

The Periodization of American Jewish History



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ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT

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THE TIME HAS COME, I believe, to periodize American Jewish history. Though Jews, as a community, have lived here for over three hundred years, it was not until the year 1800 that a young graduate of Columbia College, in a Hebrew commencement oration, attempted a brief survey of American Jewry. As far as we know, that was the first sketch of American Jewish history by an American. Since then, individual Jews, conscious of the growth and possible significance of the American Jewish community, have written on the history of their people in this land. As early as the ante-Civil War period, Jacques Judah Lyons, the *hazzan* of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York, began to collect material for a history which he hoped to write. His published notes do not indicate that he had any scheme of periodization. His approach to the subject—and that is true of most writers in the middle nineteenth century—was purely annalistic.

By the third quarter of the last century, students of American Jewish life were fully aware that there had been three “waves” of migration to this country: the Spanish-Portuguese, the German, and the East European. What is more, they were conscious of the fact that these “waves” represented different cultures. Consequently, three different periods in American

Jewish life came to be commonly accepted, and when Peter Wiernik published his *History of the Jews in America* in 1912, he employed the obvious device of dividing all of American Jewish history according to the three “successive strata of immigration.” In my opinion, this division of the material of American Jewish history is natural and correct, and should be definitively adopted.

My purpose in this study is to re-examine and reappraise this now traditional form of periodization in order, if possible, to fix the limits of the various periods of Jewish history in this land.

As we know, periodization is the parcelling of time into separate and distinct periods. It is chronological division. In its simplest form, it becomes annals. Obviously periodization is largely a convenience, a contrivance to ease the study of history. It is a skeleton on which to hang flesh, a frame on which to build. But in truth, it is more than a convenience, more than a mechanical arrangement determined by an arbitrary snip of the shears.

It has been long known to us that in all history there are different epochs and eras. They extend over fixed periods of time and are determined by stages in culture. They have characteristics of their own, a style and a tempo and manifestations that are typical and distinctive. They reflect differences in ethnic composition, in political, economic, social, cultural, and religious life. Aspects of culture often die or wither away in one era, only to rise again modified in a later period. New ages bring minor or radical changes. The differences, the new stresses, are significant.

Cannot the periodization adopted by historians for general American history apply also to American Jewish history? I do not think so. The Revolution, the establishment of the Republic,

Jacksonian Democracy, Manifest Destiny, slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction, to be sure, affected individual Jews and, ultimately, all of Jewry here. The Revolution, for instance, gave the Jew his first taste of full political freedom and opportunity. But a history of American Jewry built on the scheme of general American life would be merely a pale reflection and repetition of American history. It would tell us little or nothing about the history of the Jew *as Jew*. The periodization of American Jewish life is determined by factors that are characteristic in large part of the Jews alone, by elements that are inherent in and relevant to the Jewish group alone over a period of time. The epochs of American Jewish history may well be fixed by incidents and circumstances almost completely independent of general American history. On the whole, the complex of events and culture that go to make an era for the Jew in America is unique with the Jew.

If periodization of a people's or a nation's history has been based on a careful and thorough epochal analysis, then a brief exposition of the reasons for defining the termini will in effect constitute a *précis* of that history.

After this brief introduction, we may proceed to the actual periodization, beginning, of course, not with the coming of individuals, but with the first establishment of communities here on the North American mainland.

American Jewish history may well be divided into four great periods. Very roughly, we may call them the Sephardic, the German, the East European, and the American periods.

The Sephardic period is so named because the pattern set up by Spanish-Portuguese émigrés in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries predominated in this country until the superimposition of another pattern no later than the year 1840. I call this the era of The Rise and Decline of Sephardic Jewry, 1654-1840.

Actually, this epoch is itself divisible into two main parts: the Colonial Period (1654-1776) and the Early National Period (1776-1840). The Colonial Period is further to be divided into two parts: the Dutch Period (1654-1664) and the English Period (1664-1776).

The decade from 1654 to 1664 is called the Dutch Period because the only Jewish community of the North American mainland was then in New Amsterdam. Initiated with the coming of Jewish refugees from Dutch Brazil after its reconquest by the Portuguese, this period extended to the occupation of New Amsterdam by the forces of the Duke of York in 1664.

Under the Dutch, the Spanish and Portuguese Jews controlled Jewish life in the community, Their Sephardic ritual became traditional in American life and was to be accepted, apparently without appreciable protest, by the Central and East Europeans who were to outnumber the Spanish and Portuguese Jews by the second decade of the eighteenth century.

The Dutch era in American was, in its essence, medieval-in the worst sense of the term. This was due to the bigotry and unbusinesslike attitude of Governor Peter Stuyvesant and his adherents. In a frontier country, where the skills and crafts of every individual might well be exploited, the Stuyvesant "party" attempted to ignore the directives of the profit-minded West India Company and to force the Jews out by denying them elementary religious and economic rights. It is obvious why the first Jewish community on the North American mainland did not thrive.

The succeeding era, the English phase, began, as we know, with the British conquest (1664) and ended with the Declaration of Independence (1776). The English language had, almost from the outset of the British occupation, become the vernacular of American Jewry. The British mercantilists,

eager to further their Atlantic colonies, especially those on the American mainland, had seen to it that the Jewish settlers here were granted economic opportunities, adequate civil and religious rights, and ample scope for cultural advancement. Political liberties, however, were still circumscribed. Although the ethnic composition of Jewry had changed by the 1720's from Spanish and Portuguese to German and Polish, the Spanish rite was retained. Power in Jewish community was exercised by the synagogue officers who co-ordinated and controlled all phases of religious, educational and social-welfare activity. In general, membership in this unitary type of synagogue-community was compulsory, and discipline was maintained through effective religious and social sanctions.

The Early National Period of the Sephardic era extended from the Declaration of Independence through the Year 1840. Under the auspices of the new government of the United States, the Jews, for the first time, began to receive full political rights. Privileges and immunities of citizenship came first on the Federal level through the new Federal Constitution. Rights under the states came much more slowly. New York led the way in 1777, but it required a full one hundred years before the last of the original thirteen states, New Hampshire, emancipated its non-Protestants (1877).

Sephardic Jewry continued to exert cultural domination over the older seaboard Jewish communities all through this period. Its *minhag*, its ritual, persisted in the older synagogues, although by the late eighteenth century Germanic (German and Polish) rituals were already being employed by more recent European immigrants. With the exception of Richmond, all new congregations established during this epoch adopted Germanic rituals.

There was a sharp change in the economic life. Jews continued to be shopkeepers and merchants, but the vast majority of them confined themselves to urban domestic supply. Only a negligible few continued as merchant-shippers. Jews began to make their appearance in the professions, a few became brokers, and some began to nibble at industry.

The Sephardic age had atrophied by 1840. The Sephardic unitary synagogue-community died as German Jewish conventicles, formed in Philadelphia and New York, remained outside the Sephardic orbit.

Although the tightly governed Sephardic synagogue-community lost its power with the rise of voluntaristic, independent synagogues in the metropolitan centers and in the trans-Allegheny towns as far west as St. Louis, national unity among Jews became more intense. A feeling of fellowship, of kinship, among American Jews was undoubtedly stimulated by the ritual-murder accusation directed against the Jews of Damascus in 1840. In that crucial year, as the medieval-like charge was once more voiced against the Syrian libel. Though the leaders in denouncing this lie were very often the old-line Sephardim, Shearith Israel of New York, the mother synagogue of Sephardic American Jewry, refused to open its doors for a protest meeting. That act may well be designated the moral abdication of Sephardic hegemony. It was tantamount to a symbolic renunciation.

Ever since the middle 1830, German Jews had been coming into the eastern ports in substantial numbers. Fifteen of the twenty-one congregations in the country were, in fact, Germanic. In that same fateful year of 1840, Sephardic Beth Elohim of Charleston deserted Sephardic orthodoxy and joined the ranks of the Germanic Reformers. When in 1841 the Sephardic-oriented Isaac Leeser called for a country-wide

American Jewish organization, he was joined by a German colleague, and the call to action was published both in German and in English. The German Period had begun.

I call this second period in American Jewish history The Age of the Rise and Dominance of the German Jew and the Challenge to His Leadership, 1841-1920. Actually, as we have already said, the Germans and the related East Europeans had been in the numerical majority ever since the 1720's. They came into their own and determined the destinies of American Jewry after 1840. Their Ashkenazic rituals, the German and the Polish, were almost universally adopted, and German culture prevailed in practically all American Jewish communities. Religious institutionalism was characterized by independency and voluntarism. By the post-Civil War period, German Reform Judaism had set the tone in American Jewish religious and social life, though it never achieved the distinction of being a majority movement.

It was but a short step from voluntarism—the right to belong or not to belong—to secularism in Jewish organizational life. About the third decade of the nineteenth century, the social-welfare, educational, and socio-leisure agencies began to cut the umbilical cord that tied them to the synagogal matrix. By 1860 those Germans and their sons had created all the basic Jewish institutions, or their prototypes, which now minister to the needs of some five and half million Jews in twentieth-century America.

As the industrial age moved into high gear in the days after the Civil War, Jews turned in ever increasing numbers to manufacturing. Their presence was most evident in the apparel industry. Some of the children of the German immigrants went to the better colleges and universities and entered the fields of law and medicine and science. As the last of the original

states cancelled its disabilities against non-Christians, and as the immigrants and their children became acculturated, more and more of them went into politics and sought office. During the occupation of the West and the conquest of the frontier, Jews, from 1841 on, kept moving west from the Mississippi and, from 1849 on, east from California. During this German era there was a Jewish storekeeper, in one decade or another, in almost every town and hamlet between the Alleghenies and the Rockies. The increasing visibility of the Jew, his rise to relative prosperity and wealth, the incidence of frequent economic dislocations and the need for a scapegoat, the inflow of immigrant-borne European concepts of Judaeophobia and anti-Semitism—all this led to a growing prejudice against the Jew. (But let it not be forgotten that there never was a period of American Jewish history in which anti-Jewish prejudice was absent.)

By 1920, the “German” Jews, not largely native-born citizens who had absorbed the minuscule Sephardic group socially, ruled an empire of almost four million Jews, most of whom were of East European provenance. From 1914 on, however, the East Europeans, sensing the power of their numbers and of their improved economic status, essayed to challenge the leadership of the “natives.” The East Europeans hoped not only to overthrow the hegemony of the older German Jewish stock, but even more, to control completely the institutions and destinies of American Jewry. The instrument which they forged for that purpose was the American Jewish Congress, reorganized “provisionally” in 1920. The unquestioned leadership of the “German” Jew had now come to an end; his philosophy of the American Jewish way of life had been sharply challenged.

The third epoch in American Jewish life is The Age of the Advent and Rise of the East European Jew and His Bid for Hegemony, 1852-1920. As the chronological termini indicate, this epoch ran concurrently with the German. Thus, there were two disparate, yet parallel, Jewish cultures in this country from 1852 on, when the first Russian orthodox synagogue was established. By the late 1870's there were dozens of such East European "shuls" and they increased into the hundreds and, finally, into the thousands after the Russian pogroms of the 1880's.

The East Europeans differed notably from their coreligionists already established here. When the Russians and Poles and Roumanians came to these shores, the westward movement had almost ground to a stop. It would not be long before the homesteader, the peddler, and the horse-drawn vehicle would become part of a romantic past. The machines of industry were humming at full force, the factories were spawning huge sprawling cities, and the incoming East European immigrants, keenly alive to the future trend of industry, poured into the metropolitan slums to work in the needle trades. For the first time in its history, America sheltered a substantial body of Jewish proletarians. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that, to a marked degree, this group was unique. Its members were not the sons of proletarians, nor were they destined to remain the fathers of proletarians.

In a religio-cultural sense, the "Russian" Jew *was* different. He had never had the advantages of the secular education which had nearly always been available to the German Jews in the tiniest of villages in the Fatherland. Perforce, the East European had found his outlet for cultural expression in Hebraic and rabbinic studies. He had, therefore, considerably more knowledge of Jewish tradition than his American coreligionists.

The typical East European here was orthodox, observant, and determined to maintain his traditional Hebrew school system. Though his vernacular, Yiddish, was frowned upon as a “jargon” by native American Jews and East European intelligentsia, he loved it and persisted in cultivating it. If not actively interested in latter-day Palestinian nationalism or Zionism, he was at least sympathetic to the ideal of a restored Jewish commonwealth in the ancient homeland. To the native American Jew, on the other hand, Zionism represented nothing so much as a return to the ghetto, a betrayal of the imminent messianic advent of complete social and cultural equality. A substantial minority of the East European immigrants were anti-religious, radical in their political views, and disdainful of the Hebraic heritage and hope. Like the native, they too, were anti-Zionist, believing that Socialism would bring political salvation to all peoples and thus obviate the need for a specific Jewish haven of refuge.

With the beginning of World War I, the “Russians” felt strong enough to emancipate themselves from the natives, who were generally identified with the national civic defense organization known as the American Jewish Committee. As we have seen, the rival body established by the East Europeans to overthrow the power of the “Germans” was the “democratically” elected American Jewish Congress. That organ of the newcomers enunciated the goals which the masses here were determined to reach: an autonomous Jewish homeland in Palestine and minority rights for the oppressed Jews in the East European states created or strengthened by the Versailles Treaty of 1919. The power of an aroused American Jewish public opinion was so irresistible that the natives and their leaders thought it wise to subscribe to that program. Yet, conscious of their wealth, culture, and status, they refused to

surrender their rule and to subject themselves to the dominance of the “Russian” or new immigration. By the 1920’s the two groups had apparently determined to continue on their own separate ways.

Though it seemed at first glance in 1920 that American Jewry was to be split into two hostile groups, forces were at work which were to compel a fusion of the two elements. That continuing unification is the outstanding characteristic of the fourth period, the one in which we now live. This is the period of The Emerging American Jewish Community, The Age of Fusion, The Epoch of the Rise of the *American Jew*. It began in 1921.

In that year the first immigrant quota law was passed, a law that was to restrict Jewish immigration and to serve as a forerunner for similar and more drastic acts. The quota laws, which in effect, cut off immigration to these shores, meant that within a generation most Jews in this land would be natives. Cultural and social levelling and intramarriage and fusion were, therefore, inevitable. The “Spanish,” the “German,” the “Russian” Jews were doomed. There would be only “Americans,” Jews with but little knowledge of their European origins and with a growing disregard for traditional “ethnic” differences.

In the last forty years, more or less, there have been pronounced economic changes. The Jews have concentrated themselves in the larger metropolises. The children of the East Europeans have moved upward in the economic and social scale into the white-collar class. They are largely in commerce and trade. An unusually large percentage of them has acquired a college education and is heavily represented in the professions.

In its social, religious, and communal life since 1921, Jewry has been subject of four forces that have profoundly affected its development: American cultural and economic opportunity,

anti-Jewish prejudice in Europe and in the United States, an effective Jewish education, and Zionism. In consequence of the impact of these four factors, American Jewry has developed apparently along antipodal, if not ambivalent, lines.

Under the lure and attraction of the prevailing economic opportunity and the chance to participate in all phases of American cultural life, most Jews have entered completely and wholeheartedly into the world of business, culture, and science. Their acculturation has been remarkably rapid. On the other hand the anti-Semitism of the 1920's, the trauma of Hitlerism, the beneficial effects of an improved Jewish education, the fascination and inspiring appeal of Zionism have all acted to intensify Jewish loyalties. There has been a remarkable growth of interest in all phases of "Jewishness," an interest that is manifested most strikingly in the post-prandial life of the Jew in the metropolitan suburbs to which he has moved. It is no exaggeration to maintain that there has been a renaissance of Jewish sympathies and Jewish culture—although, of course, its characteristics are not those of the Jewries of ancient Palestine, Babylonia, Spain, or Poland.

The American Jews of this generation are a middle-class group who have much in common socially, culturally, and economically. As they move into the suburbs and are touched by the prevailing Gentile concept of respectability, many of them, hitherto unaffiliated, have joined religious organizations. Some have entered the synagogue, if for no other reason than to provide their children with a Jewish education.

As the result of a historical development, now centuries-old on this continent, the American Jew finds himself surrounded by a series of interlocking institutions which literally mount guard over him from a pre-natal to a post-mortem stage. In effect, he lives in a closely integrated, highly organized Jewish

“community” which guarantees him civic defense, vocational guidance, medical and social-welfare care, religious and cultural edification, and opportunities for leisure in a most attractive environment. Sensitive—if not hypersensitive—to rejection, present-day American Jewry has tended to withdraw into himself itself. This new “community,” most often held together by the device of a Jewish Community Council, has in effect reconstituted the all-providing *kehillah* of Eastern Europe and the eighteenth-century American Jewish Sephardic compulsory unitary community. There is this difference: the early American Jewish form of living-together was shot through with religious motifs; the present-day community has strong secular overtones.

It is in this age of fusion that there has begun to emerge a *homo novus*, the American Jew. Because of numerous intermarriages and other environmental factors, the “Semitic”-looking Jew—more native to caricature than to reality—has all but vanished. Typical Jewish names have begun to disappear. The American Jew, in appearance, dress, and manners is indistinguishable from his fellow-citizens. He is an urban white collar worker who is, at the very least, literate and, indeed, often well-educated; he is liberal in his politics, sympathetic to Judaism and to Jewish education, and imbued with a strong sense of kinship for all Jews. Paradoxical as it may sound, this emerging “American” Jew is more assimilated, culturally, than was his father, yet in many respects as good, if not a better Jew.