question, not so different from the one facing Jews in the mid-nineteenth century, remains where to compromise for the sake of unity and where to stand firm for the sake of principle.

A recent book entitled *One People, Two Worlds: A Reform Rabbi and an Orthodox Rabbi Explore the Issues that Divide Them* (2002) captures this dilemma. Its two authors, rabbis who stand on opposite ends of the Jewish spectrum, prove by the very act of communicating with one another that “discourse among Jews can be civil even when disagreements exist.” Yet the controversy generated by the book also demonstrates the fragility of these efforts, for the Orthodox coauthor, at the behest of his fervently Orthodox colleagues, withdrew from a seventeen-city speaking tour on which he and his Reform counterpart were set to dialogue jointly on stage. This mixed message of communication and cleavage reflects, perhaps even more than the authors intended, the parlous tension between “compromise” and “principle,” “one people” and “two worlds.” The fate of American Judaism—whether its adherents will step back from the edge of schism or fall into it—hangs perilously in the balance.³⁰

With so many questions and issues and tensions confronting them it comes as no surprise that as they approach their three hundred and fiftieth anniversary on American soil, Jews feel bewildered and uncertain. Should they focus on quality to enhance Judaism or focus on quantity to increase the number of Jews? Embrace intermarriage as an opportunity for outreach or condemn it as a disaster for offspring? Build religious bridges or fortify religious boundaries? Strengthen religious authority or promote religious autonomy? Harmonize Judaism with contemporary culture or uphold Jewish tradition against contemporary culture? Compromise for the sake of Jewish unity or stand firm for cherished Jewish principles?

Simultaneously, indeed, Jews witness two contradictory trends operat-

ing in their community, assimilation and revitalization. Which will predominate and what the future holds nobody knows. That will be determined day by day, community by community, Jew by Jew.

Regularly, American Jews hear, as I did at the start of my career from a scholar at a distinguished rabbinical seminary, and as other Jews did in colonial times, and in the era of the American Revolution, and in the nineteenth century, and in the twentieth century, that Judaism in America is doomed, that assimilation and intermarriage are inevitable. Should high rates of intermarriage continue and the community grow complacent, that may yet prove true.

But history, as we have seen, also suggests another possibility: that today, like so often before, American Jews will find creative ways to maintain and revitalize American Judaism. With the help of visionary leaders, committed followers, and generous philanthropists, it may still be possible for the current “vanishing” generation of American Jews to be succeeded by another “vanishing” generation, and then still another.

“A nation dying for thousands of years,” the great Jewish philosopher Simon Rawidowicz once observed, “means a living nation. Our incessant dying means uninterrupted living, rising, standing up, beginning anew.” His message, delivered to Jews agonizing over the loss of six million of their compatriots, applies equally well today in the face of contemporary challenges to Jewish continuity. “If we are the last—let us be the last as our fathers and forefathers were. Let us prepare the ground for the last Jews who will come after us, and for the last Jews who will rise after them, and so on until the end of days.”³¹

NOTES

1. Arthur Hertzberg, *Being Jewish in America* (New York: Schocken, 1979), 82, 85. For his later view, see his article in *Encyclopaedia Judaica Yearbook, 1990-1991*, reprinted in Jonathan D. Sarna, *The American Jewish Experience*, 2nd ed. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1997), 350-355.
2. W. Gunther Plaut, *The Rise of Reform Judaism: A Sourcebook of its European Origins* (New York: World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1963), 31; Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 53-61; Isaac S. Emmanuel and Suzanne A. Emmanuel, *History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles*, 2 vols. (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1970), 1: 306-327, esp. 319.
3. [New York] *National Advocate*, December 5, 1825, 2.
4. Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, *The Jews of the United States: A Documentary History, 1790-1840*, 3 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 2: 542-545; *Christian Inquirer*, September 17, 1825, 151.
5. David de Sola Pool, *An Old Faith in the New World: Portrait of Shearith Israel, 1654-1954* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), 437.
6. Israel Goldstein, *A Century of Judaism in New York: B'nai Jeshurun, 1825-1925* (New York: Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, 1930), 54-55; the original spelling of the congregation's name was "B'nai Yeshiorun."
7. Robert Liberles, "Conflict over Reforms: The Case of Congregation Beth Elohim, Charleston, South Carolina," in *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, ed., Jack Wertheimer, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 282; Blau and Baron, *Jews of the United States*, 554.
8. L. C. Moise, *Biography of Isaac Harby* (Charleston: n.p., 1931); Lou H. Silberman, *American Impact: Judaism in the United States in the Early Nineteenth Century*, The B.G. Rudolph Lectures in Judaic Studies (Syracuse: Syracuse University, 1964); James W. Hagy, *This Happy Land: The Jews of Colonial and Antebellum Charleston* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 128-160; Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 228-233; Gary Phillip Zola, *Isaac Harby of Charleston, 1788-1828* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 112-149.

9. David Philipson, *Letters of Rebecca Gratz* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1929), 75-76.
10. Jonathan D. Sarna, *A Great Awakening: The Transformation That Shaped Twentieth-Century American Judaism and Its Implications for Today* (New York: CIJE, 1995), 7.
11. Oliver A. Rink, "Private Interest and Godly Gain: The West India Company and the Dutch Reformed Church in New Netherland, 1624-1664," *New York History* 75 (July 1994): 245-264; Henry H. Kessler and Eugene Rachlis, *Peter Stuyvesant and His New York* (New York: Random House, 1959), 66; Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society and Politics in Colonial New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 25.
12. Samuel Oppenheim, "The Early History of the Jews in New York, 1654-1664," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 18 (1909): 4, 5, 20.
13. *Ibid.*, 8-37; Joyce D. Goodfriend, *Before the Melting Pot: Society and Culture in Colonial New York City, 1664-1730* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 11, 84; James Homer Williams, "An Atlantic Perspective on the Jewish Struggle for Rights and Opportunities in Brazil, New Netherland, and New York," in *Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West, 1450-1800*, ed., Paolo Bernardini and Norman Fiering (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001), 369-393.
14. E.T. Corwin, ed., *Ecclesiastical Records of the State of New York*, 7 vols. (Albany, New York: 1901-1916), 1:530.
15. All of these houses of worship were portrayed in David Grim, *Plan of the City and Environs of New York as they were in 1742-1744* (New York, 1813).
16. Jonathan D. Sarna and David G. Dalin, *Religion and State in the American Jewish Experience* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 63-75; Philip B. Kurland and Ralph Lerner, *The Founders' Constitution*, 5 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), 4: 638.
17. Sarna and Dalin, *Religion and State*, 68-69.
18. Blau and Baron, *Jews of the United States*, 8-11; Sarna and Dalin, *Religion and State*, 79-82. The editor of Jefferson's papers suggests that Jefferson may even have drafted Washington's reply to the Jews of Newport. See Julian P. Boyd, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 21 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950-1974), 19: 610n., and, for Jefferson's views on toleration, Charles B. Sanford,

- The Religious Life of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1984), 27.
19. Mark Silk, "Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America," *American Quarterly* 36 (Spring 1984): 65-85; Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*, rev. ed. (New York: Anchor, 1960).
 20. Ira Rosenwaike, "An Estimate and Analysis of the Jewish Population of the United States in 1790," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 59 (1960): 23-67.
 21. Jacob R. Marcus, *United States Jewry, 1776-1985*, 4 vols. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989-1993), 1: 610-613.
 22. Rudolf Glanz, "The Spread of Jewish Communities through America before the Civil War," *Yivo Annual* 15 (1974): 7-45; Rudolf Glanz, "Where the Jewish Press Was Distributed in Pre-Civil War America," *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly* 5 (1972): 1-14; Uriah Z. Engelman, "Jewish Statistics in the U.S. Census of Religious Bodies (1850-1935)," *Jewish Social Studies* 9 (1947): 130.
 23. Abraham J. Karp, "Overview: The Synagogue in America—A Historical Typology," in Wertheimer, *American Synagogue*, 5; Linda K. Pritchard, "The Spirit in the Flesh: Religion and Regional Economic Development," in *Belief and Behavior: Essays in the New Religious History*, ed., Philip R. Vandermeer and Robert Swierenga, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 97; Blau and Baron, *Jews of the United States*, 810.
 24. Steven G. Mostov, "A 'Jerusalem' on the Ohio: The Social and Economic History of Cincinnati's Jewish Community, 1840-1875," (Ph.D., Brandeis University, 1981), 150; Engelman, "Jewish Statistics in the U.S. Census of Religious Bodies," 129.
 25. Lance J. Sussman, *Isaac Leeser and the Making of American Jewry* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995) is the standard biography.
 26. James G. Heller, *Isaac M. Wise: His Life, Work and Thought* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1965), and Sefton D. Temkin, *Isaac Mayer Wise: Shaping American Judaism* (Oxford: Littman Library, 1992) are the best biographies. On Reform Judaism, see Meyer, *Response to Modernity*; the Pittsburgh Platform is reprinted there on pp. 387-388.
 27. Edward E. Grusd, *B'nai B'rith: The Story of a Covenant* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1966), 20; cf. Deborah Dash Moore, *B'nai B'rith*

- and the Challenge of Ethnic Leadership (Albany: SUNY Press, 1981).
28. Jack Wertheimer, *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), xiii; Reuven Bulka, *The Coming Cataclysm: The Orthodox-Reform Rift and the Future of the Jewish People* (Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic, 1984), 13; Irving Greenberg, *Will There Be One Jewish People in the Year 2000?* (New York: National Jewish Resource Center, 1985); David Vital, *The Future of the Jews: A People at the Crossroads?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 101.
 29. Samuel G. Freedman, *Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); Debra Nussbaum Cohen, "Are the Jewish People Splitting Apart?" available online at www.jewishshaz.com/jewishnews/971003/split-sb.html.
 30. Ammiel Hirsch and Yosef Reinman, *One People, Two Worlds: A Reform Rabbi and An Orthodox Rabbi Explore the Issues that Divide Them* (New York: Schocken, 2002); Samuel G. Freedman, "They Canceled Dialogue," *Jerusalem Report*, December 16, 2002, 54.
 31. Simon Rawidowicz, *Studies in Jewish Thought*, ed., Nahum N. Glatzer (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1964), 223; Marshall Sklare, *Observing America's Jews* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993), 262-274.