

Ava F. Kahn, ed., *Jewish Voices of the California Gold Rush: A Documentary History, 1849-1880* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 549 pp.

This rich documentary history of Jews during the California Gold Rush evokes the excitement of that helter-skelter era while illustrating regional differences between Jewish settlement in the Far West and elsewhere in the United States. Using settlers' and sojourners' own words, historian Ava F. Kahn shows that amid the pluralism and diversity of the Gold Rush, Judaism flourished. So too did new patterns of socialization, for California's mercurial settlement led to life cycle events celebrated in public and to business partnerships sealed across ethnic lines.

The great migration to the American El Dorado, too often neglected in Jewish histories of North America, found immigrants with Polish, Prussian, and German accents fleeing failed revolutions in Europe and mingling with westward-bound American-born Jews. All arrived during the first wave of gold rush fever and of Anglo settlement, helping define the thirty-first state and Jewish institutions within it.

Partly because California lacked the "deep-rooted Protestant hegemony" (41) of the East, Kahn contends that new, regional patterns emerged. Moreover, the great distance from established Jewish religious authorities led to innovations, such as reciting *Kaddish* for esteemed non-Jews. Calling pioneer California's "reputation for religious apathy unfounded," (38) Kahn presents documents that describe the highly visible spires of San Francisco's Temple Emanu-El and the bylaws of multiple Hebrew institutions. She also highlights, through first-person accounts, contentious splits over *shochets*, liturgy, and rabbis — indications of religious rivalry rather than apathy.

*Jewish Voices of the California Gold Rush* is divided into six segments, each with a summary introduction outlining the purpose and themes of the annotated selections that follow. The first segment, "Looking West," includes travel diaries by pioneers en route to California through the "very dirty" Isthmus of Panama. (132) Another account describes Fanny Brooks, a Jewish bride from Breslau who spent her honeymoon traveling by mule train across the Great Plains.

To survive, she learned to shoot a gun, build a fire with sagebrush and buffalo chips, and bake bread in a cast-iron skillet. A more comfortable journey was experienced by Rabbi Max Lilienthal who traveled by train from Cincinnati to officiate at the 1876 marriage of a California nephew. The rabbi's favorite stop was Salt Lake City, "the land of the Mormons ... in which we Jews were at once turned into Gentiles! ... Think what you may of Brigham Young and his queer doctrines ... he is a mighty organizer." (142–43)

San Francisco is the subject of the book's second section. From the first High Holy Day sermon delivered under a tent-roofed store to matzo advertisements and marriage *ketuboth*, the city illuminates the diversity and the disputes inherent in West Coast Judaism. Among the treats in this segment are selections by and about Rabbi Julius Eckman, the opinionated pioneer who moved to California without being "called," who contentiously served one congregation, then ultimately left his mark by founding Jewish schools and a weekly newspaper, the *Gleaner*.

"Personal Struggles," the book's third part, celebrates life cycle events such as the circumcision of an infant, reported in the *Nevada City Journal* as a "nipping in the bud." (294) At the "elegant" wedding of Carrie Goldwater to P. N. Aronson in 1876, the couple's gifts included "200 cases of silver" and a one hundred dollar donation in their name to the Jewish Orphan Asylum. (302–3) Also in this section is an entry from Rebekah Bettelheim, who later married New York Rabbi Alexander Kohut. Her father was a California rabbi. In her autobiography she concludes that "San Francisco had too many congregations, and [therefore] none of them thrived. This ... had a bad spiritual effect." (307)

Beyond San Francisco this documentary history takes a deep foray into "Gold Rush Country," meaning the mining towns and the river supply towns (such as Sacramento and Stockton) where metal-riveted, denim work pants sold by Levi Strauss and his partner tailor, Jacob Davis, were in constant demand. Life was hard in these remote towns, and Kahn documents the sad details of a suicide in Sonora and the burial procession of a man to the cemetery at Kokelumne Hill. There were also celebrations: the double bar mitzvah of Jacob Kohn

and Henry Louis at Placerville in 1867, as well as the circumcision of triplets whose middle names were Lincoln, Andrew Johnson, and John Connes (a California U.S. senator).

Subsequent sections of the book discuss “Group Relations,” with outsiders giving opinions of Jewish “slop shops,” (385) legislators commenting on Sunday blue laws, and “some of our best citizens” (390) being the subject of views from the wider community. As news of the phenomenal riches in California spread worldwide, emissaries from Jerusalem, then under Turkish rule, flocked to California to raise alms for the Jews of Palestine. These *schmorrers* nurtured a “close relationship between the golden land and the promised land.” (462) The *nouveau riche* of California gave generously to the Jews of Morocco, according to excerpts from the *London Jewish Chronicle* and *Hebrew Observer*. They also protested, in larger numbers than elsewhere, the Mortara affair, the 1858 papal abduction of a Jewish boy baptized by a Catholic servant.

*Jewish Voices of the California Gold Rush* includes a California chronology, a detailed index, and more than fifty illustrations, from a portrait of Adolph Sutro wielding a pickaxe to maps of routes to California.

Assessing the larger picture, Kahn’s bibliographical essay demonstrates the wealth of West Coast archival collections that await examination. This book, a treasury of primary source materials, should whet the appetite for further research and more thoughtful inclusion of the Far West in future surveys of American Jewish history.

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