Jews in America

A Contemporary Reader

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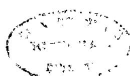

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Chaim I. Waxman

The Sociohistorical Background and Development of America's Jews

The very first Jewish communities in the United States were settled by Sephardim, Jews of the Spanish-Portugese tradition who established their synagogues in that tradition. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the majority of American Jews were of German and Central European background. During the second half of the nineteenth century and especially from 1880 to the mid-1920s, there was a massive wave of immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe. In this period of peak immigration, Italians were the largest immigrant group to enter America, and Jews from Eastern Europe were the second largest. Whereas in 1880 the American Jewish community numbered approximately a quarter of million (most of Central European background), during the years 1881 to 1923 about two and a half million Jews came from Eastern Europe. The floodtide of Eastern European immigration transformed the American Jewish community. Because the American Jewish community came to reflect the culture and concerns of this immigrant community, it is important to understand their cultural background.

The world of Eastern European Jewry was unique. In contrast to Jews in Central and Western Europe, Eastern European Jews lived in towns and villages—*shtetlach* in Yiddish—in which they were the majority. Their isolation from the larger society enabled them to develop and perpetuate a Jewish culture with a strong sense of in-group unity and with strong Jewish norms and values, many of which were religious in nature. They understood themselves as belonging to a Jewish "nation" or people, rather than simply a religion, a definition that derived from and was reinforced by both internal and external sources. As Daniel J. Elazar points out (see his essay in this volume), the Jewish community has traditionally been a unique blend of "kinship and consent," and it was almost natural that shtetl Jews perceived the Jewish community as extended family. This perception was not only theirs; the larger society also viewed them as a separate nation or people.

Their mode of life was less a matter of intentional individual choice and more a matter of familiarity and social and communal control.

Traditional Judaism was the religion of the shtetl and its culture as well. A Jew living in the traditional monoreligious culture of the shtetl would almost certainly have been confused by the Western distinction between religious group and ethnic group. To him or her there were only *Yidn* (Jews) and *Yiddishkei* (Jewishness, the Jewish way of life). To be a "good Jew" meant to behave in accordance with the norms of traditional Judaism as defined by the rabbis-scholars of the community.

Jews have traditionally had their own languages, and the language of the shtetl was Yiddish, which was a combination of a medieval German dialect and some Hebrew elements, as well as aspects of the local vernacular. Hebrew was the *loshen kodesh*, the "holy tongue," reserved primarily for religious rituals, including Scripture and prayer. For the masses, Yiddish was the *mama loshen*, the "mother tongue," which was used even to understand Scripture and for prayer. In this language of the shtetl, Jews expressed their deepest sentiments and most profound ideas. Those who knew the language of the country in which they lived used it only in their dealings with outsiders.

Occupationally, the Jews of the shtetl were middlemen engaged in commerce, trade, or skilled work. As a result of the abolition of serfdom in the early 1860s, the construction of railroads, and official attempts to promote industrialization, the economic situation of Eastern European Jewry increasingly worsened during the second half of the nineteenth century. These economic conditions, which reduced many to pauperism, along with the spread of the secular ideas of the Enlightenment, secular Yiddishism, secular Zionism, and secular socialism, overpowered the shtetl. As a closed society it could not withstand these forces. By the end of the century the shtetl was disappearing, and Jews who remained in Eastern Europe were moving to the larger cities.

Because their cultural and structural backgrounds in Europe were so different from those of German Jews and because the conditions in the United States had changed by the time of their arrival, the Eastern European Jewish immigrants developed very different patterns of organization from those of their predecessors. Ellis Island, in Upper New York Bay, was the major immigration station for those who arrived in the United States after 1892. And almost all Eastern European Jews who arrived after 1870 initially spent some time on New York City's Lower East Side.

The Eastern European Jewish immigrants arrived at a point during which the United States was rapidly becoming urbanized, and they settled in the ethnic neighborhoods in the country's largest cities. These settlement patterns led to American Jewry's becoming highly urbanized, a pattern that persists but has been steadily declining somewhat in recent years. Most Eastern European Jews arrived with no money and made their way to the Jewish neighborhoods, primarily on the Lower East Side in New York City, where they were assisted by relatives, friends, and/or representatives of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society.

For the millions who emigrated to the United States at the turn of the century, the change, though lifesaving for many, was nevertheless traumatic. Not only did they encounter alien social and cultural forces, they were frequently met with hostility, fear, and disdain from the earlier German Jewish immigrants, who were just beginning to feel comfortable with their own integration into American society.

To be sure, many of the German Jews perceived the Eastern European immigrants as uncouth, destitute, uncivilized, and therefore threatening to their own position in American society. In addition, when newly arrived Eastern European Jewish intellectuals began espousing socialism and when many Eastern European Jews became involved in and even assumed leadership roles in the newly emerging labor movement in the United States, many German Jews, who were essentially middle-class, were appalled. There was nothing novel in their fears; middle-class members of minority groups who are themselves of precarious status typically hold the lower-class members of their group in contempt. What was novel, however, was the manner in which the German Jews attempted to deal with their fears and hostilities. They did not, as other middle-class members of minority groups often have, totally reject and disassociate themselves from their lower-class brethren. Rather, they undertook to "Americanize" them as rapidly as possible.

One way they did this was to establish philanthropic organizations such as the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society, which had local committees in more than two dozen cities throughout the United States and Toronto, Canada. Another was by establishing educational and training courses and schools for both children and adults.

The Eastern European Jewish immigrants strongly resented what they perceived as the snobbishness of the German Jews and especially the Germans' efforts to Americanize them, which the Eastern Europeans viewed as forced assimilation. Some Eastern European immigrants were so resentful of the German Jews that they embarked on massive efforts to establish their own network of religious, educational, and social service institutions, organizations, and agencies. For example, they founded their own Hebrew Emigrant Auxiliary Society, which subsequently merged with the Hebrew Sheltering House, also founded by Eastern European Jews, and became the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), later a major international Jewish migration agency. Eastern European Jewish labor leaders in New York also organized a federation of Jewish labor unions, the United Hebrew Trades.

In 1887 the major Eastern European synagogues in New York City attempted to create a united Orthodox community and appoint a chief rabbi. After extensive deliberations and a search, they elected the popular and respected communal rabbi of Vilna (Vilnius), in Lithuania, Rabbi Jacob Joseph, who arrived in New York in 1888. The whole effort failed, however, because of the opposition of non-Orthodox rabbis; the vehement opposition of Jewish radicals, socialists, and anarchists; the resistance of ritual slaughterers to abide by the regulations that Rabbi

Joseph prescribed for the community; and the failure of the Orthodox synagogues to abide by their commitments to him. The effort, nevertheless, was a significant attempt by Eastern European Jewish immigrants to establish their own mode of Judaism in America.

One unique effort was the founding of extensive systems of organization, based on community of origin in Eastern Europe, known as *landsmanschaften*. These organizations catered to a host of economic, cultural, and personal needs, including mutual aid and interpersonal comfort for those undergoing a crisis. Some catered to the religious needs of their constituents as well. Founded in the late nineteenth century, many of these lasted well into the twentieth century, as suggested by a 1938 survey that found almost two thousand still in existence in New York City.

Between 1885 and 1923 twenty Yiddish daily newspapers were established in New York City. By 1924 seven of these were still in publication, and each represented a unique constituency. Despite the vehement objection of the Eastern European Jewish immigrants to the German Jewish attempts to Americanize them, the very creation of the Yiddish press, as well as the other institutions, organizations, and agencies that Eastern European Jews established, in fact helped to Americanize them. Such institutions helped the new immigrants overcome the severe cultural shock often experienced on arrival in the United States as well as teaching about American social and cultural systems and encouraging them to participate. In his study of the Yiddish press, Soltes ([1925] 1969) found it to be "an Americanizing agency" that nevertheless was cherished because it was determined by the Eastern Europeans themselves, rather than being foisted on them and controlled by others.

The Yiddish theater, which made its debut in New York on August 12, 1882, also played a role in acclimating the Eastern European Jew to American life. During its history it performed both indigenous Yiddish plays and translations into Yiddish of well-known non-Jewish plays.

Following the precedent established at the beginning of the nineteenth century by their Jewish predecessors, the Eastern European immigrants founded an array of new synagogues. According to Glazer, there were 270 synagogues in the country in 1880; "by 1890 there were 533; by 1906, 1,769; and in 1916, 1,901 . . . and there were perhaps scores or hundreds more that no census reached!" (Glazer 1972, 62).

The mushrooming of Orthodox synagogues during this period led in part to the prevalent but incorrect notion that all Eastern European Jewish immigrants were Orthodox when they arrived in this country and that only later did many of them and their children leave Orthodoxy for the Conservative and Reform synagogues or for no synagogue affiliation at all. This characterization is incorrect on several grounds. As mentioned before, throughout the nineteenth century, Eastern European Jewry, in the shtetl and elsewhere, was in major upheaval and change, including religious change. Many Jews in Eastern Europe had, in varying degrees,

rejected the prevalent religious traditionalism. And many who maintained traditional Jewish religious patterns did so not so much out of an ideological commitment to Orthodox principles but simply because those were the cultural patterns they had internalized. When they emigrated to the United States, they founded synagogues because the synagogue was the central institution in their native communities. They founded Orthodox synagogues because those were the only kind they were familiar with. It would be more accurate to describe them as Orthoprax, conforming with Orthodox habit or custom, rather than as ideologically committed Orthodox Jews. Even among the Orthoprax, there were varying degrees of observance. In what might seem to be a paradox but is not, there were the "nonobservant Orthodox," whom Sklare (1972) defines as "heterodox in personal behavior but who, when occasionally joining in public worship, do so in accordance with traditional patterns" (46). Thus, while the Orthodox synagogue was the one chosen by the typical Eastern European immigrant who was so inclined, wide variations in intensity of religious commitment and a complete religious secular spectrum was already present in the first, the immigrant generation (Liebman, 1965; Singer, 1967).

Another indication that most Eastern European Jewish immigrants were not committed to Orthodoxy is the paucity of Jewish education during this period. While the Jewish population in the United States in 1900 was estimated to be 1,085,135, with approximately 200,000 being children, "only 36,000 received any kind of organized Jewish instruction at any one time" (Winter 1966, 11). Of these, about 25,000 were enrolled in religious schools attached to synagogues, and the remaining 11,000 were enrolled in communal supplementary schools (ibid.). Although many presumably received their Jewish education from private teachers, it is apparent, nevertheless, that the majority of Jewish children did not receive any Jewish education.

The Eastern European Jews came not only for economic reasons but also because of harsh religious persecution. The pogroms and anti-Jewish legislation were, in fact, part of a long history of persecution in Europe. These Jews did not, therefore, consider Eastern Europe their home as, for example, the Italians considered Italy. When the Jews left Eastern Europe, they harbored no hopes of returning; their departure was final. They came to the United States to stay. They also had a reference group to whom they could look in their hopes for making a better life for themselves—their German-Jewish predecessors, who were rather successful. Jewish immigrants brought their wives and children with them or sent for them soon after their arrival. They were determined to stay and gain a security that was not possible in Eastern Europe, for themselves or at least for their children (cf. Sarna 1981, for a penetrating analysis of the exaggerated claims of a few Jews returning to Eastern Europe.)

Despite many hardships, the Eastern European Jews remained convinced that with hard work and a bit of luck their conditions would improve. Perhaps luck was on their side, for they arrived at a most propitious moment—the birth of the

burgeoning clothing industry. Given the backgrounds and skills they brought and the fact that many of the industry's employers were German Jews, the immigrant Jews were presented with a unique opportunity. Many took advantage of it.

But it was not luck alone that enabled the immigrant Jews to gain a modicum of economic security. It also took many years of relentless sweat and toil, often in unsanitary and unsafe working conditions; frugality; and at times, organized conflict with employers. It was not wealth, nor even money per se, that they sought. Rather, after centuries of persecution and insecurity they yearned for a degree of security (if not for themselves, then for the children), that had been inconceivable in Europe. In a sense, it was another form of the same drive that impelled the pioneers of Zionism to create a Jewish homeland in what was then Palestine so that they could finally taste freedom. For many Eastern European Jewish immigrants, gaining freedom and economic security in America meant a national liberation. They foresaw the possibility of freedom and were determined to take advantage of it. Moreover, they had no intentions of giving up their religious and cultural heritage in order to enjoy the benefits of that freedom and security. Willing to make certain adjustments, they were convinced that they could have their cake and eat it too. They were convinced that they could gain economic security and at the same time maintain their own group identity.

As the period of the first generation—the Eastern European immigrant generation—came to a close, American Jewry had laid the foundation for the organizational structure that was to encompass the American Jewish community of the following generations. By and large, the immigrants had overcome the challenges of economic survival, and their children set out to take full advantage of the openness and opportunities they saw in American society. In these pursuits they Americanized Judaism and the American Jewish communal structure.

The transformation of the Jewish communal structure was enabled through the consequences of the well-known phenomenon of status inconsistency. This is common among middle- and upper-class minority group members who, understandably, wish to be treated in terms of their highest status, as middle or upper-middle class. But frequently they find themselves treated in terms of their lower, minority group status. This is a source of great frustration, and one of the typical ways for avoiding its consequences is to remain within the minority group. This is precisely what occurred with some economically well-to-do second-generation Jews, who found themselves treated as Jews, outsiders, despite their high socioeconomic status. Jewish communal workers provided them with the resolution by offering to help them construct a web of institutions that were parallel to those in the larger society but were all-Jewish, such as Jewish country clubs, Jewish Community Chests, and the like. The communal workers served as catalysts, or matchmakers, to bring together two segments of the community so that each could provide for the other's needs. In exchange for their financial support, the masses conferred the desired status on the wealthy, while the wealthy, in turn, provided

the Jewish masses with the resources needed for an organizational structure of which they, the wealthy, would partake.

Despite the growth of a unique and complex communal structure there emerged signs of Americanization of the Jewish community and Judaism to the extent that by the third generation there were those who warned of the serious decline if not disappearance of the American Jewish community. The first empirical indications were highlighted by W. Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole (1945) in their analysis of "Yankee City." On the basis of field research conducted between 1930 and 1935, they suggested that "the progressive defection of successive generations of Jews from their religious system in a process apparently nearly completed among the children of the immigrants themselves" was much more apparent than the defections among other immigrant groups. It was their observation that "the religious subsystem of [the Yankee City Jewish] community is apparently in a state of disintegration" (199, 200), primarily because of the economic factor. If Jews were to successfully compete in the economic sphere, Warner and Srole argued, they had to break with traditional religious patterns, such as Sabbath observance, that restricted them. Although they readily dropped those religious traditions that inhibited their successful participation in the competitive race, Yankee City Jews did not opt for mass identificational assimilation, nor did their actions result in the disintegration of the Jewish community. As Warner and Srole observed, what developed was a basic change in the nature of the community: "[T]he process of change is one of a replacement of traditionally Jewish elements by American elements. In the religious system of the Jews there is no such replacement. The Jews are not dropping their religious behaviors, relations, and representations under the influence of the American religious system. There are no indications that they are becoming Christian. Even the F^1 generation [the native-born generation] can only be said to be irreligious" (202).

The Jewish community, according to them, was culturally assimilating but not disappearing. Even as Yankee City's Jews shed their traditional Jewish norms, they did not eliminate the religious element from the group self-definition. They did not cease to define themselves as a religioethnic group and proceed to become solely an ethnic group. Instead, they embraced Conservative Judaism, which they perceived as a progressive form of Judaism but also rooted in tradition. Conservative Judaism thus provided them with a framework within which they could behave as Americans while espousing an ideological commitment to tradition that maintained an explicit emphasis on the ethnic character of Judaism. In other words, their Judaism was basically an expression of ethnicity, not religion.

In his analysis of religion in the United States at mid-twentieth century, Will Herberg (1960) argued that the Americanization of Judaism "was characterized by a far-reaching accommodation to the American pattern of religious life which affected all 'denominations' in the American synagogue. The institutional system was virtually the same as in the major Protestant churches" (191).

Herberg (1960) then proceeded to provide a vivid portrait of that Americanization as it manifested itself in a variety of American Jewish religious patterns, including the organizational structure of the synagogue as well as the structure of the synagogue edifice itself, the patterns of worship, ritual observance, and Jewish education. He further suggested that "by mid-century, all three of the 'denominations' were substantially similar expressions of this new American Jewish religious pattern, differing only in background, stage of development, and institutional affiliation" (195).

Although different in important ways and although Herberg never mentions it, his central thesis about religion in America in general at midcentury is reminiscent of Durkheim's theory of religion and society ([1912] 1995) when, concurring with theologian Reinhold Neibuhr (1955), Herberg (1960) argues: "What Americans believe in when they are religious is . . . religion itself . . . what they seem to regard as really redemptive is primarily religion, the 'positive' attitude of *believing*. It is this faith in faith, this religion that makes religion its own object, that is the outstanding characteristic of contemporary American religiosity. . . . Prosperity, success, and advancement in business are the obvious ends for which religion, or rather the religious attitude of 'believing' is held useful" (265–66).

This kind of religion, Herberg argues is, in essence, not religion but crass secularism, in that it is worship not of God but of the goals and values of American society, the "American way of life." Thus, even though there were increases in the rates of religious identification and affiliation and increases in the percentage of Americans, including Jews, who placed importance on religion, it was not really religion and religious values but secular American social and cultural values that they were revering.

Herberg's (1989) critique may have been more theological than sociological and a reflection of his own personal spiritual transition from secularism to religion. But he was far from alone in deciphering the basic secularism of America's Jews, even as they continued to affiliate with American Jewish religious institutions. Thus, on the heels of the first edition of Herberg's work, Herbert Gans (1958), in his analysis of the acculturation and secularization of the Jews of Park Forest in line with Warner and Srole (1945), again portrayed the religion of America's Jews as actually an expression of ethnicity. As he saw it, the temple was the center of most of the community's activities but not because of its sacred status and the centrality of religiosity in the members' lives. Quite the contrary. The temple is the center because of ideological and institutional diffusion and because of its ability to adapt itself to the wishes and desires of its members. This is very much akin to what Peter Berger (1967) later portrayed as religious institutions being subject to consumer preferences. In the case of America's Jews, as Gans (1958) saw it, consumer preferences were essentially ethnic. That is, the temples, synagogues, and Jewish schools were, in the final analysis, manifestations "of the need and desire of Jewish parents to provide clearly visible institutions and symbols with which to maintain and reinforce the ethnic identification of the next

generation" (247). For many, the problem was that it was very difficult to transmit an ethnic Jewishness without a substantive Judaism, and, as America's Jews faced the mid-1960s and beyond, serious questions about the future of American Jewry were heard, not only from pulpits and in scholarly writings, but in the mass media as well.

Note

Some of this discussion is more fully developed in my book *America's Jews in Transition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983).

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