
In 1893 Rabbi Bernhard Felsenthal wrote for the American Jewish Historical Society one of the first accounts of early Jewish Chicago. In it, he emphasized that his study would be only a small contribution “to the work of a future historian of Chicago Judaism.” Chicago’s Jewish history, especially in comparison with other American Jewish communities, represents the full spectrum of an American Jewish community’s development from hamlet to metropolis at a breathtaking pace. Few others—perhaps only San Francisco and Atlanta—allow comparable study of Judaism’s and Jewry’s development on such a scope.

Following the Jewish history of only one congregation and one community (albeit the third-largest Jewish community in the United States today) could have resulted in a meticulously researched and compellingly told story of little significance. But Tobias Brinkmann’s *Sundays at Sinai: A Jewish Congregation in Chicago* avoids that pitfall. Although it is presented as the story of the Sinai congregation in Chicago, it thankfully transcends every limitation associated with a specific community, state, region, or nation. In tracing this single congregation from its founding in 1861 to its centennial, Brinkmann manages to cover the entirety of American Jewish life: from the origin of immigrant Jewish Americans, to the establishment of organized religious life, to the institutional coming-of-age in a nation coming of age, to racial and religious interrelations in modern America.

The book is divided into three parts: 1. Founding and Early Development; 2. Social Justice and Civic Action; and 3. Decline and Renaissance. It is further organized into twelve subchapters (plus introduction and epilogue), which factually discuss American Jewish life within the context of those themes.

In the first part, Brinkmann provides unexpected eye-openers for the founding period—for instance, when discussing the Germanizers and Americanizers among leading Reform rabbis. The author argues convincingly that the camp the rabbis fall into has to do with more than the language they embrace. Isaac Mayer Wise—the long-held epitome of
an Americanizer because of his approach to English—emerges as the true Germanizer because of his emphasis on a European- (and Protestant-) style umbrella organization of American Jewish congregations. By contrast, Einhorn and Felsenthal, typically seen as Germanizers, emerge as the true “American” rabbis because of their adherence to congregations’ sovereignty (48). When discussing the migration process of Chicago’s Jewish pioneers (the Greenbaums, Mayers, and Felsenthals), Brinkmann compellingly challenges assumptions concerning the existence of marked differences between Jewish and non-Jewish immigrants in the mid-1800s which move beyond religion. Indeed, “[s]ocial, ethnic, religious and other differences between migrants from one region may be more relevant for contemporary historians than they were at the time” (25). To further illustrate the importance of regional origin, Brinkmann successfully outlines the nexus of early Chicago chain-migrating Jews to the Palatinate/Rhine-Hesse in Germany, in particular the small community of Eppelsheim (which today has some 1,400 residents).

The narrative of Sinai’s development under Rabbi Emil G. Hirsch (1881–1923) is one of the many strong points of this work. During his term, Sinai became one of the largest Jewish congregations in the country. Moreover, it was under Hirsch that “radical Reform Judaism” was translated into the “social context of a rapidly growing city” (8). Sinai had found itself in a quagmire between traditional-minded newcomers and adherents to Felix Adler’s Ethical Culture movement (157). On top of Sinai’s theological isolation as a radical Reform congregation (through Sunday services, for instance, 174), Hirsch’s term was marked by debates concerning modern congregations, such as the role of the rabbi or female membership (184, 199). By presenting the strategies to address these religious challenges, Brinkmann’s in-depth study may serve as a model for understanding the struggles of radical Reform congregations of the period.

In addition—and because Chicago grew at such a breathtaking speed (its number of residents quadrupled between 1880 and 1905)—Chicago’s Jews faced societal tests in a city full of newcomers and without a structure of public welfare to address their needs (124). It was to Hirsch’s credit that he addressed the interrelationship between the religious and the social by understanding that “reformers had to do constructive work” (125). Hirsch “provided Sinai with the theological justification for social action,” (150) as it was “not a Jewish congregation
in the narrow sense” (171). Sinai’s members got involved with social Progressivism, including the Jewish-Christian dialogue in the city and educational collaborations with the University of Chicago (155). Brinkmann comprehensively outlines the congregational environment that would produce philanthropists such as Julius Rosenwald.

*Sundays at Sinai* is, in its first half, a preeminent and much-needed discussion of the Atlantic Jewish history to date. Unlike most others writing about the so-called German Jewish period, Brinkmann’s native language is German, which gives him an unusual authority over his subject matter. For our broader understanding of the immigrant’s background, it is not only essential to employ German sources in Europe but also the treasure trove of German sources in the United States. In this respect, Brinkmann succeeds soundly and offers new perspectives. In its second half, *Sundays at Sinai* keeps every promise to be a comprehensive discussion that moves beyond its seemingly limited subject. The story of Sinai may appear very Chicago-centric at first glance, but it is easy to extrapolate its facts and, in doing so, highlight the underlying currents of American Jewish history in the century under discussion.

*Sundays at Sinai: A Jewish Congregation in Chicago* is researched and written extraordinarily well. It has been 120 years between Bernard Felsenthal’s introductory remarks quoted above and the publication of this work. The pioneering Chicago rabbi surely would not have minded waiting. For the historian in the field of Jewish, American, and Atlantic history: It was worth it.

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Henry L. Feingold’s *American Jewish Political Culture and the Liberal Persuasion* seeks to examine the soul of American Jewish political behavior through an exploration of the “recognizable habits and customs that account for behavior in the political arena” (2). This is firmly a work of synthesis primarily based off of various secondary sources, though it tends to eschew the latest of relevant scholarship. While not a chronologically driven study, Feingold is a historian by training and pays astute attention to the historical roots of the Jewish political persona. He posits an explanation of American Jewish political culture that rests upon three intertwined pillars: liberalism, Zionism, and the Holocaust.

Liberalism, Feingold argues, occupies the core of American Jewish political culture. The deep-seated American Jewish adherence to liberalism grew out of the feeling of living as permanent outsiders in unstable societies, came of age during the era of the New Deal, and found its home in the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. Liberalism functions not merely as a practical political ideology but as a visceral emotion and secular faith for American Jews committed to the role of government as insurer of societal improvement.

If Zionism is characterized as a source of conditional and contested adoration for the American Jewish public, then the Holocaust is what helps to fuel the Jewish obsession with Jewish survival. Both Zionism and the Holocaust, according to Feingold, have challenged the liberal pillar of the American Jewish political triad. Zionism’s post-1967 nationalistic thrust intensified the conflict between liberal universalism and Jewish particularism; the Holocaust forced liberals to recognize the so-called “limits of humankind” (281). Even so, Feingold effectively argues that the American Jewish liberal ethos—with its concern for the underdog, democracy, and social stability—has profoundly shaped the ways in which American Jews understand their complex and often contradictory relationship with the Shoah and the Jewish state.

To a certain extent, the book’s great strength lies in its ability to track and trace the multiple and ever-evolving expressions of Jewish liberalism well into the twenty-first century while taking into account American Jewry’s lack of coherence and cohesiveness. Even though Jews, according
to Feingold, are currently in the process of “becoming 5.5 million tribes of one rather than a collectivity,” they nevertheless retain an abiding attachment to liberalism largely because of their high levels of education, secularism, and urbane sensibilities (299).

And herein lies one of the book’s key flaws. Intent on seeing contemporary American Jews as a highly individualized and liberal lot, Feingold, problematically, pays little attention to countervailing trends. For example, demographically expanding groups—émigrés from the former USSR and the Middle East as well as the Orthodox—that often vote as a communal or religious collectivity and frequently show ambivalence toward or flatly reject the liberal model receive scant attention. It should also be noted that the book is littered with distracting factual errors: “the election of Bill Clinton in 1988” (122); Jewish “resistance to community control of schools in Bedford Stuyvesant” (293).

These problems aside, Feingold’s work is a thoughtful and penetrating view of American Jewish political life, its history, its contemporary conflicts, and its future. Feingold at his best validates the role of the historian as not just a chronicler of the past but also an astute social commentator and provocateur.

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In an event held in London to mark the launch of Pam Fox’s fine book, the Anglo-Jewish historian Geoffrey Alderman noted that historians and biographers are usually separate breeds. Such is the quality of this work, he argued, that it deserves to be seen both as biography (telling the story of the
life of an important and undervalued figure) and as history (casting light on the story of British Jewry and the liberal denominations of Judaism).

If there is any criticism of this work, it should focus on the second part of the equation, namely its contribution to a broader historical understanding. As a biography of a significant yet largely forgotten figure, it shows exemplary attention to detail, as well as an admirable lack of that hagiographical tendency that is the blight of many rabbinical portraits. Fox has worked with a variety of sources to produce a sensitive and fascinating account of a life that takes the reader from Lithuania in the 1880s to Worcester, Massachusetts, in the 1890s; turn-of-the-century Harvard; Hebrew Union College under Kaufmann Kohler; and other locations until the contours of pre–World War I London come into view.

Mattuck was a giant of Liberal Judaism. At their peak, his Sunday services attracted audiences of a thousand people. His reputation as a scholar was matched by his moral courage in adopting positions on matters of social and political concern. His interaction with the two other great M’s of Liberal Judaism in Britain—Lily Montagu and Claude G. Montefiore—led to the establishment of a cogent and influential voice in British Judaism and beyond. Only a year or so before Mattuck’s arrival, the Zionist thinker Ahad Ha’am had offered a withering account of what he took to be Montefiore’s apologetic and inauthentic Jewish approach. With Mattuck’s involvement, Liberal Judaism became a viable and respectable if controversial feature of the communal landscape. While both Montagu and Montefiore have previously been the objects of scholarly attention, Fox has now done justice to the scale of Mattuck’s contribution. She rightly notes that he was “an outstanding figure in Anglo-Jewry.”

IIM (as he is known throughout this work) was a disciple of Kohler’s Reform Judaism—learned, intellectual, rigorous, radical, rationalistic, and anti-Zionist. He was gifted with a strong sense of principle, a firm grounding in the classical sources, highly developed oratorical skills, authorial and editorial talents, and a good approach to the building of institutions. As Fox’s work shows, this latter capacity extended beyond the Liberal Jewish Synagogue to a network of Liberal congregations around Britain and the fledgling World Union of Progressive Judaism. He showed courage and vision in taking uncomfortable stands on matters such as unemployment.
There are very few slips to be found in this work, and they may be editorial or typographic rather than authorial in provenance. The reference to “Sir Samuel Herbert” (rather than “Sir Herbert Samuel”) is a minor example, and the description of Liberal Judaism as “iconic” should probably read “iconoclastic.” These small exceptions are far from the general tenor of a well-researched and admirable book. It tells the story of Mattuck’s life in a no-nonsense and mainly linear way, and it offers its readers the considerable rewards of clarity and perspective.

As noted above, Fox shows admirable awareness of, but not obsession with, IIM’s shortcomings. She describes a person, not simply a paragon, and the addition of these human dimensions enriches the work. At one point she expresses the view that in the course of his many years in the pulpit IIM may have been slow to change—a particularly ironic fate common to many who promote the cause of change. None of the personal and professional aspects she describes makes her subject any less admirable. And while his consistent views on peoplehood and Zionism were not to this reviewer’s taste, his willingness to grapple with ideas and issues in a spirit of integrity and honesty certainly was.

Fox does a creditable job of setting out some of IIM’s beliefs. One can rarely do better than quote his sermons, which included some memorable phrases. Fox notes, for example, that in 1926 IIM defended the radical flavor of his liturgy by stating that the purpose of a prayer book was “not to maintain tradition but to maintain life.”

A particular point of interest is the light shed in this work on the relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom. IIM was a proud American, and he kept up meaningful contacts with many at HUC, in the CCAR, and elsewhere. Fox quotes a comment made by IIM at the start of his time in London: “In England that which is old is justified by its very antiquity, that which is new still requires justification. In America that which is new is justified by its novelty, that which is old requires defence.” By considering the case of Mattuck, an HUC graduate who made an impact outside the United States, some indirect light is shed on the American Jewish experience. The reader cannot help but wonder if IIM would have been reckoned among the giants of American Reform had he decided to stay.

A twenty-first-century visitor to the Jewish community in Britain is likely to be surprised by its denominational nomenclature. How to understand
the subtle gradations of distinction between Liberal and Reform? What does the term Progressive denote? And what is the provenance and orientation of the Masorti movement? The plethora of titles is rendered even more curious by the dearth of absolute numbers. There are perhaps 300,000 Jews in the United Kingdom, and of those who affiliate at all, approximately one-third align themselves with these non-Orthodox streams. An outsider could be excused for wondering how the total number of participants justifies the proliferation of organizational structures.

A reviewer is not usually excused for lapsing into autobiography, but I will take the risk. The Anglo-Jewry into which I was born had two networks of non-Orthodox congregations. One was termed Liberal or Progressive and the other Reform. There was much that these movements had in common. Both were expressions of liberal theology. By the mid-1960s, both were training their rabbis at the Leo Baeck College. Rabbis serving in one movement would occasionally switch to the other; I remember my father’s colleague at the North Western Reform Synagogue, the Reverend Philip Cohen, who had previously served at the flagship congregation of that other stream, the Liberal Jewish Synagogue in London’s fashionable St. John’s Wood. This state of affairs continues today—among other examples, one may cite the senior rabbi of Reform’s flagship West London Synagogue, who until her appointment to that position was a senior Liberal rabbi.

What sets these two movements apart from each other? Having left Britain in my early twenties, I never had a clear sense of their differences. My perception, informed only by my own prejudices, was that the Reform movement was more open to Zionism, peoplehood, and ritual, and it had a strong European bent. The Liberals, in contrast, were perceived both as heirs of the mantle of Classical Reform Judaism in the American style, and yet also more “English.” What this meant was never defined, but like much of British society, it had something to do with class as well as with a sensibility I identified as genteel in nature, and perhaps to some degree gentile in aspiration. It also had a formidable intellectual profile, exemplified in my day by the likes of John Rayner and David Goldberg. I knew from these men and a few others (it is remarkable how little contact there was between our two movements given the narrowness of the chasm separating us) that they, the Liberals, saw us Reform Jews as frum wannabees, privileging emotion over intellect and communal conformism over the dictates of ethics and academic probity.
As a consequence of disagreements (on issues relating to conversion and personal status, for example) combined with misapprehensions and institutional inertia, Reform and Liberal Judaism continue to exist as independent entities. Historical research can serve an important function not only in shedding light on episodes and individuals who have been unfairly cast into obscurity but also in helping the contemporary movements understand the history of their own foundation. Toward the end of her book Fox hints tantalizingly about all this, but no more than a glimpse is offered.

The groundwork for the institutional paradigm that allowed for two, and later three, small non-Orthodox movements to come into being in the United Kingdom was established in the first half of the twentieth century, and this biography tells the story of one of that era’s greatest figures. Thus it is all the more frustrating that the book has next to nothing to say about the fissure that gave rise to the growth of the two movements. Of the relationship between IIM and Harold Reinhart, a contemporary of his at HUC, we hear very little. Having been informed that relations between them were originally warm, we are informed that “for reasons that are not clear, within a few years the relationship between IIM and Reinhart had cooled.” Would that these reasons were a little clearer.

Now it might be argued that the history of the rift between two movements has no place in a biography. I will confess that it was curiosity about this rift that provided my initial motivation for reading the work. It is to the biographer’s credit that notwithstanding the marked lack of this historical dimension, there is still so much of worth and interest to be found in this biography that the overall impression is highly positive. For a history of Liberal versus Reform we must look elsewhere. For the life story of a great twentieth-century Progressive Jew, child of Vilna, son of Worcester, protégé of Kohler, and pride of London, one need look no further.

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For a couple of millennia, the subjunctive warning “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem” has imparted to the Jewish people in exile that memory loss will have consequences. Emily Alice Katz puts a spin on Psalm 137, however. She claims that American Jewish historians have failed to recount the impact of the first two decades of Israel’s sovereignty upon the wealthiest and most powerful of Diaspora communities. Katz, a historian at the University of California, Irvine, asserts that the institutional and emotional links with the new state, prior to the Six-Day War, were considerably more than “an afterthought” (5). Much of the previous scholarship on the postwar era “undervalues Israel’s impact on American Jewish culture,” she complains. “In neglecting the cultural sphere, as such, we are in danger of missing a prime arena in which American Jewry first explored its relationship with the state of Israel” (3). Her book is a solid effort to eliminate that danger.

Katz pays close attention to the ways in which talented authors, choreographers, musicians, and visual artists—as well as the impresarios and connoisseurs who made the achievements of Israeli culture available—injected themselves into a community that was distancing itself from its immigrant origins. It was seeking another option to preserve a distinctive collective identity and to connect to a larger Jewish destiny than suburbia might otherwise offer. *Bringing Zion Home* is not in itself ambitious, because it confines itself to ethnic precincts and shows little curiosity about the larger American scene.

Thus, the value of Katz’s book lies primarily in what could be termed its ethnography. The author makes a praiseworthy contribution to historiography by recording how segments of postwar Jewry read journalistic and travel accounts about the formation of the new state, learned the folk dances and culinary arts of the *yishuv*, put the ceramics from the New Bezalel School in its homes and Sisterhood gift shops, and enthusiastically applauded the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra when it visited American cities. Katz has examined the relevant primary sources, including the archives of Hadassah, the Israeli Dance Institute, and the America-Israel Cultural Foundation (AICF); and she has consulted three dozen periodicals. Such research has generally led, in each of
her chapters, to roughly the same conclusion: The artistic expression and material culture of Israel enriched and enlarged the sensibility of American Jewry, who grasped something at once exotic and familiar. What got transmitted was worthy of aesthetic appreciation and was also a source of communal pride. Thus enhanced and enlivened, American Jewish culture could help inspire political support for the nascent state.

Whether postwar American Jewish history needs to be rewritten in the light of *Bringing Zion Home* is dubious, however. It admittedly serves as a useful corrective to any accounts that omit Israel entirely from the historiographical record, but no responsible scholarship does that. Nor does Katz deny how formidable an event the Six-Day War was. Along with the emergence of Holocaust consciousness, which the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem activated, the 1967 war reconfigured the direction of American Jewish life. Only a decade earlier, the community seemed doomed to the prospect of full, don’t-look-back integration.

But in making her case, Katz is only moderately persuasive. In summarizing a number of early books about Israel, for example, she seems compelled to minimize the stunning impact of *Exodus* (1958, film adaptation 1960), even though authors like Ruth Gruber, Molly Lyons Bar-David, and Shula Hirsh would undoubtedly have been delighted to have cashed the royalties checks that Leon Uris earned, or to have sold their own movie rights to Otto Preminger. Katz quotes Ruth Glazer’s 1951 article in *Commentary*, which disparages the low quality of the Israeli-designed ceremonial objects that attracted shoppers; they bought tchotchkes to affirm their communal pride at the expense of discriminating taste. But *Bringing Zion Home* oddly fails to quote the author’s then-husband, Nathan Glazer. In his classic *American Judaism* (1957), Glazer claimed that “the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine … [has] had remarkably slight effects on the inner life of American Jewry” (114). Katz should not have dodged the force of this observation.

Finally, one can’t help wondering how the ethnography exhibited in *Bringing Zion Home* might look to, say, Palestinian readers. Katz describes a vibrant and prosperous American minority that had already locked into place the religious and other cultural institutions that were poised to translate favorable images of Israel into political influence. In sharp contrast to the feeble lobbying of Arab-Americans, organized Jewry had secured the attention of Democratic presidents such as Harry
Truman, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson. They led a nation that found the claims of a common democratic polity and shared civic values plausible. Though vestiges of antisemitism still lingered in the State Department and in other bastions of the foreign-policy elite, and though the Eisenhower administration demanded that Israel give up the Sinai after the Suez campaign, pro-Zionists enjoyed a tremendous—and indeed insuperable—head start in the battle for public opinion in the United States. Israel’s foes consisted of despotic regimes and medieval kingdoms. During the period that this book covers, Palestinian nationalism was inchoate. Indeed, the term “Palestinian” was about as likely to designate Yitzhak Rabin as Ahmad Shukeiri. The Palestine Liberation Organization that Shukeiri founded did not get formed until 1964, only three years before the war that would suddenly confront Zionism with the seemingly intractable dilemma of how to placate a rival nationalism demanding sovereignty over the same land(s) through “armed struggle.”

Which national claim could invoke historic priority? Katz does not refer at all to the Dead Sea Scrolls (discovered in 1947), artifacts that provided material evidence for rich Jewish life in the land of Israel at the turn of the common era. Nor does she consider the impact of archeology in linking American Jews both to their coreligionists and to their fellow citizens. On 13 December 1963, for example, *Time* magazine put on its cover Rabbi Nelson Glueck, then-president of Hebrew Union College. The cover story further consolidated the biblical authority that Jews in the United States could specify in championing the renewal of the Holy Land. To Palestinian readers, the evidence of how American Jewry tapped into “the cultural sphere” to “accrue and deploy political capital” (146) must seem downright enviable.

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The main argument of this book is that the benevolent organizations supported by the Jewish elite in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century South—and especially those organizations serving orphans and widows or abandoned wives—attempted to inculcate in their charges a set of values that would prepare them to live in an American society with distinct ideas about gender, race, and even consumer behavior. This, Light contends, was a result both of their altruism and their self-interest, for the benevolent leaders of Southern Jewry were intent upon affirming their place within white Southern society and demonstrating that Jews, even foreign-born indigent Jews, could take their place within that very race-conscious society without being a burden upon it. Thus, the projects of these leaders involved not only seeing to the physical needs of children without parents (or perhaps simply without fathers) but also providing them with practical, gender-specific skills and policing them, and sometimes their mothers, to prepare them in the ways of Southern “cultural citizenship” (6).

The title of Light’s book alludes to a speech made at the dedication of the New Orleans Jewish Orphans Home in which a “pride of race and character” was cited as one of the motives behind Jewish charitable work. But the meaning of the book’s subtitle is less apparent. It can be read to imply that Light’s study simply interrogates the foundations of Jewish benevolence in the South—which this book certainly does—but it seems that the author intends something more. Her subtitle appears to suggest that Jewish benevolence, at least in America, was shaped in the South. At the beginning of her first chapter, for example, Light asserts that “Southern Jewish contributions both to ‘supporting their own people’ and to wider social uplift efforts would help set the tone for national Jewish traditions of benevolence” (24). This is an intriguing idea, but one never convincingly substantiated in the book. If anything, the book reveals that Southern efforts were in several ways tailored specifically to their region, influenced as it was by memories of the Civil War and obsessed with matters of race.

To protect the identity of those served by benevolent institutions and of the professionals who worked with them, Light has assigned
pseudonyms to these individuals. This was a condition set by those who provided access to the confidential files on which much of Light’s argument depends, but it does mean that anyone who may wish to return to Light’s key original sources will be unable to do so. Moreover, it is not clear just how many case files and other documents the author actually consulted, and at times it seems that some of her broad generalizations rest on rather sparse source materials. The pseudonymous “Margaret Goldfarb” casts a long shadow over a chapter devoted to benevolent work with agunot (wives unable to obtain a religious divorce), for example, and “Rebecca Weiss” dominates the book’s chapter on the Depression era. Throughout the book, there are places where the reader may crave additional evidence. It may well be true, for instance, that “acculturated Jewish reformers were less likely to grant eastern European and Sephardic newcomers the same institutional generosity accorded to families … [from] more civilized and modern European nations” (159), but this statement would be more credible were it backed by a larger body of proof.

Light’s analysis of the documents she consulted also raises some questions of overinterpretation. At one point, for example, the author contends that when a member of the Jewish elite in Greensboro, North Carolina, argued that a child in his community needed the protection of the Jewish orphan home in Atlanta to help her develop into a “good woman,” the very use of that term indicated that he was referencing a belief “that girls and women were especially vulnerable to the ill effects of poverty, social alienation, and association with nonwhites” (75). Similarly, when a social worker declined an invitation to dine with one of her clients and her family, Light too readily concludes that this “suggests her sense of her clients’ cultural differences and inferiority” (192).

Finally, another shortcoming of the book is that the text is often repetitious and prone to employ language that hinders understanding rather than promoting it. Writing of “a fictive historical space through which affiliations and exclusions are imagined and coded” (6) or of “a matrix of citizenship structured around a gendered and racialized logic of production” (181) hardly invites easy comprehension.

Light has identified a significant topic that touches upon important matters such as the intersection of race and gender in the Jim Crow South, the changing nature of child welfare work in nineteenth- and
early-twentieth-century America, and the influence of regionalism in American Jewish history. *That Pride of Race and Character* constitutes a very interesting and useful investigation of this topic, even if in some ways it is not as satisfying as it might have been.

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In the late 1960s, many American Jews faced a dilemma: Could they support the Vietnam War? And if they could not, did their religion sanction conscientious objection? In working out answers to these questions, Rabbi Roland Gittelsohn offered a piece of insight. Judaism, he told his congregation, “gives even higher priority to responsibly motivated conscience than to government and law.” When young conscripts faced draft boards, Gittelsohn provided the rabbinic authority to religiously validate their resistance to war. The rabbi’s imprimatur was not that of a pacifist, however, but of a retired Marine chaplain with pacifist roots. In *Unlikely Warrior*, Lee Mandel documents “a pacifist rabbi’s journey from the pulpit to Iwo Jima.”

Born in 1910 to immigrant parents, Gittelsohn grew up in Cleveland’s robust Jewish community. His grandfather was an Orthodox rabbi, his father a physician, and Gittelsohn contemplated pursuing the law. But he deemed the rabbinate a better fit and, with his grandfather’s blessing, enrolled in the Reform movement’s Hebrew Union College in 1931. Mandel moves quickly from the basic biographical highlights of Gittelsohn’s early life to the development of his intellectual commitments, in particular his ideas about social justice and pacifism. With careful attention to the sermons Gittelsohn preached as a student-rabbi and to the larger organizations dedicated to disarmament and pacifism in the 1930s, Mandel establishes the contours of the pacifist rabbi’s politics. He was a race liberal, a progressive who danced with socialism (and was...
accused of communist sympathies), an activist who worried about “false propaganda that touted making the world safe for democracy when he believed it was to make the world safe for corporate profits” (65–66).

By the late 1930s, Gittelsohn enjoyed his Long Island pulpit and growing family. He, like other Americans, watched the news carefully and, like other American Jews, was attentive to the news coming out of Europe. And he was angry: angry that Hitler had brought the world to the brink of war and angry that European leaders had not stopped him. Still, he remained a committed pacifist, a rabbi who—much as he dreaded the work of Hitler—resisted the widespread view that war could save democracy. Yet in 1942, Rabbi Gittelsohn dropped what Mandel labels a “bombshell” (203): He told his congregation he was joining the U.S. Navy.

Mandel devotes the second half of the book to Gittelsohn’s decision to set aside pacifism and to his experience as a military chaplain. Privately, Gittelsohn began rethinking his stance on war by the middle of 1940 and, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, discussed the appeal for rabbis to serve as chaplains with several colleagues. Mandel carefully documents each move—intellectual and literal—Gittelsohn makes as he dons the uniform and embraces his new role. After Chaplain School, the Long Islander received his orders to San Diego, where he became the first Jew to serve as a chaplain in the U.S. Marine Corps. Deployed to the Pacific, Gittelsohn was present for the Iwo Jima campaign, which led to his most famous and challenging experience as a military chaplain. In “The Purest Democracy,” the rabbi preached a sermon that sacralized the dead and urged the living to push America to realize its progressive possibilities. Initially written for the interdenominational service planned by the Protestant Division chaplain, Gittelsohn instead delivered his address at a smaller Jewish ceremony when Protestant and Catholic chaplains objected to his role. Several Protestant chaplains, however, attended the Jewish ceremony to protest Gittelsohn’s exclusion from the larger general one.

Mandel’s book offers an exhaustive examination of Gittelsohn’s early career as a rabbi and a chaplain. Unfortunately, the copious detail overwhelms the narrative and obscures a clear argument about Gittelsohn’s biography. The book lets a reader consider what it means for a rabbi to change his mind on something as big as pacifism and war. Yet because the book ends with World War II, rather than extending throughout Gittelsohn’s life, the full complexity of the rabbi’s ideas are left untouched.
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Natan Ophir’s book, a major new study of Shlomo Carlebach, doubles as a treatise on researching modern figures who exist most vividly in the followers’ memories and recordings. Scholarship today must reckon more than ever with nonwritten sources. Commercial sound, image, and video repositories such as YouTube stand alongside nonprofit efforts such as the Internet Archive (archive.org), institutional portals at museums and research centers, digital archives at national and university libraries, and massive and growing personal media archives in home collections. Charismatic leaders still often present their ideas through written texts; but the immediacy of audio/visual sources, coupled with expanded options for their creation, dissemination, and preservation—whether on cassettes or the internet—can now match or exceed the significance of their textual output. Faced with such a range of materials, how will scholars organize and interpret them? Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson offers some hints of the emerging situation: though the author of a considerable written oeuvre that continues to anchor his intellectual legacy, he remains the subject of a huge, even growing collection of images, audio, and video. But what about a significant and influential thinker whose media presence vastly outweighs his written work?

Few twentieth-century figures offer as interesting a case in this regard as Shlomo Carlebach. Despite a slight literary output, Carlebach’s vast array of teachings—in person and in performance, preserved in memory and on recording—continue to occupy a formidable space in contemporary Jewish life and in reverberating circles beyond. Understanding his worldview, however, arguably requires a fundamentally different scholarly paradigm for research and analysis. Ophir takes on this challenge with intelligence and enthusiasm; and his consideration of Carlebach as “a
modern day Baal Shem Tov” (425–427) late in the book perhaps best characterizes the result. Actively recognizing a sometimes hagiographic level of hyperbole that accompanies his subject, Ophir views Carlebach’s spiritual and intellectual legacies as a universal “Hasidic” message, which he documents in large part through the eyes and narratives of others.

Ophir, to his great credit, conducted much of his research through intensive collaboration with Carlebach’s “chevra.” Earning the trust of many members in Carlebach’s inner circle, he conducted around 250 interviews and gained access to a wide variety of materials—from local photos and videos to official smicha (religious title conferral) certificates—that might have been overlooked. Shlomo’s daughter Neshama Carlebach adds a foreword (11), and key Carlebach associates—the late Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Sammy Intrator, Aryae Coopersmith, and Shy Yellin—present their own endorsements of Ophir’s work in an extensive back-matter section (500–503). Academic purists might voice concerns with such an “authorized” version of Carlebach’s life; and moments along the way where critical distance appears to collapse may reinforce that view, most notably a first chapter that essentially treats Carlebach’s early years as a tzaddik narrative. Yet amid these claims, Ophir also presents reasoned observations that seek a respectful balance between scholarship’s aspirations of objectivity and the passion of Carlebach’s devoted followers (see p.116, where Ophir notes that “Shlomo’s recollection was typically hyperbolic”). Accepting these shifts as a natural part of the Carlbachian landscape allows Ophir’s deep and continued engagement with the Carlebach community to shine as one of the book’s major achievements: facilitating a life map far more detailed than any that had existed before.

The narrative that emerges often has the hallmarks of a guided sourcebook, with Ophir weaving materials and memories together into an organized but dizzying array of experiences and personal relationships. Throughout, Carlebach appears as an intellectually curious, spiritually intense, musically resourceful, organizationally spontaneous, and theologically creative figure: taking his yeshiva upbringing into a series of spiritual spaces otherwise ignored or rejected by other Jewish leaders in the second half of the twentieth century. From Chabad-based outreach events to a synagogue position in St. Louis, coffeehouses, the Berkeley Folk Festival, the House(s) of
Love and Prayer in Haight-Ashbury, Israel’s Moshav Meor Modi’im, a historic tour behind the Iron Curtain, New York’s “Carlebach Shul,” and numerous Eastern- and Jewish-oriented spiritualist retreats, Ophir’s account highlights open conversations with an extraordinary range of religious and musical figures—not to mention supporters such as brother-in-law Srul Irving Glick and megaphilanthropist Michael Steinhardt, the latter of whom offered rent support for the House of Love and Prayer. Perhaps just as remarkable, and implied in Ophir’s retelling, is the extensive support system that Carlebach’s supporters and collaborators established for him. With Carlebach’s attention often focused on personal outreach, others set up events and concerts, arranged travel and logistics, prepared recording sessions, and offered lodging and other basics to support Carlebach’s active career.

Simply finding a scholarly format for recounting all these aspects of Carlebach’s life can prove daunting. Ophir, a scholar of Jewish philosophy, responds by orienting his account along an intellectual maturation/dissemination axis. His first section, “The Mission” (chapters 1–5) explores the development of Carlebach’s core ideas and methods from his education through circa 1978. His second section, “The Impact” (chapters 6–12) addresses the spread of Carlebach’s ministry from 1959 to his 1994 death and beyond. Each chapter covers a different part of Carlebach’s multifaceted career, including a fascinating chronicle of the people upon whom he conferred spiritual authority (363–379).

Sections of the book can seem catalog-like in their presentation of dates and events, though Ophir also offers concise moments of clarity that tie these lists together. Considering Carlebach’s success in addressing Jews in alternative spiritualist movements, for example, Ophir notes incisively that “he was perceived as offering a Jewish mode of experience without deprecating their path” (191). Carlebach’s outreach philosophy to Soviet Jews hinged on recognizing their “white fire” or “inner light of knowing” to compensate for their lack of religious Jewish knowledge (271–272). As with his outreach to other groups of nonpracticing Jews, Ophir asserts, Carlebach’s passion for reaching the inner, pure Jewish spirit awaiting development was a basis for his tendency to “exaggerate … with a natural naivety” (272). And in an analysis of one of Carlebach’s ordination documents, Ophir highlights
Carlebach’s informed modification of the “Yoreh yoreh / Yadin yadin” ordination formula into “an outreach/inreach task to discover the inner value of each person and to work towards eradicating evil and sin and hastening redemption” (379). Ophir’s assertions sometimes strain to contain the breadth of sources he brings into the conversation, such as ephemera, concert recordings, and private documents; yet this generous and expansive approach also gives these sources the breathing room that a tighter intellectual structure might stifle.

Ophir’s study also opens areas for significant future scholarship. At times, especially in the latter chapters, his account feels incomplete—an issue compounded, I suspect, by the tendency of qualified reviewers to see if their own encounters with Carlebach have been included. (My own three brushes with Carlebach, for example, occurred at events that did not make it into Ophir’s timeline.) Ophir can hardly be faulted for such lapses; rather, they point out the task ahead in assembling a comprehensive life trajectory from a scattered and complex series of nonstandard sources. Additionally: while Ophir satisfactorily documents many of his claims, he also regularly emphasizes unsupported assertions with italics or exclamation points, seemingly to amplify Carlebach’s achievements (189, 203, etc.). These issues, which have been criticized in other reviews of the book, to me reinforce the challenge of reconciling strong insider streams of Carlebach scholarship—marked by annual conferences at the Carlebach Shul and the journal Kol Chevra—with academic standards that tend to equate dispassion with rigor. The ethnographer in me is sympathetic to the scholarly and formal straddling in which Ophir engaged to explore this major figure; but readers should understand this implied frame when they pick up the book. More productively, these issues represent places for additional research and negotiation. Ophir’s stated plans to write a second book delving deeper into Carlebach’s philosophy only underline the importance of approaching this figure with a generous spirit and cautious judgement.

More than a decade ago, I gave a paper on the music of Carlebach at a conference celebrating the 350th anniversary of Jews in America. At that time, musicologist Edwin Seroussi urged more scholars to pursue “Carlebach studies,” building on existing research by Yaakov Ariel. Aside from Shaul Magid’s meaningful contributions since, however,
the discipline has developed slowly. Ophir’s book, in this context, represents a major step: a needed bridge from hagiography to history, a new structure for future Carlebach study, and a useful model for philosophical discourse in an era that will rely more and more on new media as both message and messenger.

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1Chaim Dalfin’s recent book The Real Shlomo (Santa Fe: Gaon Books, 2015) resonates more as an effort to resituate Carlebach’s life within Chabad Lubavitch-based discourse than as a contribution to American Jewish history.

Ofer Shiff, The Downfall of Abba Hillel Silver and the Foundation of Israel (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 289 pp.

For more than a decade there has been increasing scholarly interest in the American Reform rabbi and Zionist leader Abba Hillel Silver. Ofer Shiff’s latest book adds to this growing scholarship. Focusing on Silver’s ideas and political activities after the creation of the State of Israel, Shiff argues that Silver developed an original Zionist vision, one characterized as a “bridges and walls” approach. Silver envisioned Zionism as a national movement that separated Jews from non-Jews (walls) but also as a movement that promoted universal values (bridges).

While Shiff’s book does focus attention on Silver’s ideas and activities during the 1950s, he begins by highlighting Silver’s popularity in the 1940s. During World War II, Silver preached a “Diaspora-Zionist” message that resonated strongly with American Jews. Offering an alternative vision to Stephen S. Wise’s approach to the American government, one focused on appeasing the Administration, Silver presented Zionism as a way to establish Jewish solidarity while at the same time encouraging Jewish participation in American democracy. With his rise in popularity and power in the immediate postwar era, however, Silver worried that diasporic Zionism would end up playing only a supporting role to Israel. The multiple ways in which he confronted this issue is the subject that most interests Shiff.

Shiff shows that Silver struggled constantly to make American Zionism, and his own role within it, relevant once the State of Israel was
created. Silver hoped, at first, that the American Zionist movement and Israel could be equal partners. Seeking influence in the General Zionist Party in the early 1950s, Silver believed he could convince the Mapai leadership of the importance of American Zionism. When that failed, Silver created a new model, one that would represent what Shiff terms “pan-Zionist” interests (145). Simultaneously, he became active in his support for the Republican Party and the Eisenhower administration as part of his effort to create a significant role for himself under the umbrella of his new pan-Zionism. In the end, though, Silver had little influence on the Republican Party and failed to make Israel a priority for Eisenhower.

Silver’s role, however, changed by the time of the Suez Crisis in 1956. Speaking with “two voices”—an American voice to Israeli leaders and an Israeli voice to American leaders—Silver positioned himself as a “senior mediator” between the White House and Israel (217). Yet, he realized that his diplomatic efforts were not very significant, as he was able to do little more than offer support for Israel. This realization, though, proved important for changing Silver’s conception of the role of Zionism in the Diaspora, one that “identified with the State of Israel but maintained its own distinct Jewish agenda” (242). For Silver, Zionism in the Diaspora needed to articulate a balance between focusing on Israel and promoting universal values.

By concentrating on Silver’s post-1948 ideas and activities, Shiff connects Silver’s struggle to find a role for American Zionism in his time with today’s efforts to find a unique role and identity for American Zionism. In addition, Shiff’s analysis of Silver’s private journal—which reveals, for example, how Silver believed Israeli leaders would approve of his efforts to lobby the Republican Party—allows readers to gain fresh insights into this complex individual.

Missing throughout much of this study, however, is the historical context in which Silver operated. For example, there is very little discussion about American Reform Judaism and its changing view on Zionism during the mid-twentieth century. Nor was there much discussion of other American Zionist leaders during this time: how they struggled to find a role for themselves in particular and American Zionism more generally. Such comparisons might have enabled Shiff to develop his analysis further and strengthen his argument about Silver’s
unique brand of Zionism. Most glaring, however, is the absence of any discussion of the Zionist ideas that shaped Silver. Was he influenced by Ahad Ha-Am or Louis Brandeis? Did Zionist leaders like Judah Magnes, who also sought to emphasize universal values within a larger Zionist vision, have an impact on Silver? Without any discussion on this topic, Silver appears at times to be operating in a historical and ideological void.

That said, Shiff’s book provides an important perspective on Silver’s life, one that will be appreciated by scholars of American Zionist history. It is also a must-read for anyone struggling with how to conceptualize the role for American Zionism in our own time.

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