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*350 years of
American Jewish Life
Greetings from Home*

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Evolving American Judaism

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IN SEPTEMBER 1654, the *St. Catherine* (*St. Catrina*) sailed into New Amsterdam with “twenty-three souls, big and little.” Expelled from Recife, Brazil when the Portuguese recaptured the colony from the Dutch, the bedraggled Jewish refugees were now seeking a new home.

The refugees differed from the few identifying Jews known previously to have visited North America because they sought to settle down permanently, to “navigate and trade near and in New Netherland, and to live and reside there.” Helped by fellow Jews in Amsterdam, they overcame opposition from the colony’s anti-Jewish governor, Peter Stuyvesant, and won the right to “travel” “trade” “live” and “remain” provided that *“the poor among them shall not become a burden to the company or to the community, but be supported by their own nation.”*

New Amsterdam’s Jews extended the boundaries of American religious pluralism. Stuyvesant promoted Dutch Calvinist orthodoxy and discouraged competing faiths. He worried that “giving them [the Jews] liberty, we cannot refuse the Lutherans and Papists [Catholics].” In 1663, the Dutch West India Company advised Stuyvesant, who had been persecuting Quakers, to “Shut your eyes, at least [do] 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.”

A year later, the British took New Amsterdam from the Dutch and

renamed it New York. Small numbers of Jews migrated to the colonies from Europe, the West Indies and even the Iberian Peninsula, where individual Jews had lived as crypto-Jews for centuries. Colonial Jews never exceeded 1/10 of one percent of the American population, yet they established patterns of future Jewish communal life. First, most Jews lived in port cities where opportunities abounded, and people of diverse faiths lived together. Second, Sephardic Jews and the institutions they founded maintained cultural hegemony in Jewish life into the early 19th century, even though Ashkenazic Jews were by then more numerous. Third, Jews organized themselves into synagogue-communities. Savannah, Charleston, Philadelphia, New York and Newport each had only one synagogue that assumed responsibility for all Jewish religious and communal needs..

The American Revolution marked a turning point in American Jewish history. As many as one hundred Jews fought in the Revolution; three attained high office in the Continental Army; and other Jews served as “suppliers, bill brokers, money-lenders, shopkeepers, blockade-runners and even ‘manufacturers’ on a small scale.” Haym Salomon, Broker to the Office of Finance, was personally generous to Jew and Gentile alike.

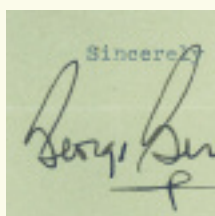
The Federal Constitution (1787) and the Bill of Rights (1791) outlawed religious tests “as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States,” and forbade Congress from making any

law “respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Still, Jews had to fight for their rights on the state level and overcome social prejudice. Having shed blood for their country, Jews felt more secure than in colonial days and asserted their rights vigorously. Justice Ginsberg’s essay in this issue describes President George Washington’s famous letter to the Jews of Newport in 1790, which reassured Jews of their place in the new nation.

The great question that Jews faced in the wake of the Revolution was whether Judaism as they had known it could be reconciled with America’s new spirit of freedom and democracy. Could Jews maintain the traditional structure that bound them together and promoted group survival and yet at the same time also accommodate new political and cultural and religious realities? In the 1820s, detecting a spirit of “apathy and neglect” pervading Jewish life, young Jews in Charleston and New York moved to revitalize Judaism, just as they saw Protestantism revived by the Second Great Awakening. Charleston’s young Jews sought to introduce English-language prayers, regular sermons and an abbreviated service. The young Jews in New York sought less formal worship with time for explanations and instruction. They wanted no permanent leader and no “distinctions” among members. When the established leadership rebuffed their initiatives, the young Jews of Charleston seceded and founded

1931

The first musical to win a Pulitzer Prize, *Of Thee I Sing*, composed by George Gershwin (1898 – 1937) and written by George S. Kaufman, Ira Gershwin and Morris Ryskind.



1933

The American Jewish Congress declares a boycott on German goods to protest the Nazi persecution of Jews.



1933

Stephen S. Wise (1874 – 1949) organizes a rally at Madison Square Garden to protest the appointment of Adolf Hitler as chancellor of Germany.



“The Reformed Society of Israelites for Promoting True Principles of Judaism According to its Purity and Spirit” – a forerunner of Reform Judaism. In New York, they opened the city’s first Ashkenazic congregation, B’nai Jeshurun. With these two actions, which were emulated elsewhere, the young Jews overthrew the monolithic “synagogue-community” that had dominated Jewish life and created a new American Judaism that was much more democratic, free, diverse, and competitive. American Judaism, as later generations knew it, was shaped by this revolution.

Between 1820 and 1840, America’s Jewish population increased approximately five-fold to 15,000. Between 1840 and 1860, it increased another ten-fold, to 150,000. By 1877, the American Jewish community had ballooned to 250,000. America’s Jewish population had increased at a rate almost fifteen times greater than the nation as a whole. Most immigrants came from Bavaria, Western Prussia and Posen, part of a larger stream that deposited millions of Protestant and Catholic immigrants on America’s shores. Jews, significantly, emigrated at a rate almost four times that of non-Jews, largely because, in addition to the general causes of emigration, Jews also faced severe residency, work and even, in the case of Bavaria, marriage restrictions.

Jewish immigrants spread out across the country, wherever rivers, roads or railroad tracks took them. Cincinnati became the first Jewish “boom town” west of the Alleghenies. Its Jewish population zoomed from 16 in

1820 to as many as 10,000 by the Civil War. By then, 160 organized Jewish communities in thirty-one states and the District of Columbia had at least one established Jewish institution.

Between 1820 and 1860, America developed a nationwide, market-driven economy. Peddlers, many of them immigrant Jews in their teens or twenties, helped to create this transformation by selling notions, dry goods, second-hand clothing and similar products while learning English and accumulating capital. As they crossed the country, they carried Judaism to frontier settings where Jews were unknown before.

In these new settings, the peddlers attempted to replicate the Judaism of their European homelands. However, American freedom soon led to significant changes. Some, like the great Orthodox Jewish leader, Isaac Leeser, advocated tradition in an American key, calling for greater emphasis on Jewish education, decorum at services, synagogue aesthetics and English-language sermons, but nothing deviating from Jewish law.

The great Reform Jewish leader Isaac Mayer Wise presumed that Judaism itself needed to change in order to survive, urging Jews to adopt innovations to make Judaism seem more appealing and spiritually uplifting: shorter services, vernacular prayers, organ music and mixed gender seating.

Still a third preservation strategy rejected the synagogue altogether and focused on peoplehood as the unifying element in Jewish life. For example, B’nai B’rith, established in 1843, argued that fraternal ties – the covenant (*b’rith*)

that bound Jews one to another – could bring about “union and harmony,” while synagogues divided Jews and alienated some of them altogether.

The history of American Judaism is replete with oscillations among these different strategies. Proponents of each checked the other’s excesses, and together they accomplished what none might have accomplished separately: they kept American Judaism going. Yet this benefit came at a steep price. Often, American Jewish religious life has seethed with acrimonious contention, the unseemly specter of Jews battling Jews.

Central European Jewish immigrants were the chief builders of several philanthropies and of the Board of Delegates of American Israelites (1859-1878), which fought for Jewish equality; separation of church and state; protection of overseas Jewry; and supported Palestine relief. Jewish leaders established a thriving periodical and book press in German and English and the first significant American rabbinical seminary, the Hebrew Union College, in 1875.

Over the next fifty years, a much larger immigration from Eastern Europe brought some 2 million Jews from Russia, Romania, and Austria-Hungary to America’s shores. Bloody pogroms from 1881 onward sparked many a decision to leave the Old World behind, but the root causes of mass migration lay in overpopulation, oppressive legislation, economic dislocation, forced conscription, poverty and despair, coupled with tales of wondrous opportunity and cut-rate steamship tickets. Jewish immigration virtually

1933



Students at Graduate School for Jewish Social work conduct a photography

project to capture images of the Lower East Side in transition from purely Yiddish-speaking area to one in which Jews became bilingual in Yiddish and English.

1934



American Jews cheer Detroit Tigers’ Hank Greenberg (1911 – 1986) when he refuses to play ball on Yom Kippur. In 1938, with five games left to the season, Greenberg’s 58 home runs are two shy of Babe Ruth’s record. When several pitchers walk him rather than giving him a shot at the record, many believe major league baseball did not want a Jew to claim that place in America’s national sport. Greenberg himself denies the assumption.

stopped during World War I and then resumed, but quota legislation then drastically restricted it in 1924.

With the opportunities available to Jewish immigrants, especially in the clothing trade, and the comforting presence of other Yiddish-speaking Jews nearby, large numbers of East European Jews saw no need to travel further than New York City. They mushroomed the city's Jewish population from about eighty thousand in the 1870s to almost 1,400,000 in 1915, nearly twenty-eight percent of the city's total population. East European Jews also settled in other communities from Maine to California, sometimes thanks to ambitious organized efforts. One notable project drew ten thousand immigrants to the port of Galveston, Texas, in the hope of alleviating overcrowded conditions on the east coast.

East European Jewish immigrants had to make a leap from the religious and cultural self-sufficiency of their European background to an industrialized America that emphasized individualism and devalued Old World traditions. For the culturally bewildered and economically exploited Jewish slum dweller, the Americanization process was rapid and difficult, ultimately successful, but not devoid of tragedies, family breakdown, unemployment, illness, conflict between parents and children, and escapism from Jewish life.

Predominantly factory workers when they arrived, East European Jews pioneered in trade unionism and industrial relations. They developed community centers, lodges, *landsmanshaftn*, Yiddish

and Hebrew literature and newspapers, publishing houses and cultural organizations, Yiddish theatres, Talmud Torahs, day schools, Yiddish schools, and academies of higher learning.

The devastation that World War I wrought upon Jewish communities drew the different segments of American Jewry together to relieve the suffering of Jews in Europe and Palestine especially through the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), founded in 1914.

Zionism became a significant force in American Jewish life on the eve of World War I. The conversion of the nationally famous "people's lawyer" and future Supreme Court justice Louis D. Brandeis to Zionism in 1914 catalyzed American Zionism's growth. Thanks to his charm, prestige, and passion Zionism's ranks and treasury swelled. In 1917, Zionists and non-Zionists, religionists and secularists, joined in the first American Jewish Congress to press for rights for the Jews of Europe and a "Jewish National Home" in Palestine.

In decades following World War I, Jews numbered among the many immigrants and their children who benefited from new opportunities in higher education, wartime prosperity and post-war investment. They bounded into "white-collar" positions as professionals and clerks, and moved to better neighborhoods. A few East European Jews became millionaires; only a minority remained wage laborers. American-born children of immigrants came to outnumber their parents during the 1930s. Finally, those born or raised in the country, especially those

who served in the war, felt equally "at home" as Americans and Jews.

Yet, American Jews had cause for apprehension. In response to the postwar "Red scare," many Americans lashed out at immigrants, "Bolsheviks," and apparent nonconformists. Some thought the Jew embodied capitalistic materialism, while for others he carried anarchistic ideas. Even Jews whose American families went back generations felt the sting of prejudice. In 1915, an Atlanta crowd lynched Leo Frank amidst a frenzy of anti-Semitism after he was falsely accused of murdering a thirteen-year-old employee in the factory he managed. Beginning in 1920, the *Dearborn Independent*, Henry Ford's widely-distributed newspaper, purported to describe an international Jewish conspiracy. In 1927, under intense pressure, Ford publicly apologized, but the damage was done. The 1930s added economic depression to this scalding brew. With Hitler in Germany and domestic anti-Semites like Father Charles Coughlin ranting on the airwaves, Jews had good reason to be nervous.

According to a 1938 survey, even with reports of Nazi atrocities, fewer than 5 percent of Americans expressed willingness to raise immigrant quotas to accommodate refugees, while two-thirds insisted, "We should try to keep them out." A bill to admit twenty thousand refugee children outside the quota failed in Congress. Eventually, America accepted over 200,000 Jewish refugees between 1933 and 1945, more than any other country, but only a small fraction of those needing rescue.

Could American Jewry have done

1939

"Tevya El Lechero" [Tevya the Milkman], based on Sholom



Aleichem story, produced to serve the increasing numbers of Jews who find safety from European anti-Semitism in South and Central America. In later years, story becomes

basis for Broadway mega hit "Fiddler on the Roof."

1943

Raphael Lemkin (1901 – 1959), an international lawyer who escaped from Poland to the U.S. in 1941, coins the term "genocide" to describe the Nazi attempt to exterminate European Jewry.



1945



World War II. More than a half-million American Jews served in the United States military. Jewish chaplains struggle to

serve Jewish personnel in far-flung combat areas throughout Europe and the Pacific, while also tending to needs of Jewish survivors of Holocaust.

more to rescue the Jews who fell under Nazi rule during the 1930s and early 1940s? Some blame Jewish leaders for doing too little too late, condemn Jewish organizations for their inability to unite in time of crisis, argue that American Jews should have applied greater pressure on the government to help save Jews, and point accusingly at missed opportunities—actions that if taken might have made a difference. Others conclude sadly that little more could have been accomplished given the realities of the day. Anti-immigrant sentiment within the United States, persistent isolationism, burgeoning anti-semitism, and the politics of expediency, coupled later with the President's firm insistence that the best way to save Jews was to win the war, would have rendered even the most zealous Jewish rescue campaigns largely futile. By all accounts, Adolf Hitler's maniacal determination to annihilate the Jews greatly exceeded the American Jewish community's power to stop him. Yet nagging doubts remain, for Jews know that had they been even a little more successful in opening up America's gates, bringing government pressure to bear on Great Britain to admit more Jews into Palestine, or in shaming the world to find some other haven for the Jews of Europe, many more of their brothers and sisters might have been saved.

Some 550,000 Jewish men and women served in America's armed forces during World War II. While many faced anti-Semitism, the central command worked to promote religious harmony through an interfaith message, using phrases like "Judeo-Christian" and "Protestants, Catholics, and Jews" that

rapidly gained ground in the postwar era.

With the terrible destruction of European Judaism, America became the most important Jewish community in the world. Fueled by postwar prosperity, American Judaism strengthened institutionally, building synagogues, religious schools and community centers, particularly in suburbia and the sunbelt. Holocaust refugees, among them illustrious rabbis and scholars, contributed to strengthening and revitalizing American Jewish religious life. This, they came to believe, was the transcendent purpose for which they had survived.

During the 1960s universal causes like world peace, civil rights, interfaith relations and the war in Vietnam dominated the American Jewish agenda. Jews played an active role in the civil rights movement, lobbied for a revised Catholic position on relations with the Jewish people, and many participated in anti-war demonstrations. The late 1960s, however, witnessed a shift from Jewish universalism to particularism. The Six Day War in June 1967 changed the way many Jews thought about Israel and themselves leading to a new focus on strengthening Israel and helping 1.5 million persecuted Jews of the Soviet Union move to Israel, the United States and Western Europe.

Young American Jews also focused on revitalizing Judaism in harmony with the 1960s counterculture. The *havurah* movement, the *Jewish Catalog* and a substantial "back to tradition" movement affected all streams of Judaism. Jewish education and Jewish culture strengthened markedly, leading some to suggest that American Judaism was

experiencing a "renaissance."

Feminism and spirituality also transformed Jewish life. The ordination of women by the Reform (1972), Reconstructionist (1974) and Conservative (1985) movements symbolized feminism's impact on late twentieth-century American Judaism. Women also assumed new roles in Orthodoxy as high-level Jewish education, including Talmud study, became available to Orthodox women. Meanwhile, spiritual and emotive religious experiences incorporating music, dance, mystical teachings and healing brought a renewal of spirituality across the spectrum of Jewish religious life.

Questions still confront American Jews as they mark their 350th anniversary. Should they focus inwardly to enhance Judaism, or focus outwardly 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 tradition against contemporary culture? Compromise for Jewish unity, or stand firm for cherished Jewish principles?

Today, Jews witness two contradictory trends operating in their communities: assimilation and revitalization. Which will predominate? That will be determined day by day, community by community, Jew by Jew. [ajhs](#)

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1948



United States Army in Occupied Germany publishes a 19-volume *Survivors' Talmud* for use by Jewish Displaced

Persons and Holocaust survivors, the first time in world history that a national government published these sacred texts.

1948



United Palestine Appeal publishes its *Yearbook* to commemorate its "Night of Stars" gala celebrating the birth of the State of Israel.

1950



As American Jews move to the suburbs, they build hundreds of new synagogues even as they become increasingly indistinguishable from other middle class Americans. Joining a synagogue becomes the chief expression of Jewish identity. In 1930, a mere 20 percent of American Jewish families belong to a synagogue; by 1960, nearly 60 percent do in a search for community as well as spirituality.