Book Reviews


In recent years, Detroit has attracted research and studies by historians, sociologists, and journalists, who describe and explain the city’s former glory, precipitous decline, demographic shift from a white city to a black city, and the current efforts to stimulate a renaissance. This deeply researched and vividly written book by Lila Corwin Berman is part of this trend; it concentrates on Detroit’s Jewish community in post–World War II, from the 1950s through the 1960s. Berman chose to examine Detroit Jewry, she says, because of the outsized roles Detroit Jews have played on the Jewish national stage and because Detroit Jewry’s experience can shed light on the postwar Jewish experience throughout the United States. Additionally, aside from local histories of its Jewish population, “historians of Jewish urban politics and culture have almost entirely neglected Detroit” (15).

With Detroit as her laboratory, Berman asserts that:

Jews who migrated away from American cities and to suburbs in the postwar years understood their movement through an urban framework because they felt connected to the idea of the city as a space of orientation in American Jewish life. Jews believed in cities and persisted in reinventing their relationship to cities because they thought that there was no better place to be a Jew than in the city or in a region defined by proximity to the city (9).

Her book examines how and why Jews reinvented their urbanism over time and the ways in which the city remained a central element of Jewish identity, even as most of them left the city space. Jews did so by creating a new kind of urbanism, a metropolitan urbanism. They became “metropolitan Jews.”
The book represents an interesting, and very convincing, argument of historical change over time. Berman persuasively demonstrates how Detroit Jews’ engagement with the city began with a neighborhood-based urbanism, then changed into a city-wide urbanism, and eventually became a metropolitan urbanism. To do this, she structures her narrative chronologically in seven chapters, each of which carefully examines an element of Detroit Jewry’s experience that illustrates and supports her thesis. The first chapter offers readers a historical and geographical orientation to Detroit and the city’s Jewish neighborhoods. Following chapters discuss Jewish decisions about where to live in the postwar period through the early 1970s, especially after the devastating 1967 riot; how Jewish political activism and identity changed over time in Detroit; and the ways in which Jewish spiritual and cultural transformations occurred. In addition, she examines the sacred places Jews built as they moved their families, communities, and congregations away from the city. In constructing her narrative, Berman focuses on community leaders, religious and secular institutions, and political and cultural movements in the city. She also spent a great deal of time with Jews who grew up in Detroit, who provided her with insights on how place and power worked in the city. In an epilogue, she describes the new Jewish urbanism that has developed in Detroit in the twenty-first century.

One interesting aspect the book offers is a different perspective of Detroit Jews’ ongoing urban liberalism and commitment to the Democratic Party despite their increasing economic and political success and integration into American life.

In writing her book, Berman examined material in Jewish institutional and national archives, read the correspondence of communal leaders, perused the local Jewish and general press, made use of communal surveys, and consulted a wide range of historical and sociological works. Her thoroughgoing research contributes to our understanding of the relationship and contribution of individual Jews and Jewish communal institutions to the city of Detroit over the past fifty years. This study will likely influence the way scholars perceive American Jewry and American urban history for some time to come.

On a personal note, I grew up in Detroit and personally experienced many of the trends and movements that Lila Corwin Berman describes
and analyzes so ably. Consequently, I had to check impulses to interject my own views of the events. What I can say is that reading the book brought back my own memories of Detroit, the neighborhood I lived in, my family, and the dear friends of my youth. I also learned a great deal that I did not know about the city and its Jewish community. I have lived away from Detroit for more than fifty years. Nonetheless, I still return to the city at least twice a year and continue to feel emotionally connected to it. Many years ago, a reviewer of my book on early Detroit Jewry wrote, “It appears that you can take Rockaway out of Detroit, but you can’t take Detroit out of Rockaway.” That still remains true.

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Last December, my daughter’s fifth-grade teacher invited students to bring family holiday decorations to display in their public school classroom. My daughter happily hung a homemade Hanukkah banner near her seat, prompting a classmate to ask, “Are you … Hanukkan?” While “Hanukkan” quickly became our new favorite word and this anecdote part of our family lore, the Hanukkan experience also demonstrated a couple of important points about the power of material culture and the potential of American public space: (1) Art and objects can act as powerful conversation starters about identity; and (2) American institutions can offer space for much-needed, meaningful exploration of American Jewish life. Avi Y. Decter’s book, Interpreting American Jewish History at Museums and Historic Sites, argues these points and, in the process, provides a useful guide for exploring American Jewish life in American cultural spaces.
Decter’s book is designed for secular American institutions; this is not a guide for interpreting material culture at Jewish museums and historical societies. Rather, this book argues for the inclusion of American Jewish stories in the larger cultural conversation. Dector decries the lack of Jewish history in American institutions: “Despite their presence in communities both large and small across the continent, especially in the most recent 150 years, Jews and their histories are frequently unknown or misunderstood, even in their own locales” (3). He names the factors that have contributed to the absence of American Jewish history from American cultural institutions: American Jewish history is complicated—it’s diverse and dispersed. Public history professionals are not familiar with the American Jewish experience. The majority of objects and images that might help to illuminate American Jewish life fall under the auspices of Jewish institutions and private collections. Finally, mainstream institutions, Decter argues, are afraid of “getting it wrong”—of offending or misrepresenting a minority community.

Decter’s book aims to help American museums and historic sites get it right. He, along with contributing authors Zev Eleff and Grace Cohen Grossman, offers primer and practicum via five thematic chapters and twenty case studies meant to educate the reader about American Jewish history and elucidate the varied methods of delivering that history. The thematic chapters—“Migration and Mobility,” “Domestic Life,” “Communal Life,” “Commerce and Culture,” and “Discrimination and Tolerance”—provide accessible, detailed history of the topics, while the case studies present examples of how the themes have been explored in venues as varied as a historical society in Chicago, a prison in Pennsylvania, a museum in Los Angeles, and a historic home in Alabama.

The result is a useful toolbox for museums and historic sites interested in building the American Jewish experience into their galleries and tours. This tool kit contains crucial background information (history) and practical application of that history (case studies), but it is missing a component necessary for interpreting American Jewish history at museums and historic sites: discussion of design.

Public historians would benefit from a clearer illustration of the cognitive map that moves interpretation from idea to design. What are the
central themes or questions of each exhibit? How does design help to engage those themes? Can you convey a sense of Jewishness in design? What are the challenges in writing text for Jewish content? How do you create Jewish content that is appealing and accessible to non-Jewish audiences? There are illustrations of objects in the text, but the book lacks a visual guide to the case studies. Adding images of the exhibits, tours, and videos would allow an appreciation for and analysis of design. Inclusion of both curator and visitor interactions with the material would further illuminate the successes and challenges of interpreting American Jewish history.

The closing chapter of the book, “Toward Next Practice,” is an acknowledgement of future work to be done. Decter, Eleff, and Grossman provide a solid, important foundation for museums and historic sites interested in interpreting American Jewish life. Going forward, scholars and practitioners can build on this foundation by adding discussion of design and consideration of curatorial and visitor experience.

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Though I have been asked to review these works as a two-volume set, Ellen Eisenberg’s recent studies of the Oregon Jewish experience (from 1849–1950 and from 1950–2010) actually function as two distinct volumes. The first, *Embracing a Western Identity: Jewish Oregonians, 1849–1950,* takes the form of a standard historiographical monograph. Covering a century of history, Eisenberg explores Jewish migration to Oregon, the development of Jewish institutions and neighborhoods, and the influence of Oregon’s Jews in business, politics, civic engagement,
and social activism; and she connects that history to recent trends in American Jewish historiography. The second book, *The Jewish Oregon Story, 1950–2010*, reads more like a collection of essays, each arguing a discrete point about a particular facet of the Jewish Oregon experience in the second half of the twentieth century and beyond. The collected chapters (essays) that make up the book address topics such as the dispersion of Portland’s Jews from the city center to the suburbs, the ways in which that city center was remembered and memorialized, the increasing presence and influence of women in Jewish organizations, and other topics of significance to Jewish Oregonians since the end of World War II.

In her first book, *Embracing a Western Identity*, Eisenberg explains that Oregon’s earliest Jewish immigrants were part of the pioneer generation that came to the region in the 1840s and 1850s, prior to statehood. Like other, non-Jewish, Oregonians, this generation would see their identity as bound up in the pioneer experience, of being part of the generation that took the risks and built the social and business infrastructure that would serve future Oregonians. Like other Jews who came to the American West in the mid-nineteenth century, historians typically connect Oregon’s pioneer Jews to the immigration of German peddlers who, in the American interior and in the Far West, would often become traders or dry-goods merchants, and Eisenberg continues to characterize them in that way. Employing a fairly typical narrative of American Jewish migration, the author notes the subsequent arrival of Eastern European Jews to the region and the communal divides created by religious and social differences between the two migrant groups. Here, though, Eisenberg employs Hasia Diner’s important scholarship on the inaccuracy of this supposed German/Eastern European divide to complicate the narrative, noting that many of the so-called Eastern European Jews who arrived in Oregon were Poseners, “Polish Jews [who lived] under Prussian rule,” (61) who, at least in Oregon, would serve “as a bridge” between German Jews and Jews of Eastern European descent. Throughout the book the author observes the ways in which class and ethnic divisions between pioneer Jews (as well as their descendants) and more recent arrivals would manifest themselves in religious practice, politics, and attitudes toward Zionism.
In her third chapter, Eisenberg studies the history of Neighborhood House, a Jewish settlement house in South Portland whose programming proved so central to that neighborhood that Eisenberg has called it “The Heart of the Community.” And the volume concludes by exploring the fluidity and tenuous nature of Jewish racial identity and the ways in which that identity would direct or restrict Jewish Oregonians’ actions on behalf of racial and ethnic minorities in the state. She notes that, in the nineteenth century, societal acceptance of Jews and their roles as merchants and traders resulted in Portland’s Jews advocating against anti-Chinese violence. As anti-Jewish sentiment grew in the twentieth century, however, Jewish Oregonians’ familiarity with prejudice “heightened their sensitivity to the plight of more disadvantaged groups … [but it also] made them reluctant to speak out in ways that drew attention to their community” (230).

In her second book, *The Jewish Oregon Story*, Eisenberg explores a series of topics of regional and national concern. As noted above, I believe that the book’s constituent chapters do not collectively form an overarching narrative, and that the book functions best if one thinks about it as a collection of essays. When thought of in this way, though, it is quite useful and to my mind breaks more new ground than her first book. One of the more notable chapters documents the ways in which women’s engagement and leadership in the Jewish community evolved in the second half of the twentieth century. Calling on a remarkable collection of oral histories, Eisenberg traces the way that the changing role of women in postwar society altered their participation in Jewish organizations, first becoming “professional volunteers”—a term that Eisenberg defines as women “who made a virtual career out of volunteering” (85)—and then, in the 1970s and beyond, building on their volunteer experience and education to became paid staff, institutional leaders, and major donors. Eisenberg notes that while Jewish women appreciated and embraced the professional opportunities made possible by changing attitudes and a more equitable society, some lamented the ways in which new professional opportunities for women limited their free time and “led to a curtailment of women’s organizational work” (104).

Eisenberg’s work (in both books) is at its best when she explores the insights, attitudes, and contributions of women. In *Embracing a
Western Identity, for example, she explains that most historians who study the clash between German and Eastern European Jews focus on “difference[s] over liturgy” and have, perforce, focused on men “who, unlike women, had an official role as members and officers of synagogues and burial societies” (53–54). Her study, by contrast, focuses greater attention on Jewish women’s identities, and in so doing she provides important insight into the social implications of such ethnic divisions. Eisenberg’s use of women’s oral histories provides important information in other chapters, as well, including her study of Neighborhood House, her chapter on the memorialization of Old South Portland, and, of course, the chapter about the postwar evolution of women’s engagement in the Jewish community (cited above).

Both studies should prove welcome additions to the bookshelves of scholars and others interested in western Jewish history, the history of American Jewish women, and, of course, the history of the Jews of Oregon. They both function as solid reference works and can serve as foundational texts in university classrooms, continuing education programs, and other venues where Jews and others study the American Jewish experience. This reviewer is particularly taken with the second volume for the diversity of its topics and the ease with which each chapter can serve as its own discrete article. Nevertheless, both books make an important contribution to our understanding of the Jewish experience in Oregon, the Far West, and in some ways, the United States.

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At the core of this collection of documents Zev Eleff has assembled is the question of who and what constitutes “Modern Orthodox Judaism.” Is it made up of all Jews who continue to identify themselves as Orthodox
and live in the modern world? Or is it those Jews who, while Orthodox in their behavior and outlook, also embrace the ethos of modernity and see value in its plural culture, ideas, and practices? If it is the former, then it will include the increasingly fundamentalist, haredi, and stubbornly insular Orthodox. But if it is the latter, it will be far more open, tolerant, and inclusive. One might suggest that the best way to answer that question is by looking at its documentary history—that is the way Eleff has decided to go. However, as any good editor knows, the documents one selects as significant and illustrative determine the answer.

Eleff gives a hint of his answer in his preface, when he identifies former Jewish Center Rabbi Norman Lamm—his teacher and, for many years, president of Yeshiva University (YU)—as its “leading spokesman.” This is the same Norman Lamm under whose leadership this flagship Orthodox institution—once criticized by those on the right as not being a real yeshiva and those on the left as not being a true university—moved steadily toward the haredi right in its rabbinic faculty and the atmosphere in its beit ha-Midrash, which often diverged from the values and outlook of its university side. Nevertheless, as a product of YU, Eleff is clearly committed to seeing it as the embodiment of Modern Orthodoxy.

Eleff warns readers that the Modern Orthodox community is “far from coherent,” because it includes both those who identify as “liberal” and those who are “stringent.” In other words, for Eleff, Modern Orthodoxy is not an ethos but rather all those who call themselves Orthodox. To that, he adds, it is “indigenous to North America.” This last point—undoubtedly a reflection of his training by American-oriented historians such as Jeffrey Gurock and Jonathan D. Sarna, whose influence looms large in this volume—will come as a surprise to many. Indeed, there must be countless Jews who are part of modern culture and consider themselves loyal to halakhah (Jewish law) and Jewish practice yet find themselves living in Israel, Europe, Australia, or South Africa—to mention but a few places where arguably “Modern Orthodox” communities are found. To this reviewer, the impact of Israeli Orthodoxy on North American Orthodox Jews seems impossible to deny.

Given this bias, Eleff’s collection is helpful albeit flawed by his selection criteria. The whole of Part One, predating the real influx of the
Orthodox to America during and after the Holocaust, is effectively a documentary record of a proto-Orthodoxy, filled with materials reflecting the difficulties that traditional Jews had with American Jewry and its lack of adherence to Jewish practice. Readers familiar with Orthodoxy today will perhaps be interested to discover, for example, that bans on using a Reform prayer book, such as an 1855 letter from Rabbi Bernard Illowy or an 1865 suggestion that these books be burned, reflect a pattern of contempt toward Reform Jewry and its products that still can be found in many precincts of Orthodoxy today.

The real heart of the documentary substance, however, begins with Part Two, where we discover the emerging impressions of America as a place hostile to Orthodoxy. Here are the documents that the rabbis and leaders of Orthodoxy used to persuade European Jewry that America was a land where Jewish observance and all that Orthodoxy valued could never survive. This of course, as we now know, was wrong. With the large influx of Orthodox refugees and survivors after the Holocaust, we have discovered that America is on the contrary a place where Orthodoxy has flourished as never before. Had more Orthodox Jews been encouraged to emigrate from Europe earlier, lives would have been saved. As it was, the rabbis (quite a few of whom managed to save themselves) discouraged their followers from leaving when it was still possible. This resistance to the “Trefene Medine,” as the Orthodox called America, was not to be gainsaid, as these documents make clear.

Finally, what I have called the “slide to the right” is documented in these pages, a process by which an ideologically open Modern Orthodoxy has been attacked and often vilified. Eleff offers documents that show this. Perhaps none is more telling than a famous exchange that took place in 1966 in the pages of the YU student newspaper between two representatives of the Modern Orthodox world: Rabbis Yitz Greenberg and Aharon Lichtenstein. The subject was “making Orthodoxy relevant in America.” Greenberg argued that Orthodoxy was refusing to abandon its “East European ghetto psychology” and was living “in its own world,” having “lost all connection with modern life.” He commended other movements for having taken “the risk and dealt seriously with Judaism’s relevancy to modern life,” even if they had come up with what he thought were “wrong answers.” His was the
paradigmatic expression of an ideologically open and engaged Modern Orthodoxy, in which withdrawal from mainstream culture or insularity—which haredi Orthodoxy champions—was “cowardice.” Greenberg argued that the Torah provided “enough vitality to live in any situation” and that Orthodox Jews should integrate American values and culture to “illuminate and deepen our traditional Jewish framework.”

Responding several months later, Lichtenstein, also on the YU faculty and son-in-law of esteemed Orthodox Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, attacked his colleague Greenberg in the pages of the same newspaper, arguing that to call upon students to meet those challenges of integration and take those risks of engagement with mainstream culture was not “in the best interest of Halachic Judaism.” Instead, he advocated a “retreat” into a “traditional bastion in order to avoid confronting the contemporary world altogether,” a strategy Lichtenstein asserted was “a genuine path to avodat hashem [service to God],” which he admitted he prized “most highly.” He accused Greenberg, whom he addressed somewhat patronizingly as “Dear Yitzchak,” of a “strident tone” and called upon him to be “more careful and more responsible” in future public discussions. In a nutshell, the Greenberg/Lichtenstein exchange captures the ongoing problem of Orthodoxy. In the years that have followed, this divide has only grown deeper.

Eleff’s collection is rich in documents from all the important voices of Orthodoxy—from Soloveitchik to Shlomo Riskin, Herman Wouk to Marvin Fox, Eliezer Berkovits to Haskel Lookstein, Moshe Tendler to Avi Weiss and Asher Lopatin. Women are represented here as well—Rivka Haut, Esther Krauss, Blu Greenberg, and Tova Hartman—although they are too few in number and particularly missing the new generation of Orthodox feminists. Also missing are many of the academics who have written about Orthodoxy—although to be fair, the latter have their own books and articles in print. In assembling this collection, Eleff has provided a useful compendium for those interested in American Orthodoxy.

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“I believe in America.” So begins perhaps the greatest film trilogy of the twentieth century, Francis Ford Coppola’s The Godfather. Yet the story of the Corleone family is compelling not only because the characters are simultaneously sympathetic and heinous, noble and deeply flawed, but also because the story is the story of America’s coming of age in the twentieth century, a tale that extends back into the Old World but really begins with Ellis Island and wends its way to the Upper West Side of Manhattan, with an interlude in Nevada along the way.

Likewise, Aaron Hughes’s most recent book, Jacob Neusner: An American Jewish Iconoclast, is compelling not only because Hughes’s biography of the most published individual in human history is also a story that reaches beyond the vicissitudes of a particular scholar who grew up in West Hartford, Connecticut, and made his way across the academic landscape: from Harvard, Oxford, the Jewish Theological Seminary, and Columbia, on to the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, Brandeis, Dartmouth, Brown, the University of South Florida, and Bard College. Rather, as Hughes says, “Neusner’s story is the story of what happened as Jews migrated to the suburbs, creating new lives for themselves as they successfully integrated into American society” (6).

Hughes begins with Neusner’s early days in the interwar period in central Connecticut, far from the centers of Jewish learning in central Europe and its luminaries who would make their way to the New World in the wake of Nazi devastation. Growing up in the home of a journalist in the Jewish press and himself reviewing books from an early age, Neusner developed and would never lose a fine-tuned skill for turning out words quickly and for striving to reach a broad audience. Finding
his way into the newly-emerging scholarly study of Jewish texts almost by accident, Neusner brought a uniquely “American” approach that allowed the study of Judaism to take its place in the pantheon of religious studies in the American academic scene. More to the point, one of the central strands that Hughes weaves recounts Neusner’s place in the broader movement of the field of Jewish studies from “ghettoized” roots which were the province of rabbis or at times rabbi-scholars to a place as one of the constellation of religions that would be studied in religious studies departments in North America and Europe, subjecting Jewish “data” to a rigorous methodological examination and demonstrating the importance of Judaism to the comparative exercise.

Hughes draws the trajectory of Neusner’s prolific career, with both professional and intellectual volte-face in spades, as a scholar of rabbinic Judaism shifting over time from the study of the Talmud to the study of religion and eventually even to constructive theology itself. Yet Neusner’s daunting and inexhaustible literary production, writes Hughes, may be the scholar’s Achilles’ heel, keeping Neusner from receiving his due. At the same time, Neusner’s prickly personality may have sent the man into self-imposed isolation, writing books with titles such as Are the Talmuds Interchangeable? Christine Hayes’s Blunder. Relying on archival materials as well as personal interviews with Neusner, his wife Suzanne, and others, Hughes gives us a window into the man behind the legend.

Hughes himself has already written no less than seven books over the last decade both theorizing and historicizing the fields of Jewish studies and Islamic studies, so his latest contribution should be read in light of his commitment to shining a light on one of the thorniest problems plaguing these two fields—what Hughes describes in this book as “identity politics” and what one might otherwise glibly describe as the distinction between the ichthyologist and the fish. In his other work, Hughes has, of course, shown the field of Jewish studies to suffer from the undue influence of foundations and corporations whose interests lie beyond the academy and whose willingness to fund projects that advance those interests has shaped the direction and even the conclusions that researchers in the field have drawn. Yet in this book about Jewish studies, Hughes actually hews closer to his critique of Islamic studies, in which he argues that the field has reactively overcorrected in response to
the challenges posed by Edward Said’s 1978 book *Orientalism* by lionizing research and teaching from the perspective of the “fish.” By focusing on Neusner’s concern (one might even say obsession) with bringing Jewish studies out of the yeshiva and into the pantheon of disciplines that might be studied in the university, Hughes reminds us that Jewish studies, too, had to deal with—and, perhaps, still has to deal with—the problem of confessionalism creeping into scholarship.

By expressing this concern in the form of a *bildungsroman*, Hughes allows us to see his protagonist’s own awareness of the problems inherent in a naïve approach to rabbinic sources unfold over time. For example, Neusner writes his doctoral dissertation on Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai and yet subsequently declares his very own work “gullible, conventional, and unoriginal” (62). In dialogue with scholars who worked on religions other than Judaism while he was at Columbia (as doctoral student and as a Kent Fellow at the National Council in Religion in Higher Education) and particularly at Dartmouth (1964–1968), where he exchanged ideas with Hans Penner (a student of Mircea Eliade) and Jonathan Z. Smith *inter alia*, Neusner came to see “the difference between religious studies scholarship and that which passed for scholarship in the quasi-seminary model of Jewish studies” (112). Leaving Dartmouth for personal reasons, seeking a position where his children could receive a Jewish education, Neusner brought this keen sensibility to Brown, where his prickly personality seems to have been his own worst enemy but where he also seems to have had great latitude to “train a generation of young scholars using his newly developed methods” (132). Clashes at Brown would drive Neusner first from its religious studies program into a separate Jewish studies program (clearly a challenge for someone who wanted to see Jewish studies integrated into religious studies) and eventually from Brown itself to the University of South Florida.

Amid these developments, Hughes identifies another strand of Neusner’s persona, that of the public intellectual we might call “Rabbi Jacob Neusner.” His strand was distinct from, yet interwoven with, the Neusner who lived in the rarified world of scholarship. A journalist from his youth, Neusner came to take on the role of cultural critic when tapped for the National Council for the Humanities (1978–1984) and the National Endowment for the Arts (1984–1990). In this role,
Neusner shifted from the soft left-wing politics of his youth to support the right wing as a compatriot of William F. Buckley, Lynne Cheney, and William Bennett. Hughes explains that “Neusner, like Bennett and Cheney, had no qualms articulating what constituted ‘good’ humanities and how it differed from ‘bad’ humanities” (209). Neusner also came to scorn affirmative action in the university, seeing it as leading inexorably to the further marginalization of the very minorities it was designed to help. We might see this as parallel with Neusner’s scholarly critique of Jewish studies as an area of study independent of religious studies; here, too, Neusner “was critical of African American students who would simply gravitate to courses on African American studies taught from insider perspectives as opposed to being more fully integrated with the humanities curriculum” (208).

Hughes presents us with a compelling and sympathetic portrait of a man fighting to bring Jewish studies out of the ghetto. He seems very deferential of his subject. Never having interacted with Neusner personally, nor having received one of the myriad “drop dead” letters he is known to have sent, I am incapable of judging the accuracy of this portrait. There are signs throughout the book that Neusner may have been his own worst enemy, both in terms of his professional life and his scholarship. Jewish studies need not take the route into religious studies Neusner encouraged—Jewish studies has also demonstrated its place in Near Eastern studies, classics, history, literature, and so forth—but this book is important and should be read by Jewish studies scholars and students alike for its attention to the tension between confessionalism and scholarship. At the same time, undoubtedly due in large part to Neusner’s own influence, the problem of so-called identity politics has subtly shifted over the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first—as Hughes is well aware. Neusner had great faith that the university was the vehicle for Jewish humanities to take its place among the canon of the West, yet this materialized at the very moment when the canon itself seems to have disintegrated. While the university may have provided American Jews a means to cultivate their cultural prominence through the support and expansion of Jewish studies programs and endowed chairs, the scholars who now teach in those programs and populate those chairs do not, by and large, use their perch as a soapbox.
for Jewish confessionalism. Yet the concern that identity politics (or, indeed, politics itself) might crowd out scholarship is very much alive, even if the nature of identity politics has shifted over the course of recent decades. The Godfather is dead—long live the Godfather!

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Naomi Prawer Kadar, formerly the national director of the Workmen’s Circle schools, passed away in 2010, only three years after completing her doctorate in Yiddish literature at Columbia. Subsequently, her family, assisted by a team of advisors and academics, shepherded her dissertation to publication. *Raising Secular Jews* is both a testament to Kadar’s work in the realm of Yiddish education and a useful volume for scholars of children’s literature, Yiddish culture, and secular Jewish identity.

Kadar’s book is a study of the children’s periodicals produced for American children by the four secular Yiddish school movements: the labor Zionist Farband schools, the largely apolitical Sholem Aleichem Folk schools, the socialist Workmen’s Circle schools, and the Communist-leaning Ordn schools of the International Workers Order. Throughout her work, Kadar meticulously documents both the ideological differences between these movements, as well as each organization’s evolving relationship to politics and Jewish tradition over time. The second chapter of the book offers a comparative analysis of the philosophical and pedagogical goals of each group, as expressed through the cover art.
printed on their respective magazines. Her careful study of the diversity within the world of secular Yiddish education, particularly the attention she gives to the publications of the unabashedly pro-Soviet Ordn schools, is one of the book’s core strengths.

Each educational movement receives its own chapter in the middle of the book, in which Kadar reviews the history of its publications, recounts the biographies and ideological orientations of its editors and key contributors, and engages in thorough literary analysis of selected stories and features. One of the interesting insights to emerge from this comparison, although the reader is left to do much of the work in stitching it together, is the disposition of each group toward America and American culture. As Kadar writes, “The struggle of the Jews’ complex relationship with America—on one hand, a provider of opportunities, and on the other hand, a usurper of the souls of Jewish youth—is a source of constant tension for the immigrant educators” (70). In the Farband schools’ *Di yidishe kindervelt (The Jewish Children’s World)*, for example, America is both celebrated as a land that has welcomed Jewish immigrants and enabled them to prosper, and “portrayed as a place of cruelty” and “moral emptiness” by the pen of the well-known Yiddish writer Joseph Opatoshu (73). While the publications of the Sholem Aleichem schools celebrate multiculturalism and the harmonious compatibility of Jewish and American ideals, the 1937 premiere issue of the Ordn schools’ *Yungvarg (Young Stuff)* features a fictional character who lives in the United States but longs to be in the Soviet Union, where freedom and prosperity are within reach for all. In the early pages of *Yungvarg*, it is neither New York nor Jerusalem but rather Birobidzhan that captures the imagination and affection of the writers.

The most important chapter in Kadar’s book deals with the subject of how Yiddish children’s periodicals introduced young readers to the Holocaust as the genocide unfolded. Yankev Pat and other Yiddish writers seeking to convey to children the enormity of the Nazi devastation “believed that the events of the catastrophe had to be conveyed to the younger generation in all their stark brutality and without euphemisms” (161). Accordingly, readers were not spared gruesome details about what transpired in the ghettos and concentration camps of Nazi-occupied Europe. Children figured prominently in these stories, both when they miraculously avoided death and when they did not.
Kadar argues that Yiddish writers in America, though physically removed from the horrors of the Holocaust, felt a deeper emotional bond to their brothers and sisters in Eastern Europe than their contemporaries who did not write in Yiddish. Therefore, she suggests, and for the same reasons, just as the American Yiddish press was ahead of English-language publications in terms of reporting Nazi atrocities to adult readers, Yiddish children’s magazines grappled with the destruction of European Jewry much earlier and much more intensely than the English-language publications for Jewish children did.

Her claim that Anglo-American Jewish schools avoided discussion of the Holocaust until the 1960s is difficult to sustain in light of Rona Sheramy’s work on early Holocaust education, which Kadar seems not to be familiar with, and Hasia Diner’s groundbreaking book about the Holocaust in postwar American Jewish culture, which Kadar sadly may not have had the opportunity to read. Here and elsewhere, the book would have been enriched by thematic comparisons between the magazines that Kadar studied and those that Jewish children in English-language Hebrew schools read, such as World Over and Young Judaean. Kadar’s insight that Yiddish writers focused on conveying examples of physical and spiritual resistance so as to provide American Jewish children with hope and pride, for example, calls to mind Sheramy’s analysis of the parallel literature written in English for American Jewish children immediately after the war.

Raising Secular Jews ends with a chapter on how these periodicals faced challenges and ultimately folded in response to acculturation, suburbanization, and the decimation of the Eastern European Jewish community. “Walking the tightrope of becoming integrated into American society while maintaining a close connection to the Jewish roots and linguistic heritage of the immigrant generation ultimately proved to be an impossible task” for secular Yiddish school movements in the United States, Kadar concludes. “But unlike footprints in the sand, the legacy remains” (235). So too, Naomi Prawer Kadar has left behind a remarkable legacy as an educator and scholar. May her memory be a blessing.

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*To Stand Aside or Stand Alone: Southern Reform Rabbis and the Civil Rights Movement* collects thirteen oral-history interviews that P. Allen Krause conducted at a Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) convention in Toronto in June 1966 for his Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) rabbinic thesis. Three years later he summarized his findings in an article in *American Jewish Archives*. His scholarship was pioneering then, and any subsequent study of the Jewish role in the Civil Rights movement has had to consider it. Retired after forty years as a pulpit rabbi, with the wisdom of experience, Krause has presented us with a more complete accounting by publishing edited transcripts of the interviews. To establish context, he introduces each interview with a community history and a rabbinic biography.

Sadly, it was not given to Krause to complete the task of publishing this book, but neither did he desist from it. At his retirement, Krause was diagnosed with cancer, and he succumbed in 2012. This volume thus has added resonance as a memorial. Standing neither aside nor alone, Krause entrusted its editorial completion to Mark K. Bauman, the estimable authority on Southern Jewry, who worked with Stephen Krause, the rabbi’s son and a lawyer. The volume begins with moving and well-deserved tributes from Bauman, Stephen Krause, and Sherri Hofmann Krause, the rabbi’s widow. The American Jewish Archives, which houses Krause’s tapes and papers, provided support. (As one rabbi advised Krause, to learn more, go “ask Professor Jake Marcus.”)

More than an editor, Bauman has been the book’s impresario. His editing of the interviews retains the freshness and immediacy of the oral history, noting deletions with ellipses. He inserts citations and contributes to the scholarly apparatus. He adds an explanatory introduction to Krause’s foreword, providing a historical overview, and ends with a bibliographical essay that not only contextualizes the book’s place in the literature but reads as a self-referential book review.

As Bauman notes, Krause’s research inspired a revisionist history that
overthrew the common narrative of a Southern Jewry, still cowed by Leo Frank, which had remained silent and compliant during the Civil Rights era. As acculturated Southerners acquiescing to Southern racial codes, according to the narrative, Dixie Jews were a people caught in the middle, few and vulnerable, fearful of an economic or even violent backlash if they were to express their repressed racial sympathies. What Krause showed was that nearly all Southern Reform rabbis sermonized in support of integration, and, unlike Protestant ministers, rarely felt their tenures threatened. They mostly shunned the spotlight, and even those publicly silent often worked behind the scenes to prepare for, if not effect, an incremental desegregation. Krause added names to the list of those who acted at personal risk—with their congregation’s tacit, if not open, consent. Virtually all rabbis took pride in their “freedom of the pulpit.” Building on Krause, Berkley Kalin and Mark Bauman in the anthology The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights and Clive Webb in Fight against Fear: Southern Jews and Civil Rights updated the revisionist evidence, arguing that a sizeable Jewish minority did much even if others could have done more.

Working from a standard protocol, Krause queried the rabbis on contentious issues focusing on Southern and Jewish exceptionalism. Behind Krause’s first question, on the boundaries of the South, lies the now-commonplace recognition that there are indeed many “Souths.” Each rabbi regards his city as somehow different. The situation of Rabbi Jacob Rothschild in cosmopolitan Atlanta with thousands of Jews, including civic and business leaders, was not that of Rabbi Charles Mantinband in provincial Hattiesburg, Mississippi, with its small, isolated mercantile Jewish community. A rabbi in Atlanta or Nashville found allies in progressive civic, religious, and political leaders, while the Birmingham rabbi contended with violently recalcitrant Sheriff “Bull” Connor. The presence of a military base, a black or white college, or a liberal or reactionary press influenced community racial dynamics. For Rabbis Rothschild or Malcolm Stern, in Norfolk, a merchants’ association more concerned with economic development than with massive resistance created yet another kind of Southern reality. Interestingly, in the mostly Protestant South, places with large Catholic constituencies, such as Mobile and New Orleans, tended to be more hospitable, and progressive
rabbis spoke of finding allies among priests who had institutional support and did not serve at their congregation’s mercy. At a contentious temple board meeting, Rabbi Mantinband of Hattiesburg was rescued when a Catholic priest showed up—uninvited—to speak in his defense.

Krause was well aware that the thirteen rabbis interviewed were but a selection. He focused on states in the Deep South with large African American populations. Half of all Southern rabbis were Reform, and he notes other activist rabbis whom he did not interview. He concedes that more research is needed on Conservative and Orthodox rabbis. The rabbis interviewed, with exception, describe colleagues from other movements as insular, mostly uninvolved, more concerned with pastoral duties.

As Southerners, rabbis share a sense of social order as well as a commitment to social justice. For Jews the Holocaust was a living memory, and bombed temples and beaten Jews certainly lay behind the fears of rabbis, who, if not European born, were a generation or two removed. Expressing a typical Southern racial paternalism, several rabbis complain of “lawless” Negro demonstrators. One notably quiet rabbi, disparaged by his colleagues, claims that he would cooperate with African Americans if only he could find an intelligent one. Although several rabbis hold warm, intimate social relations with local black Civil Rights leaders—including Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King Jr.—recognition of black agency came slowly. Activist Rabbi Alfred Goodman in Columbus, Georgia, notes that the city’s school integration was negotiated by white civic and school leaders without black participation.

In his 1969 AJA article, Krause distinguished among societies that were “closed,” “less closed,” and “open” or “safe” for Civil Rights activism. In this current work he makes a bipartite distinction between nine rabbis “in the land of the almost possible” and four “in the land of the almost impossible.” The rabbis almost all sought Protestant cover through an interfaith or ministerial council, several serving as its president. Often they expressed disappointment with the Christian clergy’s lack of commitment, especially among the dominant Baptist. Virtually all rabbis serve on a local or state biracial human relations organization, and many join the progressive Southern Regional Council.

Rabbinic responses to the integration crisis range from a quiet tokenism to a confrontational activism, challenging stereotypes of a fearful
Southern Jewry wanting only to fit in. Some rabbis have become praised as famous men for their heroism. Threatening letters and phone calls came to their homes, and looking out their windows they could see Klansmen stalking them. After the 1958 Atlanta Temple bombing, Rothschild rallied the community, converting this antisemitic act into a turning point in the city’s racial history. Many speak admiringly of Mississippi Rabbis Mantinband of Hattiesburg and Perry Nussbaum of Jackson, who remain bravely defiant though confronted with murders and bombs. In 1966 Rabbi James Wax could not have known that his efforts to make Memphis a model of peaceful integration would not survive King’s assassination two years later. For his outspokenness, Rabbi William Silverman of Nashville—a.k.a. the “Pistol Packin’ Rabbi”—endured dead rats thrown on his lawn and was once bloodily assaulted in a Methodist church; when white extremists targeted his family, he let it be known that he carried iron when driving his son to school. At their retirements, rabbis were feted by Jew and gentile alike as paragons of social justice. Once-vilified rabbis often retired from their communities holding keys to the city.

The rabbis cited the prophetic ethics of Reform Judaism as the foundation of their activism. That civil rights presented a clear choice between good and evil does not mitigate that many rabbis were confronted with choices that lay in what Primo Levi called—in the context of the Holocaust—the “grey zone,” a place where moral action is fraught with ambiguity. As Birmingham Rabbi Milton Graffman put it, choices were “no-win.” Graffman, infamous for being among the clergymen cited in Dr. King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” has been disdained for his gradualism, but he had a long history of tirelessly advocating integration. Is the gradualist strategy a reprehensible cowardice, or is King’s civil disobedience—integration here and now—the only morally defensible position? Can quiet diplomacy succeed when public action will provoke violence? Does one take a moral stand in support of African Americans if the consequences compromise the safety or livelihood of others, one’s family or congregants? No Southern rabbi appeared to have taken to the streets to march or demonstrate. Prior to the interview, the once-uncompromising Rabbi Mantinband handed Krause a statement acknowledging “multiple approaches to this struggle, and all serve a...
purpose.” If the rabbis tended to begin as gradualists, wanting to change hearts and minds, such, too was the first position of prominent Southern liberals such as Lillian Smith and Frank Porter Graham. Although we may seek in this book confirmation of our own Jewish values—and assess these rabbis in that light—much here suggests the wisdom of withholding judgment. Several cite the rabbinic admonition to stand in another’s place.

With rare exceptions the rabbis express reservations about the public stands of national Jewish defense organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the CCAR, and the American Jewish Congress, which made grand public gestures and filed friends of court desegregation briefs but ignored the sentiments and situation of Southern Jews. Many rabbis resented Northern rabbis coming South and regarded their marching and demonstrating as grandstanding to promote their rabbinic careers while their Southern brethren labored in the hinterlands. They similarly dismissed Freedom Riders, disproportionately Jewish, for their “hit-and-run” tactics even as they might arrange housing for them locally. Not knowing nor understanding the South, these interlopers left a mess for the local rabbi to clean up. Rabbi Wax describes Freedom Riders who arrived in Memphis not knowing that the bus station had long ago integrated.

The rabbis insist that racism is a national problem, noting that Northern Jews who condescend to their Southern brethren themselves lived in segregated societies. The rabbis typically say that they have few if any segregationists among their congregants. Southern Jewish communities typically include a small core of multigenerational natives, but often Northern newcomers, drawn by postwar industrialization, outnumber them. The rabbis do not find a predictable North-South Jewish divide in racial attitudes among their members, noting that the acculturated Southerner will acknowledge that segregation is morally untenable. Most Jews concede the immorality of segregation but simply did not want to become involved. Yet, at moments of crisis, temple boards almost invariably supported their activist rabbis, and, relative to Protestant clergy, few lost their pulpit or had it imperiled. After the Nashville JCC was bombed and the temple threatened, Rabbi Silverman was heartened to find his next service so packed that he thought it was Rosh Hashanah.
What brings to life *To Stand Aside or Stand Alone* is its human dimension, catching the rabbis in the fullness of their beings. They repeatedly note that civil rights was only one dimension of their rabbinate, and their pastoral virtues seemed to trump whatever discomfort their civil rights advocacy caused. Principled rabbis could also be personally abrasive and uncompromising. Their Zionism or traditionalism also shaped community relations. Those of us not in the clergy might be surprised by their willingness to engage in rabbinic sniping, unmindful of *lashon hora* (gossip). They name colleagues they regard as bigoted or cowardly. What is one to make of Rabbi Mantinband’s characterization of his “good friend” Rabbi Nussbaum of Jackson as a civil rights “Johnny-come-lately?” Why carp about Nussbaum who spoke early and often to his congregation on integration, sat black friends at his dinner table, suffered a house bombing, and conducted integrated services for Freedom Riders at the notorious Parchman prison? Reading the interviews in total, one becomes more aware of the limitations of taking oral histories at face value as self-representations without corroboration.

With notable exceptions the rabbis do not claim that their role changed the course of civil rights history, a judgment that accords generally with the views of Webb and Bauman. Yet the rabbinic role was not insignificant. The interviews open a window into the times, and Krause and Bauman provide the frame through which to view them. These voices speak with the freshness of experience, and the commentary adds reflection. *To Stand Aside or Stand Alone* holds value as both a reference book and a work of literature. As a scholarly resource, it belongs on the shelf of anyone studying community history, black-Jewish relations, or the South generally. As a good read, it fits on the night table of anyone seeking an absorbing story of courage and all-too-human fallibility.

*Leonard Rogoff, historian for the Jewish Heritage Foundation of North Carolina, has written extensively on Southern Jewry. His last book is Gertrude Weil: Jewish Progressive in the New South.*

*Hideous Characters and Beautiful Pagans* analyzes how representations of Jews on the early national and antebellum American stage mirrored the treatment of actual Jews offstage. Nathans argues that antisemitic and philo-Semitic representations of Jews paralleled early American Jews’ struggle to become part of the new nation. *Hideous Characters and Beautiful Pagans* is the first book-length exploration of Jews and American theater prior to the Civil War. It is also a masterpiece of scholarship. Beautifully written, well structured, and exquisitely researched, Nathans’s book deepens our understanding of this tumultuous, but often under-studied, era. Her attention both to theories of the theater and masculinity should make her volume compelling and useful to scholars working in later eras.

*Hideous Characters and Beautiful Pagans* moves chronologically and thematically through the history of Jews in early American theater. The introduction lays the groundwork for Nathans’s main argument. While previous scholars have suggested that “Jews were inevitably depicted as venal villains on pre-Civil War American stages” or were described in reviews as “hideous characters” or “beautiful pagans,” Nathans discovered subtle distinctions even in the “most egregious images” (1). Nathans is as much concerned with why stereotypes were useful at specific moments as with how specific characters challenged expectations (1). Although Jews represented only a small proportion of the new nation’s population, they were particularly conspicuous in early theater. Drawing on the work of theater scholars Marvin Carlson and Henry Bial, Nathans pays particular attention to the way that certain characters were “double coded” (that is, spoke to at least two audiences) and how they were haunted by the ghosts or shades of “well-known figures from theatre, literature, and poetry” (5–7). Jewish dramatic characters, in turn, she argues, “ghosted” other early American Jews, as they performed their own identities off stage.

Nathans’s book follows this argument through six chapters that move from the Revolution to the brink of the Civil War. In the first chapter, Nathans examines how the theater served as a mirror for “Jewish men’s
participation in the American polity” from the Revolution to the Jew Bill of 1826 (19). Here she focuses primarily on the legal means Jews used to claim their place in the nation. In contrast, the second chapter turns to extra-legal strategies and examines the revival of classical republicanism in theater productions between 1826 and 1861. Throughout the second chapter, Nathans places theatrical characters alongside contemporary displays of violence—particularly duels, native American removals, and the Damascus affair (51). In the third chapter, Nathans turns her attention to theatrical representations of the wandering Jew and cosmopolitan citizen. As in the previous chapters, Nathans relies on theater theory to expand the notion of performance.

In the fourth chapter, Nathans shifts her gaze to how American Jewish actors and audiences forged communities on and off the stage. This chapter includes both Jewish and Jewish-descended performers and in doing so questions how perceptions of Jewishness and the actors’ own Jewish identities shaped their reception. Nathans’s fifth chapter centers on female Jewish actors and how they forged a middle ground between Orientalized stereotypes and claims to republican motherhood. Nathans argues Jewish female actors faced a “crisis of visibility.” The final chapter, “If I Forget Thee,” considers representation of biblical history and Jewish rituals on the antebellum American stage. Nathans contextualizes these staged productions with “rituals of tolerance” that politicians used to showcase the young nation’s commitment to religious freedom (175).

Hideous Characters and Beautiful Pagans is a remarkable work of scholarship from a senior scholar with deep knowledge of both theater history and early America. Nathans balances performances of Jewishness on and off stage, and in doing so, provides a unique window into everyday early American life. One of the more compelling aspects of Nathans’s work is her approach to what we cannot know: She repeatedly calls attention to the limits of the archive without losing sight of her larger argument. Although her work benefits from gender and theater theory, her prose remains lucid and engaging. Each chapter is filled with both insightful analysis and important revelations from the archives. This is a work that should appeal to literary scholars and historians alike.

The weaknesses in Nathans’s work are minor and primarily have to do with her discussion of race. Nathans cites Sander Gilman’s
often-repeated claim that “the association of the Jews with Blackness is as old as Christian traditions” (27), but her analysis would benefit from more investigation of how the perception of Jews and race changed during the era she discusses. Surely “blackness” meant something different in medieval European Christian theology than in the antebellum United States? Likewise, while I loved Nathans’s inclusion of runaway advertisements for Jewish servants from 1752–1776, I found myself skeptical of her claims for what they meant about Jewish stereotypes (85). Although the examples she cites emphasize the skin color (“dark complexion,” “yellow complexion”) and height of the runaways (5’5”, 5’4”, 5’3”), these attributes are part of the stock language of runaway ads. Even runaways from Northern Europe often are described as having dark skin, presumably because as laborers they worked outdoors. The reduced height of Jewish servants may reflect that they were foreign born rather than stereotypes about Jewish shortness: As historian John Komlos notes, American men tended to be taller than their English counterparts, and American-born apprentices “dwarfed” their counterparts in London.¹

These quibbles aside, this is a phenomenal book that is both smart and a pleasure to read. Nathans provides a new standard for integrating literary and historical approaches. As Josh Lambert notes, some of most interesting recent works of literary criticism pay attention to the materiality of Jewish American literature “by analyzing its production and consumption in fine detail.”² Nathans follows this trend, but brings to the conversation an eye for how theater performances mattered to everyday life and Jewish history.

Notes

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academic articles. She served as the academic director of the award-winning, multimedia public television series American Passages: A Literary Survey. Her book, Messianism, Secrecy and Mysticism: A New Interpretation of Early American Jewish Life, won a Jordan Schnitzer Book Award and a National Jewish Book Award, and was a Choice Outstanding Academic Title.


The detailed relationship between Abraham Lincoln and the Jews is explained in this valuable study coauthored by historian Jonathan D. Sarna and collector Benjamin Shapell. Using the rare manuscripts and images from the Shapell Lincoln Collection, as well as archival materials from other major institutions, the authors portray the large number of Jews Lincoln befriended in his fifty-six years.

This beautifully illustrated volume is not only a credit to the authors but to the vast legacy of Jewish history. Included are many examples of the relationship between Lincoln and Jews. There are real treasures displayed here, including autographed documents in Lincoln’s hand and photographs of Lincoln and his Jewish contemporaries. This finely crafted book not only satisfies a collector’s yearning but further enlightens us about the middle period of American history.

Lincoln did not know Jews in his youth, and in his million-word-utterance record he only mentions Jews a few times. Yet those times were meaningful. He described Abraham Jonas as “one of my most valued friends. And when he appointed a well-known Jew, Moise Levy, as assistant quartermaster, he defended the choice by saying, “I believe we have not yet appointed a Hebrew”—although he had, in fact, appointed others. In an antisemitic world where hatred of Jews was nearly universal, America’s greatest president was free from this ancient prejudice; he proclaimed their legitimacy with genuine admiration.

Most know Lincoln was quick to countermand General Ulysses S. Grant’s General Order #11, which banished Jews “as a class” from Grant’s Department—i.e., the Mississippi River to the Tennessee River
and from Northern Mississippi to Cairo, Illinois. Before Grant’s order could be carried out, a delegation of Jews went to the Executive Mansion. The authors described the exchange between the delegation and Lincoln. It demonstrates his knowledge of the Bible, his bonhomic, and, more important, his empathy for the Jewish community:

“And so the children of Israel were driven from the happy land of Canaan?” Spokesperson Cesar Kaskel responded, “Yes, and that is why we have come unto Father Abraham’s bosom, seeking protection,” with Lincoln immediately responding, “And this protection they shall have at once.” The order was revoked (116, 118).

Grant spent the rest of his life trying to make up for his mistake, and Jews during the Civil War and during his presidency were quick to forgive him. Other generals, however, such as Benjamin Butler and George B. McClellan, expressed antisemitic sentiments openly.

Jews emerged on the national scene during Lincoln’s lifetime. With a scant 3,000 Jews living in the United States in 1809—the year Lincoln was born—there were more than 150,000 at the time of Lincoln’s assassination in 1865. Alarmed by a growth in the Jewish population, many Americans, cabinet members, and generals treated Jews as outsiders. As he did with all immigrant groups, Abraham Lincoln took the opposite tack, expressing a deep knowledge of the Old Testament and employing its language and concepts in his most important writings, especially his second inaugural address. Having befriended Jews from early adulthood, he promoted equality, appointed numerous Jews to public office, and, beginning in the 1850s, had Jewish advisors and supporters. He replaced “Christian nations” with “This nation under God” as part of his Gettysburg declaration.

Lincoln was assassinated on Good Friday, 14 April 1865, and died at 7:22 a.m. on Holy Saturday, 15 April. This was during Passover, so Jews actually heard the news in synagogue. The New York Times reported that Temple Emanu-El in the city responded with all the congregants spontaneously rising to recite kaddish, the Jewish prayer of mourning. The country not only lost its president, but the Jewish people knew, as this volume demonstrates, that they had lost a great friend.

This book gives Lincoln’s presidency an expanded dimension. Even while orchestrating a civil war, Lincoln also had to navigate his way
through the middle of a troubled time in American Jewish history. This book shows that he did so with great skill and empathy and, in the process, it brings an expanded dimension to his presidency.

_Frank J. Williams is the chair of the Lincoln Forum and author of Lincoln as Hero._

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**Christian Wiese and Cornelia Wilhelm, eds., _American Jewry: Transcending the European Experience?_ (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 379 pp.**

As the field of American Jewish history follows the transnational turn in the humanities, more and more studies theorize and show how the Jewish experience in the United States has been entangled with other Jewries, in more ways than by immigration and in reciprocal, multidirectional relationships. Europe has always figured prominently in the many complicated ways that American Jewry has developed and seen itself: as a source of immigration; as a dark foil for the shiny “New World,” or a role model of (East) European authentic Jewishness; as the source of sophisticated culture, or the locus of the murder of six million Jews. With the exception of Israel, no other place, real or imagined, may have served to define American Jewry as much as Europe. But has American Jewry been so different and self-sufficient as to “transcend” the European experience in Jewish history? And if so, what does that mean?

This is the question at the heart of a volume edited by two German scholars of the modern Jewish experience: Christian Wiese, professor of Jewish thought and philosophy in Frankfurt, and Cornelia Wilhelm, professor of modern history in Munich. They assembled an impressive group of American Jewish history scholars to endeavor to understand “in which regard and for which reasons American Jews did, indeed, deviate from the patterns of their European past, which aspects of the ‘Old World’ they retained and continued to cherish, and what facilitated the unmistakable re-invention of Jewish identity in America over the last centuries” (8). The length of the sentence in Wiese’s introduction...
matches the breadth of the scope and the ambition of the volume. It consists of twenty-one articles, all but a few original, which roughly follow a chronological order from colonial times to the present. In Wiese’s words, the volume does not claim to cover all perspectives that its transnational approach could open on American Jewish history, but it still aims “to explore the gradual emergence of the leading role American Jews have played and continue to play with regard to religious trends, secular Jewish culture, and Jewish politics” (9).

It is notoriously difficult to do justice to edited volumes and their constituent parts in a review, even if the questions they address are more limited and the topical and disciplinary diversity less rich than in the present case. If there is a cumulative response to the questions that emerges from the heterogeneous mix of articles, it may raise the counter question: What does “transcending” mean? How did American Jews relate to Europe at various stages of their history? The title phrase was a smart choice, as it leaves room for a wide spectrum of interpretations, reflected in the contributions. A few examples may suffice. Wilhelm’s analysis of the B’nai B’rith organizations in nineteenth-century Germany and the United States points to a German Reform heritage that could unfold its potential under the more favorable conditions of cultural pluralism in America, whereas exclusionary German nationalism denied legitimacy to such ethnic forms of Jewish distinctiveness. Karla Goldman’s article on the changing role of women in nineteenth-century American and German Judaism, and Wiese’s chapter on American rabbis’ perspectives on their liberal German counterparts, show how Reform Judaism in the United States went beyond—i.e. transcended—the limited changes that were made on the other side of the Atlantic. These and other contributions are at least as comparative as transnational, if the latter is understood as addressing interrelations and mutual influences rather than unidirectional ones. Other chapters, such as Tony Michels’s study of the “export” of New York Yiddish socialism to Russia, add dimensions of reciprocity and entanglement to the categories of influence and comparison.

Yet other chapters are set so firmly within the American Jewish context as to make the relation to the European experience implicit. Jeffrey Gurock revisits his seminal 1983 article “Resisters and Accommodators” to nuance the categories of Orthodox rabbis in their attitude to
(American) modernity. The East European background of some “resisters” aside, this is an American story. Similarly, Michael Staub’s analysis of the early 2000s, “American Jews and the Middle East Crisis,” is a story in which Europe has no role. It can be read as an illustration of the overarching trajectory that propelled American Jewry to a dominant position in world Jewry, engaged on many levels with Israel but no longer with Europe. This is a striking reversal of earlier constellations, analyzed by Susannah Heschel in her well-known essay, “The Myth of Europe in America’s Judaism,” which opens the volume. Whereas Europe was the central point of reference for American Judaism at least from the early nineteenth century, today it is the American Jewish community that serves as a model of a flourishing modern Judaism (41). Jonathan D. Sarna takes the story one step further. After analyzing how American Jewry moved from the periphery to the center after 1945, not least due to the influx of European-born Jews, he points to later developments that put Israel at the center, challenging American Jewry’s central role. In this “two-center model,” Europe has become peripheral, if it figures at all.

Taken together, the articles remind us of the diverse ways in which the American Jewish experience has been related to the European one and transcended it in many and complex ways, according to the various understandings of the term. The authors demonstrate this complexity by the variety of their topics. Many of the articles will engage readers interested in their respective specialized topics. The volume’s broader questions will speak not least to European scholars, who are less familiar than American ones with these specialized questions and the topic of American Jewry.

Weaving the centrifugal strands together in his introductory consideration of the larger topics, Wiese also addresses a crucial aspect of the notion of America’s “transcending” Europe: the oft-discussed issue of American and American Jewish exceptionalism. To the extent that “America is different” for the Jews has become a central tenet of an American Jewish civil religion, exceptionalism has even acquired a veneer of yet another form of transcendence, echoing in the invocation of the “new promised land.” Most contributions to the volume address the American Jewish experience as favored by a constellation of factors
that made for a more felicitous environment than in most of European Jewish history. Hasia Diner is most explicit in her reservations against the self-congratulatory and overly celebratory rhetoric of the 350th anniversary of Jewish life in North America in 2004/2005 (355). She calls for a critical perspective on the insight that America has been different for the Jews, based less on exceptional characteristics essential to Jews and more on a set of external factors, which made for “an environment which synergistically worked well for them” (364).

The contributions do not gloss over the less opportune aspects, such as the existence of antisemitism, albeit in a different and less fatal degree from Europe. Steven Whitfield explicitly challenges the exceptionalist notion of congenial American and Jewish values by arguing that the optimism ingrained in American national culture runs counter to fundamental tenets and insights that Judaism gained in the ancient and the Old World: “an unambiguous accommodation to the entitlement to seek happiness would snap the lines of continuity with Judaic tradition, without offering the prospect of enriching the national culture either” (350). It is an argument that adds yet another aspect to the million-dollar question of the relationship, real or ideal, of Judaism to modernity. The volume by Wiese and Wilhelm takes on this question by looking at the relationship of American Jewry to the European Jewish experience and offers a spectrum of valuable insights.

Notes


Markus Krah is a lecturer in Jewish religious and intellectual history at University of Potsdam, Germany. He received his doctorate in modern Jewish studies from the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in New York. His book *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past* is scheduled to be published by de Gruyter in the fall of 2017. He is currently working on a study of how the transnational history of Schocken Books informed the publishing house’s program for post-1945 American Jewish readers.