

Commentary

Anti-Semitism and American History

vol. 71:3

Jonathan D. Sarna

(March 1981)

THE portrait of early America in many American Jewish history textbooks is an alluring one. No anti-Semitism mars the Eden-like national landscape; religious freedom spreads over the face of the country, expanding with the frontier; Jews luxuriate in the blessings of justice and liberty. To be sure, there is the occasional incident to tarnish this glowing picture: Peter Stuyvesant's effort to keep Jews out of New Amsterdam, the recall of Consul Mordecai Noah from Tunis on account of his religion, or General Grant's Order #11 ousting Jews from his war zone in 1862. In every case, however, the severity of the decree is somehow mitigated, and Jews ultimately emerge triumphant.

"One of the most heartwarming phenomena of American life," wrote Jacob Weinstein in 1942, "was the sudden sterilization of the virus of religious bigotry once it was transferred to American soil." Oscar Handlin agreed; early Americans, he averred, generally found Jews "wonderful in their past achievements . . . still more wonderful in their preservation." Seeming exceptions "were not incompatible with the total acceptance of Jews as Americans." The latest survey of American anti-Semitism, by Nathan C. Belth, *A Promise to Keep*,* while less effusive, comes to roughly the same conclusion: the history of American anti-Semitism basically begins in 1877, when the banker Joseph Seligman was excluded from the Grand Union Hotel in Saratoga Springs on account of his religion. Before then, Jews were too small a minority to be noticed.

This cheery portrayal of early American Jewish history has a long history itself. Isaac Markens's *The Hebrews in America*, published in 1888, aimed specifically "to show the degree of prominence and influence attained by the Hebrews of the United States." Obstacles on the road to success were ignored by Markens, as were those "Hebrews" who did not succeed. Similarly, the founders of the American Jewish Historical Society hoped originally to demonstrate that Jews acted as

"co-workers in the discovery, settlement, and development of our land." Their early studies excluded filiopietism; contrary evidence went unrecognized.

American Jewish historians had no desire to uncover early anti-Semitism; they sought only to counter that which existed in their own time by showing that hatred of Jews was unpatriotic, a deviation from the country's noble past. Articles pictured the idols of the Republic, Washington and Jefferson in particular, as magniloquent philo-Semites. Cotton Mather drew praise for being "modern and liberal in his condemnation of religious persecutions." The Puritans became benevolent Hebraists. Several of Columbus's crewmen, if not the great discoverer himself, were shown to be converted Jews—a conclusion that Oscar Straus excitedly called "an answer for all time to come to any anti-Semitic tendencies in this country." Jewish historians condemned the anti-Semitism of their own day as a bad habit, imported from Europe. If Americans would only return to the virtuous ways of their forebears, they implied, hatred would end.

Studies appearing after World War II, if less tententious, adhered to the same general outline. Carey McWilliams's *A Mask for Privilege* offered a "progressive" interpretation of American anti-Semitism, blaming it on "the revolution that assured the triumph of business enterprise." The triumph was supposedly confirmed in 1877 and Judeophobia began at once; before then, McWilliams claimed, "the record . . . had been largely free of overt or significant manifestations of anti-Semitism." Oscar Handlin, who viewed American Jewish history as an "adventure in freedom," shifted the onset of significant anti-Semitism from the third quarter of the 19th century to the 20th century; earlier slurs, he claimed, had been without serious malicious intent. Other scholars heatedly debated the issue of how late-19th-century Populists viewed the Jews, a debate as narrow as it was vacuous. John Higham tried to broaden the discussion to cover anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age as a whole, but nobody took up his challenge. What came forth instead was a con-

JONATHAN D. SARNA is assistant professor of American Jewish history at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati. His *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah* has just been published (Holmes & Meier).

* New York Times Books (1979), 305 pp., \$11.95.

sensus view, quite consistent with the then regnant liberal tradition in American history, depicting anti-Semitism as a late and alien phenomenon, largely attributable to outgroups, marginal groups, or groups whose status in society had declined: rural farmers, disaffected workers, and nativist patricians.

CAME the 1960's and 70's, and theories of American exceptionalism fell into disrepute. Studies of the American character grew dusty on the shelves as newer volumes trumpeted diversity and rediscovered the nation's darker sides. Women and minority groups, blacks in particular, joined with a new generation of radical historians to point bitter fingers of accusation at the most highly glorified heroes of the American pantheon. Comparative investigations discovered that America was less exceptional than had once been imagined. Against this background, the study of American anti-Semitism also underwent a change of emphasis. Quietly at first, then with greater vehemence, historians hacked away at the old consensus, showing that its portrayal of events was more wish than reality. While the term anti-Semitism may indeed date to the late 19th century, the actual phenomenon is now known to hark back as far as American Jewry itself.

Jacob R. Marcus's *The Colonial American Jew*, a definitive three-volume study published in 1970, devotes a full chapter to "rejection" of Jews in pre-revolutionary times, discussing literary images, social prejudice, and full-scale incidents of anti-Jewish violence. In the colonial era, "'Jew' was still a dirty word," Marcus writes, "and it was hardly rare to see the Jews denigrated as such in the press." As early as the mid-17th century a New Amsterdam Jew named David Ferera, found guilty of insulting a bailiff, received an inordinately strict punishment on account of his religion. During the period of English rule, New York Jews suffered a violent mob attack against one of their funeral corteges and quite a few desecrations of their cemeteries, besides more regular cases of discrimination and defamation. After weighing the evidence, Marcus still insists that "the Jews here found more acceptance than in any other land in the world," but unlike earlier researchers he never confuses more acceptance with total acceptance.

After independence, the Jewish situation changed only slightly. Although non-Protestants received political rights, the baiting of Jews became an accepted part of political mud-slinging, even when—as in the case of John Israel of Pittsburgh—the candidate in question may not have been Jewish at all. Various recent monographs demonstrate that the range of anti-Semitic incidents in the young republic spanned the spectrum from literary and cultural stereotyping, social and economic discrimination, attacks on Jewish property, all the way to blood libels and lurid descrip-

tions of purported anti-Christian sentiments in classical Jewish texts. In 1820, New York's *German Correspondent* admitted that:

The Jews are not generally regarded with a favorable eye; and "Jew" is an epithet which is frequently uttered in a tone bordering on contempt. Say what you will, prejudices against the Jews exist here, and subject them to inconveniences from which other citizens of the United States are exempt.

James Gordon Bennett's widely read *New York Herald* displayed particular vehemence in its denunciation of Jews. Though Bennett enjoyed lambasting a host of targets, and was quite capable of printing philo-Semitic articles, his most inflammatory rhetoric evoked the darkest days of medieval disputations:

Here are pictured forth, from their own sacred writings, the Talmud, which is considered a second part of the Bible, the real opinion of the Jews on the original and Sacred Founder of Christianity. . . . In the midst of Christians, surrounded by Christian usages, the Jews may conceal these terrible opinions and doctrines—may attempt to beguile and deceive those among whom they live, in order the better to crush all religion under the secret poison of infidelity and atheism, but their Talmuds and Targums are evidences against them (November 18, 1837).

SIMILARLY medieval were characterizations of Jews in early American literature. Louis Harap, in his comprehensive book, *The Image of the Jew in American Literature* (1974), finds "invidious stereotypes of the pawnbroker and businessman," along with such timeless motifs as the "Jew's daughter," the Jewish hunchback, and the Jewish criminal in popular ante-bellum fiction. George Lippard's best-selling *The Quaker City or The Monks of Monk Hall* (1844) portrayed a hump-backed Jewish forger, Gabriel Van Gelt, who swindles, blackmails, and commits murder for the sake of money. Joseph Holt Ingraham's tales, best-sellers too, offered a whole cast of dark-eyed Shylocks, beautiful Jewish daughters, and revolting Jewish criminals. To be sure, Jews rarely appear as lone villains in early American literature. Not only do they have Gentile accomplices, but in many cases they exhibit a wise understanding of Jewish-Gentile relations ("Te Christian plead humbly to te Jew ven he would have money, and curses him ven he no more needs him"), and of history ("Under the despotic governments of the old world [the Jew's] political and personal rights have been the football of tyranny and cupidity"). Harap's summary seems apt:

Novels reveal attitudes and not necessarily behavior . . . probably actual relations were less acerbic than those reflected in [literature]. How-

ever, the reality must have been ambivalent at best.

Ambivalence is the appropriate word. Conflicting emotions, changing experiences, and divergent influences pulled people now one way, now the other. At times, the lure of the exotic opened doors to Jews. Rural Americans traveled miles just to catch a glimpse of one of God's chosen people. Joseph Jonas of Cincinnati, for example, recalled:

Many persons of the Nazarene faith residing from 50 to 100 miles from the city, hearing there were Jews living in Cincinnati, came into town for the special purpose of viewing and conversing with some of "the children of Israel, the holy people of God," as they termed us.

As was true in the case of Asian immigrants, however, the lure of the exotic frequently gave way to fear of the unknown. Outsiders came to view Jews as an alien force, a people apart, "deficient," as Charles King (at one time the president of Columbia College) wrote in 1823, "in that single national attachment which binds the man to the soil of his nativity, and makes him the exclusive patriot of his own country." As patronizing curiosity gave way to xenophobic delusion, doors closed, and Jews were kept out.

A second, even more powerful source of ambivalence was the pervasive tension between the "mythological Jew," that cursed figure of Christian tradition, and the "Jew next door" who seemingly gave the lie to every element of the stereotype. Usually it was the mythological Jew—the unscrupulous moneylender, the eternal wanderer, the satanic Christ-killer—who was flayed by anti-Semites. If they sometimes realized that Jews of their acquaintance did not fit the mold, the mold was often too deeply ingrained to change; it was easier to live with the contradiction. "Them Jews — . . . I don't mean you," is a phrase one upstate New Yorker still remembers having heard from her neighbors. Thomas Jefferson, in spite of having several Jewish acquaintances, continued to think Jews morally depraved, and lamented that "among them ethics are so little understood." Henry Ford actually believed that all the "good Jews" of the country, including his friend Rabbi Leo Franklin, would rally to his crusade against the "international Jew."

"When a delusion cannot be dissipated by the facts of reality, it probably does not spring from reality," Freud wrote. Dissonance between received wisdom and perceived wisdom was particularly strong in the case of Jews. From colonial days onward, Jews and Christians cooperated with one another, maintaining close social and economic relations. Intermarriage rates, a reliable if unwelcome sign of religious harmony, periodically rose to high levels. And individual Jews thrived, often rising to positions of wealth and power. Yet popular prejudice based on received wisdom continued

nonetheless. Even some slight manifestation of a "typical Jewish trait" brought all the old charges back to the fore.

AMBIVALENCE is a theme that emerges clearly from more recent studies of American anti-Semitism. Bertram Korn, whose pathbreaking book, *American Jewry and the Civil War*, anticipated the contemporary rediscovery of anti-Semitism in the period before the Gilded Age, found that "anti-Jewish prejudice was actually a characteristic expression of the [Civil War] age, part and parcel of the economic and social upheaval effectuated by the war." Korn adduced evidence of anti-Jewish writings and activities both in the North and the South; "the Jews . . . were a popular scapegoat in all areas." Far from being an isolated exception, General Grant's expulsion order was part of a larger pattern. Yet at the same time Jews rose in the ranks of both armies; rabbis won the right to serve as chaplains; Judah Benjamin became a key Confederate leader; and President Lincoln showed unprecedented concern for Jews' civil liberties. In the Civil War as before, Jews in general suffered because of what the word "Jew" symbolized, while individual Jews won the respect of their fellow citizens and emerged from the fratricidal struggle more self-assured than they had ever been before.

In the post-Civil War era, during Reconstruction and in the Gilded Age, many "Israelites"—as some called themselves to distinguish real Jews from mythical ones—prospered with the American business boom. Gaudy showpiece temples, the Jewish form of conspicuous consumption, testified to the community's new status and wealth. Jews entered the upper class. As Naomi W. Cohen, Stephen Birmingham, and John Higham have shown, however, the upper class had at best mixed feelings about whether to welcome Jewish parvenus. In the words of the Boston *Saturday Evening Gazette*, "It is strange that a nation that boasts so many good traits should be so obnoxious." Ultimately, some individual Jews won acceptance, while Jews as a group continued to meet with considerable hostility. Long before Joseph Seligman made his trip to Saratoga and was turned away, complaints about discrimination and prejudice filled the pages of Jewish newspapers.

The range of post-Civil War attitudes toward Jews is perhaps displayed most clearly in American literature and popular culture. Michael Dobkowski's recent book, *The Tarnished Dream: The Basis of American Anti-Semitism*,* emphasizes—to my mind, overemphasizes—the negative stereotypes found in this literature. Based on exhaustive research, the book offers a rogue's gallery of references to Jewish Christ-killers, criminals, Shylocks, conspirators, radicals, and unassimilable barbari-

* Greenwood Press (1979), 291 pp., \$22.50.

ans. Inevitably, there is a juicy quotation from that professional turn-of-the-century anti-Semite, Telemachus Timayenis:

[The Jew] comes from an inferior race, degraded by corrupt blood, his heart full of malice, his brain full of intrigues and tricks, his ideas invariably turn by natural law to deceit, usury, theft, counterfeiting, forgery, embezzling, extortion, blackmailing, and above all to fraudulent bankruptcy. This is the field and compass of Jewish inventiveness, skill, and genius.

What Dobkowski fails to mention is that Timayenis's views met with "almost universal indignation," according to the *Evening World* of Boston, and at least one of his scurrilous tracts was banned from that city's railway newsstands.

Dobkowski's portrayal of Ignatius Donnelly's anti-Semitism is similarly one-sided and oversimplified. The same Donnelly who complained that "The aristocracy of the world is now almost altogether of Hebrew origin . . . as merciless to the Christians as the Christians had been to them," elsewhere wrote of "poor afflicted Hebrews," and insisted that "we must not blame the Jews. Persecution forced them into their present channels." In a praiseworthy effort to correct earlier myths, Dobkowski has exaggerated the negative literary image of the Jew. Though admittedly weaker in the period of heavy Eastern European Jewish immigration than at any previous time, a more positive, even romanticized image did nevertheless continue to exist. In Henry Harland's *Mrs. Peixado* (1886), for example, Jews are considered by one major character to be "the kindest-hearted and clearest-minded people one meets hereabouts . . . a noble and beautiful people with a record that we Gentiles might well envy."

BY ALL accounts, anti-Semitism crested in America during the half-century preceding World War II. During this era of nativism and then isolationism, Jews faced physical attacks, many forms of discrimination, and intense vilification in print, on the airwaves, in movies, and on stage. The literature dealing with this period is vast; only recently, however, has the element of anti-Semitism been placed under the historian's microscope. Studies have appeared of the nativist mind, the Leo Frank case, Henry Ford's *The International Jew*, the college quota system, urban violence, and the German-American Bund, and more monographs are in progress. Many questions yet remain to be answered, chief among them being how Jews circumvented the obstacles in their path and rose to prominence. Still, a synoptic treatment of recent American anti-Semitism would be timely. Sad to say, Nathan C. Belth's *A Promise to Keep* does not fill the bill.

Belth calls his volume a "narrative of the American encounter with anti-Semitism," though actu-

ally all but twenty pages of the book deal with the last hundred years. Before then, he claims (as I mentioned earlier) that anti-Semitism lay in "a recessive phase," hostility being directed at other groups. Defining anti-Semitism narrowly, he concentrates on heavily publicized national incidents, ignoring serious local flare-ups which often had much greater impact on individual Jews. His concern is with "narrative"; he generally eschews interpretation. Occasionally he does discuss the effect of racism, nativism, and economic developments on the formation of anti-Jewish attitudes, but for the most part he falls back on the villain theory of history: his anti-Semites are anti-Semitic because they are wicked. In addition, Belth seems to have overlooked at least a decade of recent scholarship; he writes about Leo Frank without benefit of Leonard Dinnerstein's work, about Henry Ford without consulting David Lewis's biography, about college quotas without referring to volumes by Harold Wechsler and Marcia Synnott, about the Bund without mentioning Sander Diamond's *The Nazi Movement in the United States*. Though the building blocks exist for a thorough, imaginative study of American anti-Semitism, viewing the phenomenon across time and placing it within a proper comparative context, that study still remains to be written.

Unfortunately, the most recent historical works on American anti-Semitism proceed in a different direction altogether.* Influenced by the current obsession with the Holocaust, they ask only one question: could it happen here? And to this question they have only one answer: yes. Michael Selzer adumbrated the current trend in "*Kike*": *A Documentary History of Anti-Semitism in America* (1972). The volume forms part of the ill-fated *Ethnic Prejudice in America* series, perhaps best remembered for its use of ethnic slurs as titles and ethnic caricatures as jacket photographs. Like the other volumes in this series, Selzer's contains valuable source materials, many of them not otherwise reprinted. Instead of analyzing these sources, however, Selzer exploits them for their shock value:

There is no reason to believe that from the vast reservoir of bigotry, and specifically of anti-Semitism that exists in this country, a new wave of Jew-baiting, perhaps even of persecution and murder may not arise.

Saul Friedman's *The Incident at Massena*

* I exclude from the present account those many studies of anti-Semitism that have been carried out by sociologists and survey analysts rather than historians. Perhaps the best known of these is the seven-volume series, *Patterns of American Prejudice*, sponsored since 1960 by the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith. An eighth, summary volume by Harold E. Quinley and Charles Y. Glock, *Anti-Semitism in America*, has recently appeared (Free Press, 1979). The limitations of the series were ably pointed out some years ago by Lucy S. Dawidowicz ("Can Anti-Semitism Be Measured?" COMMENTARY, July 1970).

(1978), a volume about an overblown 1928 blood-libel incident in a small upstate New York town, is less prophetic and more emphatic: "it *did* happen here." "It" was that four-year-old Barbara Griffiths disappeared two days before Yom Kippur; officials asked Jews whether "your people in the old country offer human sacrifices"; the village rabbi acquitted himself well; and a few hours later the girl emerged on her own from the woods, to the great relief of all concerned. Jewish defense organizations only became involved in the incident later on, and used it to arouse and educate the public. At least half a dozen other such incidents have occurred in American Jewish history, receiving hardly any notice at all. But as far as Friedman is concerned, "the shades of the tragedy to befall Europe's Jews . . . were all contained in the aftermath of the incident at Massena." Indeed, the horrors of Massena "might yet be duplicated in our own day."

Albert Lee, author of the newly published *Henry Ford and the Jews*,* thinks that the Holocaust came even closer to America's shores than does Friedman. Not content with existing studies which trace Ford's ravings on the "International Jew" both to the forged *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and to the domestic concerns of Middle America, Lee asserts on the slimmest of evidence that Ford served as an inspiration to Adolf Hitler, who merely "plagiarized" Ford's arguments: "the words are different; the thoughts are identical."

The main contours of Lee's story are well known. Ford's Dearborn *Independent* commenced its attacks on the supposed machinations of Jews in 1920 and continued the assault for most of the next seven years. In 1927 Ford "apologized" to Louis Marshall, probably to avoid a libel suit; thereafter he kept his feelings about Jews largely to himself. The many reasons Lee sets forth to explain Ford's obsession with Jews—the impact of populism on his thinking, the impression made on him by the East European immigration, the influence of Thomas Edison and the pro-German Edward Rumely, the failure of his World War I Peace Ship (which a Jewish woman named Rosika Schwimmer had convinced him to finance), the rise of Bolshevism, and assorted other traumas—have all been adduced before.† *Henry Ford and the Jews* differs only in viewing Ford as a "man who helped pave the road to Auschwitz" and who "might very well [*sic*] have been elected President of the United States." What saved America, Lee claims, was Ford's timidity, his "lack of a Dale Carnegie course in public speaking." Otherwise, he appears to think, this country too might have had a *Fuehrer* at its helm.

AS THESE books demonstrate, we have moved in just half a century from the myth that America is different to the myth that America is not different at all. By itself this

transformation speaks volumes about loss of faith in American institutions and dreams. Yet uncritical condemnation of America is just as unwarranted, as misleading, and as dangerous from the point of view of Jewish interests as uncritical celebration. America is different, and it is not Nazi Germany. At the risk of oversimplification, let me spell out four such differences as they relate to anti-Semitism.

1. In America, Jews have always fought anti-Semites freely. Never having received their emancipation as an "award," they have had no fears of losing it. Instead, from the beginning they made full use of their rights to freedom of speech. As early as 1784, a "Jew Broker"—probably Haym Salomon—responded publicly and forcefully to the anti-Semitic charges of a prominent Quaker lawyer, not hesitating to remind him that his "own religious sectary" could also form "very proper subjects of criticism and animadversion." A few years later, Christian missionaries and their supporters faced Jewish polemics no less strident in tone. Where European Jews prided themselves on their "forbearance" in the face of attack, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise boasted that he was a "malicious, biting, pugnacious, challenging, and mocking monster of the pen." Louis Marshall and Stephen Wise, early 20th-century spokesmen of American Jewry, may have been more civil, but as readers of their voluminous letters know, they were no less bold. In defense of Jewish rights, they did battle even with the President of the United States.

2. American anti-Semitism has always had to compete with other forms of animus. Racism, anti-Quakerism, Anglophobia, anti-Catholicism, anti-Masonry, anti-Mormonism, anti-Orientalism, nativism, anti-Teutonism, primitive anti-Communism—these and other waves have periodically swept over the American landscape, scarring and battering citizens. Because hatred is so varied and diffused, no group experiences for long the full brunt of national odium. Furthermore, most Americans retain bitter memories of days past when they or their ancestors were the objects of malevolence. At least in some cases, this leads them to exercise restraint. The American strain of anti-Semitism is thus less potent than its European counterpart, and it faces a larger number of natural competitors. To reach epidemic proportions, it must first crowd out a vast number of contending hatreds.

3. Anti-Semitism is more foreign to American ideals than to European ones. The central documents of the Republic assure Jews of liberty; its first President conferred upon them his blessing. The fact that anti-Semitism can properly be branded "un-American," while no protection in

* Stein and Day, 200 pp., \$12.95.

† A greatly superior analysis, by Leo Ribuffo, has appeared in the June 1980 number of *American Jewish History*.

the formal sense—the nation has betrayed its ideals innumerable times—grants Jews a measure of protection not found in Europe. There, anti-Semites could always claim a legitimacy stemming from times past when the *volk* ruled and Jews knew their place. American romantics could point to nothing even remotely similar in their own past. The Founding Fathers, whatever they personally thought of Jews, gave them full equality. "Who are you, or what are you . . . that in a *free* country you dare to trample on any sectary whatever of people," Haym Salomon had demanded back in 1784. Half a century later, Isaac Leeser charged that it was "contrary to the spirit of the Constitution of the country for the many to combine to do the smallest minority the injury of depriving them of their conscientious conviction by systematic efforts." Non-Jews could respond by pointing to America's supposedly "Christian character"—a view of American society occasionally recognized by no less august a body than the Supreme Court. Nevertheless, the Constitution has proved to be a potent weapon in the Jews' defense. German Jews could appeal to no similar document.

4. American politics resists anti-Semitism. In a two-party system where close elections are the rule, neither party can long afford to alienate any major bloc of voters. The politics of hatred have thus largely been confined to noisy third parties and single-issue fringe groups. When anti-Semitism is introduced into the political arena—as it has been periodically, since the days of the Federalists—major candidates generally repudiate it. America's most successful politicians build broad-based coalitions, highly nebulous in their ideology. They seek support from respectable elements all across the political spectrum. Experience has taught them that appeals to national unity win more elections than appeals to narrow provincialism or to bigotry.

FEARS of an American holocaust are thus greatly exaggerated. What we need today is to understand American anti-Semitism on its own terms. If the country has not been utter heaven for Jews, it has been as far from hell as Jews in the Diaspora have ever known. Broadly speaking, the American Jewish experience is unique. Determining precisely how, is one of the many tasks that lie ahead.