

Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 490 pp. Illus.

Around 1700, when members of the first American Jewish congregation began public worship in New York, they were a microscopic presence in world Jewry, but they already had a sense of their special destiny. Naming their synagogue Shearith Israel, “remnant of Israel,” they echoed the prophet Micah’s teachings that the scattering of fragments of the chosen people was a portent of redemption. Over the centuries, sacred prediction in many ways became secular fact. The devastation of European Jewry in the Holocaust tragically left the America community as nearly the sole Jewish hope, and the ensuing success of the nation of Israel has not eclipsed the crucial role of American Jewry. Yet unusual responsibility may, in and of itself, have stirred proportionate anxiety about failure, and the peculiarities of American culture heightened fears of a Jewish disaster, not now caused by bigotry but tolerance. Economic opportunity, personal freedom, and a Christian majority often willing to absorb outsiders posed unanticipated dangers. Whether American Judaism fulfills or, with equal drama, disappoints the biblical mission of the people of Israel, generations have believed that the American Jewish experience would be different. In his masterful book, Jonathan Sarna chronicles this story, making the enduring tension between historical optimism and pessimism its centerpiece.

Whereas doomsayers identify American Jewish practices such as intermarriage as inevitable corrosives, Sarna pictures decline as part of a regenerative mechanism. What seem fatal flaws, in other words, become part of communal psychology. American Jewish history “is in many ways a response to this haunting fear that Judaism in the New World will wither away” (xiii–xiv). In a historical narrative more wavelike than linear, Sarna shows how committed Jews reached out repeatedly to renew tradition in the face of threat. Young people were often catalysts: for example, the men in their twenties who began the journal the *American Hebrew* (1879), a forerunner of Conservatism, or pioneers of spiritual renewal who formed small *havurot* in the 1960s.

This use of a model of religious revitalization, where change begins at the margins, self-consciously links American Jewish and Christian history, particularly the history of Protestant revivalism. Sarna sees the imprint that radical Protestantism left on American culture and, by transmission, on religious minorities, without forgetting the communities' distinctiveness. His alignment of American Judaism with its Christian counterpart, arguably the study's greatest achievement, makes two marks on the book's design: its religious focus and eclectic coverage.

Although any history of American Jewry will blend the development of Judaism as a religion with the accomplishments of Jews as a people, Sarna's title, *American Judaism*, identifies his main interest as a system of worship. Much like revivalism, the Judaism of this study consists of patterns of public religious behavior. Coherence is the advantage of this approach; but the initial choice of direction leads to further decisions: emphasis on communal ritual over individual ideas, rabbis instead of lay people, public space versus private, and institutions more than social life. The brilliant offbeat philosopher Moses Elias Levy does not appear, nor does Albert Einstein, Walter Lippmann, or Jennie Grossinger, whose *Art of Jewish Cooking* (1958) must have exerted at least as much influence as did rabbinic thought. Recent American Catholic history, surprisingly uninterested in "churchy" subjects, has perhaps set a standard for revisionism among religious historians, as practitioners like Robert Orsi, Paula Kane, James T. Fisher, and Patrick Allitt search unlikely corners, from ethnic households to converts' psyches, for "American Catholicism." Granted, it was easier to be innovative in their monographs than in a broad history such as this. Yet Sarna opts for restraint when he locates American Judaism in cycles of communal organization.

Within this world of synagogues, charities, and schools, Sarna covers a range of sometimes dissonant developments that show the pluralism of American Judaism. "Renewal," for example, the chapter on events since World War II, reports the new Orthodox presence, Jewish civil rights commitment, Holocaust remembrance, support for Israel, gender politics, and more. It is exciting to see these heterogeneous passions analytically linked. Yet as seasoned

revivalists know, it is easy to be seduced by numbers and fervency and just as hard to predict whose commitment will last. Sarna's ambitious inclusiveness at times produces emphasis on obvious traits. For intellectuals, we learn more about their activities than ideas: that Abraham Joshua Heschel marched for civil rights and Joseph Soloveitchik received secular schooling, but not that Heschel wrote *God in Search of Man* (1955) or that Soloveitchik's main concern was metaphysics, rather than historical transition, in *The Lonely Man of Faith* (1965). Sarna's dialectical model of declension and renewal succeeds mainly by finding evidence of effort. Whether initiatives sustain individual faith and communal well-being is not at the heart of his analysis.

With expressed hope and quieter fear for their future, Shearith Israel's founders resembled their Christian neighbors. The Puritans, too, imagined themselves a remnant of God's people, "a City upon a Hill" heralding redemption, in John Winthrop's words of 1630, unless "our hearts shall turn away so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced and worship ... other Gods, our pleasures, and proffits."¹ Jonathan Sarna writes not only with an awareness of this likeness but its irony. Common cultural roots in the Hebrew Bible did not make Jews and Christians equal in America, and even if freedom proved religiously problematic for both, Jews faced the challenge at a disadvantage. Sarna's phrase "American Judaism" signifies the product of this struggle in a special sense: rather than a simple historical outcome, the American idiom of the traditional faith has been deliberately articulated by the Jewish community and repeatedly revised. Probing, analytical, and committed, *American Judaism* is a magnificent scholarly achievement and invaluable common possession.

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Notes

¹ "A Model of Christian Charity," in *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*, Conrad Cherry, ed., rev. ed (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 41.