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American Judaism: A History (review)

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individualism blurs the ethnic, racial, and religious boundaries that the former seek to maintain.

Gertel's dour observations are not always accurate or consistent. He cites the Americanization of *The Goldbergs* without mentioning how Jewish the show had been until 1952. While he praises the Jewish Theological Seminary's production *Saying Kaddish* as a sincere effort to portray the soul searching done during *shiva*, he dislikes the show's pat ending. Without any convincing proof, he insinuates that *Keeping the Faith*, one of the few movies to advocate spirituality as an antidote to an obsession with career advancement, treats the priest played by Edward Norton Jr. more positively than the rabbi played by Ben Stiller. Gertel considers the undeservedly neglected film *The Plot Against Harry* as one of the most "Jewish" films ever made because it affirms Harry's *teshuvah*. Harry undoubtedly comes off as a real *mensch* despite his criminal record, but his repentance results from a near fatal heart attack and not from any religious revelation. Finally, the brash black pilot in *Independence Day* was Will Smith and not Eddie Murphy. The difference between these two books is that the first applies historical and sociological analysis to understand a topic that is a product of these forces; and the other is a Judaic exegesis of media creations whose purpose is to entertain rather than preach.

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**American Judaism: A History**, by Jonathan D. Sarna. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004. 490 pp. \$35.00.

In *American Judaism*, Brandeis University scholar Jonathan Sarna has produced a marvelous survey that masterfully recounts the history of Jewish religious life in America and in the process provides much insight into other aspects of American Jewish history as well. Sarna's book opens with a consideration of the colonial era, when synagogue and community were more or less coterminous, and it follows the saga of American Judaism all the way to the beginning of the twenty-first century, touching in its final sections on such contemporary issues as the impact of feminism and the quest for spirituality among American Jews. The excellence of Sarna's volume has been recognized by the National Jewish Book Awards, which named *American Judaism* 2004's "Jewish Book of the Year."

Sarna's decision to concentrate on religion in exploring the Jewish experience in the United States differentiates his text from similar surveys and gives

it a sense of cohesion. A major theme in the book is the creative responsiveness of American Judaism to changing circumstances, and Sarna demonstrates how periods of religious decline have, in the past, always been followed by periods of “awakening” or “renewal.” Another of Sarna’s themes is the internal diversity that has always characterized American Judaism, and he often turns his attention to arguments within the faith, which he describes as “not so much conclusive as defining” (p. 243).

As a study focused on religion, *American Judaism* highlights the role of rabbis and other religious leaders in American Jewish life. The volume includes many highly informative profiles of individuals, ranging from David Einhorn, an early advocate of radical Reform, to the Lubavitcher rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, and from Jane Evans, a leader of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, to Shlomo Carlebach, the charismatic “Jewish guru.” So too, Sarna frequently compares developments in American Judaism to developments in other faiths. At one point, he describes Reform Judaism’s turn toward social justice as “the Jewish equivalent of the Protestant Social Gospel” (p. 151), for instance, and at another point he compares post-World War II Hasidim to the Amish, Hutterites, and Mennonites.

Despite Sarna’s focus on the Jewish religion, he takes many opportunities to connect religious matters to other aspects of American Jewish history that are not, strictly speaking, part of the story of Judaism as a faith. So, for example, in sections of the book with titles such as “Judaism and Yiddishkeit” or “Jewishness without Judaism,” he examines Jewish identities that were alternatives to those grounded in religion. Moreover, Sarna often sets his discussions of religion matters in context by describing developments in American Jewish history more broadly. Before positing that during World War I “the central communal challenge posed by the thousands of Jews in uniform . . . was a religious one” (p. 212), for instance, he considers several aspects of American Jewry’s involvement with the war that had little to do with religion *per se*. Similarly, even while observing that the characterization of group visits to Israel as missions or pilgrimages “underscores their deep religious significance” (p. 336), he writes about support for the State of Israel mainly as a substitute for religious engagement as a marker of Jewish commitment.

Sarna is well known as a master of the bibliography of American Jewish history, and he has put his vast knowledge of the literature in the field to very good use in preparing this volume. In one form or another, the book covers just about all the standard topics normally considered in surveys of American Jewish history, and it does so very well. To take but one example, Sarna’s account of the mass migration of East European Jews to America is excellent, summarizing everything from the factors that prompted Jewish immigration

to migration statistics, and from rabbinic opinions about moving to America to divisions among various groups of newcomers. The richness of *American Judaism* is enhanced, however, by the introduction of some subjects that are not usually mentioned in general discussions of the American Jewish experience. So, for instance, Sarna provides information about an organization called Key-am Dismaya, founded in 1879 to promote causes such as Sabbath observance; about the nature of fraud in the kosher meat trade; and about the formation of a group called the M'lochim, an early antimodernist Hasidic sect.

Sarna has taken an essentially objective approach in exploring the history of American Judaism, and this becomes most evident when he considers more controversial topics. Raising the question "could American Jewry have done more to rescue the Jews who fell under Nazi rule" (p. 261), for example, Sarna reports a number of views on this matter but refrains from expressing any clear conclusion. Similarly, in describing the condition of American Jewry at the turn of the twenty-first century, Sarna informs his readers that some observers have noticed "welcome signs of revitalization" while others have focused on "disturbing evidence of assimilation" (p. 333), but he does not reveal where he stands on the issue. Sarna's decision to withhold his own judgment on matters such as American Jewry's responses to the Shoah or the future of the American Jewish community is probably appropriate in a survey text, but some readers may find it frustrating.

Of course, it is always possible to identify some flaws in just about any book, and *American Judaism* does have some minor faults: some subjects get perhaps more attention than they deserve (General Grant's infamous General Orders Number 11 gets two full pages); there are a few slips of the pen (the lighting of candles on Friday night is not a "Sabbath restriction" [p. 278]) and the book's illustrations, though well chosen, are disappointingly reproduced. Still, as a work that endeavors to cover a subject as broad as American Judaism, this volume is a superb achievement. Its author has generally made wise decisions about what to include and what to leave out, and he has written in a most engaging style. Yet another strength of this volume is that it is accessible to readers who may have little knowledge of Jewish practice. So, for instance, when Sarna mentions tefillin for the first time, he goes on to describe them as "leather boxes with handwritten Scriptural passages that traditional Jews strap to their weaker arm and forehead during weekday morning prayers" (p. 173). The book also includes a useful glossary.

This reviewer has had the instructive experience of participating in a *havurah* (a friendship circle *cum* study group) that chose to base its discussion sessions on *American Judaism* for several months. Taking part in these sessions has made it clear to me that Sarna's book is being seen as a splendid

success not only by scholars in Jewish Studies, but also by lay readers of many stripes. Members of my *havurah* have praised Sarna for his judicious interpretive approach, for his resistance to oversimplification, and for his presentation of history in such a way as to stimulate thinking about current issues in Jewish life. Ultimately, the *havurah* paid Sarna's text its ultimate compliment: in some twenty-five years of book discussions, *American Judaism* is the first volume for which all members of the group have expressed admiration.

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**Mordecai: An Early American Family**, by Emily Bingham. New York: Hill and Wang, 2003. 346 pp. \$26.00.

Unlike most Jewish immigrants to the United States, who arrived in the mid- and late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Mordecais arrived before the Revolution, and one branch of the family settled in the South. These southern Mordecais sought to define themselves as Americans, even as the nation was defining itself, and as Southerners, even as the region was becoming distinct in the new nation. But unlike most white Americans, the Mordecais were part of a tiny Jewish minority, and they had to define themselves as Jews, even as American Judaism was itself emerging. Their goal was always to achieve success, by which they meant to become prosperous, accepted, and respected members of the developing middle-class. In this book, Emily Bingham traces in fascinating detail how this family adopted what she terms “a protective covenant fusing bourgeois domesticity, intellectual cultivation, and religious liberalism” (p. 5) to become Americans and Southerners and the effects this had on the family over three generations. For some members of the family, their achievements came while remaining Jews—at least nominally. But for other Mordecais, indeed, for most of them by the third generation, becoming Americans and Southerners meant assimilation, intermarriage, and complete abandonment of Judaism.

The Mordecai story begins when Moses Mordecai arrived in the colonies as a convict indentured servant. After serving his indenture term Moses moved to Philadelphia where he became a moderately successful merchant and married an English woman, Elizabeth Whitlock, who converted to Judaism, marking her conversion by changing her name to Esther. Jacob Mordecai, the oldest of their three sons, was born in colonial Philadelphia in 1762. A brief mercantile career in New York, including a short stint in the employ