

American Jewish History

A Chance to Reflect

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This year Jews across the United States are commemorating the 350th anniversary of Jewish life in America. Books, exhibits, lectures, conferences, television and radio programs, films, concerts, even dance recitals are planned to mark the occasion. The U.S. Congress interrupted its business to produce an official commemorative resolution, and a national commission brought together for the first time the Library of Congress, the National Archives, the American Jewish Historical Society, and the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives “to foster and sponsor a variety of historical activities that advance our understanding of the American Jewish experience as it marks this milestone anniversary.” See <http://www.celebrate350.org> for a complete list of events.

The events of 350 years ago seemed far less momentous to contemporaries. Sometime in the late summer of 1654, a small boatload of Jews, expelled from Recife, Brazil, when the Portuguese recaptured it from the Dutch, arrived in New Amsterdam seeking a new home. The authorities in New Amsterdam, led by Gov. Peter Stuyvesant, sought to compel the impoverished refugees “in a friendly way to depart.” Stuyvesant sought to promote morality and social cohesion in his colony by enforcing Calvinist orthodoxy while rooting out nonconformity. He understood that granting Jews liberty would make it impossible for him to deny it to other religious dissenters who were clamoring for rights, like Lutherans, Catholics, and Quakers. Moreover, he considered Jews to be “deceitful,” “very repugnant,” and “hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ.” He worried that they would “infect and trouble this new colony,” making it even less governable than it already was.

The Jews appealed to the Dutch West India Company back in Amsterdam. They also appealed for support to their wealthy coreligionists in that city—some of them principal shareholders in the West India Company. Recognizing the “considerable loss” that Jews had sustained back in Brazil and fully aware of the “large amount of capital” that Jews had invested in the company, the Dutch West India Company sustained the Jews’ appeal. It ordered Stuyvesant to permit Jews to “travel,” “trade,” “live,” and “remain” in the colony, provided that “the poor among them shall not become a burden to the company or to the community, but be supported by their own nation.” Little did they know that this decision, affecting fewer than two dozen Jews at the time,

would pave the way for 350 years of Jewish communal life in North America.

It was by no means a foregone conclusion that American Jews would commemorate the 350th anniversary of these long forgotten events. After September 11, 2001, in the United States, and the heavy toll of death and destruction in Israel, some considered any notion of celebration untimely. Others questioned why Jews, who largely immigrated to the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries, should care about a remote chapter in American Jewish history that none of their own ancestors had experienced. Still others wondered whether, in 2004, history of any kind would be of interest to the American Jewish community. Would it not be wiser to look ahead and plan for the community’s future?

Advocates for the commemoration (like me) naturally offered answers to all of these objections. We pointed to Jews’ obligation to posterity, the importance of “explaining what has come before us to those who will carry it on after us.” We observed that most people had no idea that the history of Jews in America dates back 350 years, and needed to be informed of that fact. We argued that American Jewish history contextualizes contemporary challenges facing American Jews and makes Jews appreciate that they are part of a continuing community larger than themselves. And we reminded audiences that *not* to commemorate the anniversary would be read as a statement of communal failure, particularly since both the 250th and the 300th anniversary of Jews in America had been celebrated enthusiastically.

Most important of all, we argued that the celebration could help to counter the renewed tendency throughout the world to view Jewish history in tragic or lachrymose terms, as a history of persecution, expulsion, tragedy, mass murder, and now terror. The 350 years of American Jewish history, we pointed out, stands as the great exception to this melancholy story. Episodes of anti-Semitism notwithstanding, American Jewish history provides the opportunity to explore how Jews have fared in a free and pluralistic society where church and state are separated and where religion is entirely voluntary.

Whether for these high-minded reasons, or simply because most people actually enjoy the opportunity to celebrate themselves, the 350th anniversary commemoration eventually took off. As a result, for American Jewish historians like myself, the

year ahead promises to serve as a “teachable moment”—an all-too-rare opportunity to reach beyond the academy and excite a larger public about what it is that we do. Already, the anniversary has stimulated curiosity and wonder (“American Jews have been around for 350 years! Who knew?”). It has created a welcome opportunity for learning, reflection, and taking stock. It has allowed us to explain how the subject that we have spent our lifetime studying might actually be relevant to the community at large. Most importantly, it has helped us to advance the study of American Jewry by stimulating scholarship and making possible a wide range of conferences that (at their best) promote creative ideas and lively academic interactions.

Dangers, of course, continue to lurk. Whenever a group seeks to celebrate itself, the risk arises that scholarship will be pushed aside: accuracy, objectivity, and dispassion giving way to filiopitism and boosterism. One imaginative Web designer actually produced a “symbolic portrayal” of the events of 1654, depicting Jews in pseudocolonial dress, holding aloft a Torah scroll, and marching past the Statue of Liberty (!) as they crossed over into the promised land of New Amsterdam. Similar exaggerations and anachronisms are certain to make historians’ blood boil as the year progresses.

For the most part, though, the 350th anniversary promises to highlight the great advances that the field of American Jewish history has experienced in recent decades. Thirty years ago, when I first became interested in the field, there were only five tenured positions in American Jewish history and only a handful of reputable scholars in the field. Last June our biennial scholars’ conference, held at American University and the Library of Congress, drew more than 100 scholars. When I entered the field, American Jewish history was something of a stepchild in Jewish studies, possessing far less prestige than ancient, medieval, or modern European Jewish history. Today at least two Ivy League universities boast chairs in American Jewish history, and in the last year alone, at least 10 university presses, including Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, have published scholarly books by historians of American Jewish life.

The subject matter of American Jewish history has likewise evolved. Once upon a time, a disproportionate number of volumes dealt with Jewish “contributions” to America and with the history of Jews in local communities. Jews, like many another American minority ethnic and religious groups, sought through such books to legitimize their presence in the United States, display their patriotism, and undermine prejudice directed against them. They attempted to prove, as the author of an early book on the Jews of Iowa explained, “that Israel, if only let alone, is capable of contributing everything good to the common cause of mankind, that every accusation against him was prompted by bigotry and narrow-mindedness, that anti-Semitism has no footing in this country.”

Today, even though volumes of local American Jewish history remain popular, the apologetic motive has largely disappeared. The goal instead is to highlight the diversity of the American Jewish experience, to provide a sense of what is distinctive about particular communities, and to explore the

complex interrelationship between Jews and the places where they reside. A recent volume titled *California Jews*, edited by Ava F. Kahn and Marc Dollinger (Brandeis University Press, 2003), illustrates this new trend. Its essays are composed by a new generation of scholars “immersed in the academic world of the last 30 years and committed to bringing the California Jewish experience into the world of contemporary historical debate.” It highlights the differences between California Jewish life and the better-known Jewish experience of New York, and it speaks, revealingly, of California’s “rich contribution to the American Jewish experience,” rather than, as an earlier generation would have insisted, the other way around. Most significant, the volume includes examples of California Jewish failures, not just success stories. Thus, in a chapter that would have been unthinkable in such a volume years ago, the historian Ellen Eisenberg analyzes the painful silence of the organized California Jewish community during the World War II incarceration of Japanese-Americans—an incarceration, she shows, that Jews refused officially to support but were also reluctant to condemn.

California Jews also illustrates a second trend in recent American Jewish historical writing: Much of the volume focuses on the era from World War II to the present. Back when I was studying American Jewish history, in the 1970s, the era of the Holocaust represented the new historical frontier, while most of the literature we read ended either with World War I or with the imposition of strict quotas on immigration in 1924. Jacob Rader Marcus, until his death in 1995 the acknowledged dean of the field, led the way here. Brobdignagian seven-volume history of American Jewish life—*The Colonial American Jew* (three volumes) and *United States Jewry 1776–1985* (four volumes), published by Wayne State University Press from 1970 to 1993—relegates the era from 1921 to 1985 to a comparatively brief “epilogue.”

Today, by contrast, books on the era following World War II are all the rage—witness such titles as Jack Wertheimer’s *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America* (Basic Books, 1993); Deborah Dash Moore’s *To the Golden Cities: Pursuing the American Jewish Dream in Miami and L.A.* (Free Press, 1994); Stuart Svonkin’s *Jews Against Prejudice: American Jews and the Fight for Civil Liberties* (Columbia University Press, 1997); Marc Dollinger’s *Quest for Inclusion: Jews and Liberalism in Modern America* (Princeton University Press, 2000); Eli Lederhendler’s *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity, 1950–1970* (Syracuse University Press, 2001); and Michael E. Staub’s *Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America* (Columbia University Press, 2002). Rather than seeing the crucible of American Jewish life in the immigrant period, as earlier scholars did, the new historiography locates that crucible in the years between World War II and the end of the 1960s, when Jews embraced liberalism, moved out to the suburbs and the Sun Belt, and divided politically and religiously in new ways.

It goes without saying that the experience of women figures significantly in all new histories of America’s Jews—*California Jews* included. Indeed, it comes as something of an embarrassment to recall that in 1954, the theme of the 300th anniversary of American Jewish life was “Man’s Opportunities and Responsibilities Under Freedom”; the role of women scarcely

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figured in that commemoration. Fifty years later, a shelf of excellent books details the experiences of Jewish women in America, focusing particularly on activists, and on the changing role of women in American Judaism. Two recent readers summarize this large literature: *American Jewish Women's History: A Reader*, edited by Pamela S. Nadell (New York University Press, 2003), and *Women and American Judaism: Historical Perspectives*, edited by Pamela S. Nadell and myself (Brandeis University Press, 2001). The most important contribution of all to American Jewish women's studies is the two-volume, award-winning reference work titled *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, edited by Paula E. Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore (Routledge, 1997)—a far superior work, ironically, to any reference book dealing with American Jewish men. The Jewish Women's Archive (<http://www.jwa.org>) and the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute (<http://www.brandeis.edu/hbi>) further this study of Jewish women's lives, the former with an explicit commitment "to ensure that women's stories find a prominent role in the narratives of American Jewish history that will emerge during the national 350th Anniversary celebrations."

Popular culture forms another new focus of scholarship in American Jewish history. Barely noticed 50 years ago, it is central to the study of American Jewish life today. Steven Carr's *Hollywood & Anti-Semitism: A Cultural History Up to World War II* (Cambridge University Press, 2001) illustrates the trend. The volume examines how the public perceived American Jews in the entertainment industry from the turn of the century to the outbreak of World War II. Other recent studies focus on Jews in television and the Jewish role in musical theater. David Zurawik in *The Jews of Prime Time* (Brandeis University Press, 2003) shows how Jewish characters were first obscured and later rediscovered by television, while Jeffrey Shandler in his award-winning *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust* (Oxford University Press, 1999) demonstrates that even knowledge of the Holocaust among Americans owes much to TV. Meanwhile, Andrea Most's *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Harvard University Press, 2004) discusses how "the Jewish creators of the Broadway musical established not only a new sense of what it means to be Jewish (or 'ethnic') in America but also a new understanding of what 'America' itself means." The most ambitious of all the recent studies of American Jewish popular culture is *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting* (Princeton University Press, 2003), a comprehensive, well-illustrated history (based on an exhibit at the Jewish Museum) edited by J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler. Examining the way in which the subject of Jews and the entertainment media has been presented from the beginning of the 20th century

to the start of the current one, the volume serves as the baseline for all subsequent scholarship in the field.

The celebration could help to counter a renewed tendency to view Jewish history in tragic or lachrymose terms.

Finally, students of American Jewish history have, in recent years, focused renewed attention on the subject of religion. An earlier generation of scholars, many of them avowedly secular and trained in American studies or ethnic studies, eschewed this subject. Immigration, Yiddish culture, social activism, Zionism, or what was often termed "Jewishness" dominated the field—think of Irving Howe's best-selling *World of Our Fathers* (1976). As American Jewish life shifted from a focus on peoplehood to a more sustained focus on religious life, however, scholarship followed suit. *California Jews* illustrates the new trend with articles on synagogue architecture and Jewish wedding contracts. A spate of other recent books likewise illustrates the trend, including Etan Diamond's *And I Will Dwell in Their Midst: Orthodox Jews in Suburbia* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000), Jack Wertheimer's *Jews in the Center: Conservative Synagogues and Their Members* (Rutgers University Press, 2000), Dana Evan Kaplan's *American Reform Judaism: An Introduction* (Rutgers University Press, 2003), and Karla Goldman's *Beyond the Synagogue Gallery: Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism* (Harvard University Press, 2000). Coming months promise books that focus on new themes in the study of American Judaism, including Orthodox Jews and sports (Jeffrey Gurock); spiritual healing and American Jews (Ellen Umansky); rabbis' wives as American Jewish leaders (Shuly R. Schwartz); and Jews and the American soul (Andrew Heinze).

The American Jewish community itself has many reasons to be nervous as it commemorates its 350th anniversary on America's shores. Rising intermarriage rates threaten its distinctive identity, declining birthrates suggest that its numbers will decline, and a range of "Jew vs. Jew" controversies threaten to split it asunder. But the 350th-anniversary celebration coupled with the exciting new scholarship now being produced offer a ray of hope. As the Norwegian novelist Ole Edvart Rølvaag wrote on a parallel occasion, "when a people becomes interested in its past life [and] seeks to acquire knowledge in order to better understand itself, it always experiences an awakening of new life."

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