

Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History*

(New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) \$35, 465 pp.

THIS LONG-NEEDED VOLUME weaves the complex history of American Jewish religious life into a graceful narrative that moves well beyond the intellectual constraints of earlier one-volume histories. Absorbing the best of recent and older scholarship, Jonathan Sarna explains the deep connection between social, economic, and religious rights in colonial north America, the unusual role played by women in shaping American Jewish religious institutions, and the link between American culture and Jewish religious trends over 350 years. The result is a much broader, more subtle, and more inclusive analysis of American Judaism than we have seen to date.

A wonderful selection of images enlivens and underscores the points Sarna makes in his text. The white-washed interior of Newport's 1763 Touro synagogue blended the historic Sephardi synagogue floor plan with enlightenment aesthetic values. A ship-board immigrant man reciting morning prayers in *tallit* and *tefillin* portrays the distinctive look of traditional piety brought to the United States in large numbers after 1880. The stained glass windows in a San Francisco synagogue depict Moses carrying the tablets of the law while descending Yosemite's El Capitan and illustrate its congregation's sense that, in 1904, California was their promised land. These and many other images placed judiciously throughout the text bring Sarna's argument to life. Similarly, elements of folklore convey American Jews' perspectives. Like many Americans, Jews viewed the Civil War in both biblical and secular terms. After General Grant issued General Order # 11 that expelled all Jews from an area of Tennessee, delegates petitioned President Lincoln to rescind the order. Lincoln purportedly referred to himself as "father Abraham" and then granted "Israel's request." The legendary conversation exemplifies Jews' esteem for an ideal American president whom, they believe, respected both Jews and Judaism.

As those examples make clear, *American Judaism* sees Jewish religious life embedded in American constraints, opportunities, and meanings. Frontier conditions led colonial Jews to establish cemeteries before any other

institution in their communities. The experience and rhetoric of the American Revolution influenced Jews to form new congregations, to write congregational "constitutions," and to infuse their understanding of Judaism with democratic political values. Nineteenth-century market-driven economies shifted power between laity and clergy, and women's unusually high degree of participation in American religious life helped Jewish women to shape new Jewish religious, charitable, and educational institutions that won widespread support.

As each congregation — and each Jew — enjoyed the freedom to define Judaism according to personal judgments and resources, traditions were retained, reshaped, or jettisoned. So emerged Reform, Conservative, and, in the 20th century, Modern Orthodox and Reconstructionist varieties of religious practice. Their various seminaries and associations conformed to American Protestant denominational structure. Yet, Sarna is reluctant to call these various movements "denominations" because Jews have retained a unifying understanding of their bond to one another that belies denominational boundaries. Jews themselves, he points out, prefer to call their differences "streams" or "movements," whose boundaries blur.

But divisions between Jews exist and seem to be growing. By mid-20th century, various Hasidic and fervently Orthodox communities used American markets to separate their communities from American popular culture and from other Jews. At the opposite end of the spectrum of observance, liberal movements lifted historic gender constraints and ordained women. Reform and Reconstructionist rabbinical bodies gave a new answer to the question of who is a Jew by declaring any child raised as a Jew and with one Jewish parent to be fully Jewish. Each of those steps elicited condemnations from opponents.

Are we to see those divides as harbingers of dissolution or evidence of creativity? Sarna complicates the account of ever-widening divisions with analyses of renewals and revitalizations within and across previous boundaries. In the late 19th century, in the post-World

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Dianne Ashton is Professor of Religion and Director of American Studies at Rowan University.

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War II era, and in recent years, American Judaism has experienced astonishing creativity and growth. The percentage of the American population that is Jewish has diminished, intermarriage grows apace, but high-quality Jewish life flourishes. Challenges abound, but the resources for living a vibrant Jewish religious life exist in more areas of the United States than ever before. *American Judaism* suggests that pessimism about Judaism's future in America is uninformed. Sarna finds ample reason for optimism thriving alongside the portents of doom. 

The Spring issue of *Contact*, the Journal of Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation (www.jewishlife.org) focuses on ways of revitalizing Jewish professional life in America. Articles cover the recruitment and retention of the next generation of rabbis, educators, and leaders, and offer ideas on how to invest Jewish careers with more meaning. For a free copy or to be added to the *Contact* mailing list, please email contact@jewishlife.org or call (212) 279-2288.

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