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Fitting American Jewish History into Modern Jewish History

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Historians of modern Jewry have long looked upon the American Jewish experience as something of an anomaly. Some set aside special chapters on America, as if its story must be kept apart from that of all other countries. Others introduce America only late in the nineteenth-century, paying no attention whatsoever to its history up to that time. Nobody, to my knowledge, has successfully integrated America into the overall narrative of Jewish history. The reason, as Profs. Jack Wertheimer and Beth Wenger pointed out at a recent meeting of the Association for Jewish Studies, is that the "meta-narrative" of modern Jewish history, with its emphasis on emancipation, enlightenment, anti-Semitism, Holocaust, and redemption does not nicely square with American Jewish history as it has traditionally been recounted.

What might be done to further the contextualization of American Jewish history within the study of modern Jewry? One suggestion is that students of American Jewry focus upon themes that lend themselves to comparative study, like immigration, assimilation, and anti-Semitism. These themes, after all, can scarcely be understood without taking into account the Jewish historical experience worldwide. By stressing such themes, we can promote scholarly interchange with other Jewish historians and successfully introduce American dimensions into the study of modern Jewish history as a whole.

While full of advantages, this strategy does have one glaring fault: it foists an external model on American Jewish history. Instead of choosing themes on the basis of their importance for understanding American Jewish history, the European Jewish experience becomes the defining paradigm. The result is that American Jewish history fails to be understood on its own terms, and themes uniquely critical to its history are short-changed.

A second suggestion for contextualizing the American Jewish history — in effect, the reverse of the first — is to use the American Jewish experience to reshape our understanding of modern Jewish history. Professor Hasia Diner, for example, argues that in many respects the "American way" came to be the model that other Jews adopted later on. In its redefinition of "Jewishness," in education, in its organization of charity, and in many other respects, too, the American pattern played an important role in influencing Jews around the world. American Jewish history, according to her, can thus "offer scholars the paradigm for modern Jewish history."

This strategy, too, has much to recommend it. Yet valuable as it is, in the final analysis it suffers (in reverse) from the same problem as the first suggestion. It foists an American paradigm on all of modern Jewish history; to the obvious neglect of themes that do not easily fit in.

My own suggestion for contextualizing American Jewish history is somewhat different. It argues that we need to view American Jewish history, almost from the beginning, as a challenge to modern Jewish history; American, after all, represented a New World society where almost from the beginning the logic of mercantilism demanded that Jews be given freedoms undreamed of in the Old World. Subsequently, liberty, democracy, church-state separation, de facto pluralism, abundant opportunity, and the fact that America housed a variety of other out-groups, notably blacks and Catholics, shaped a society that made it possible for Jews to achieve what they so rarely did in Europe: the chance to be treated as equals, to thrive economically and, at the same time, to remain Jewish.

This, of course, constituted the dream of the *goldene medinah* ("Golden Land"), and it represented an immensely powerful historical challenge. European Jews who looked upon emancipation as a failure, considered anti-Semitism inevitable, and saw no solution to the "Jewish Problem" except Zionism had regularly to contend with this daunting challenge. Even if Jews could not achieve their goals in the degenerate Old World, optimists believed that the great goals of modern Jewry might still be achieved in the blessed New World.

Whether the dream of the *goldene medinah* ever came true is not the issue here. What is important for our purposes is the fact that the dream enjoyed wide currency, and as such has played an enormously important role in modern Jewish history. It undergirded the "On To America" movement that brought liberal-minded Central European Jews to America's shores in 1848, it influenced masses of East European Jews to choose America over Palestine beginning in 1881, and it explains why hundreds of thousands of Jews (including many Israelis) have continued to immigrate to America since Israel's establishment in 1948. Indeed, a good case could be made that the dream of the "Golden Land" has been no less potent a factor in modern Jewish history than the dream of returning to the "Promised Land."

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How does all of this affect the contextualization of American Jewish history? It explains, I believe, why America must be taken seriously by all students of modern Jewish history. It **must**, not just because many themes central to modern Jewish history apply to the New World (although they surely do), and not just because American Jewry serves as the paradigm for issues that many Jewish communities all over the world now face (although that is true, too). In the final analysis, America must be taken seriously by students of modern Jewish history because modern Jews themselves took America seriously — and still do.