

## Introduction

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The *Cambridge Companion to American Judaism* is a comprehensive survey that attempts to cover Judaism as a religion in the United States rather than Jewishness as an ethnicity in this country.<sup>1</sup> The title of this volume thus requires a word of explanation. In popular usage today, *Judaism* usually implies a broad sociological approach to the subject of Jewish life and culture, while the term *Jewish religion* suggests a more specific concern with beliefs and practices that are somehow associated with a supernatural reality. Although this collection uses the more general term in its title, its focus is on American Jewish religious phenomena. It is, however, an appropriate title, I believe, because the volume's essays describe a quite inclusive Jewish religious experience in America. This includes aspects that frequently have been neglected or ignored or are understood as outside the purview of religion by a largely Christian America, which sometimes draws different and more impenetrable boundaries between the sacred and the secular. Understanding the subject in such broad terms, one can see that Jewish religion in America means much more than just religious ritual or belief. Contributors also discuss the sociology, psychology, theology, and history of American Judaism. A number of essays concentrate on the culture of American Judaism, including musical, artistic, and literary expressions.

Perhaps, though, any division between what is and isn't religious in a Jewish context is perpetually negotiable, and this problem of placing barriers gestures to the elusiveness of Jewish identity in general. Nathan Glazer writes in this volume that to characterize present-day "Jewishness" is not an easy task. It is not easy because of the myriad, heterogeneous ways that Jews in America understand their relationship with their religion. Even within the denominational categories of Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and Orthodox, there is great diversity among individuals. Speaking in quite general terms, one can say that most American Jews understand Jewish tradition as cosmopolitan and universalistic. They see Judaism as pragmatic rather than ideological, utilitarian rather than theological, and rational

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rather than mystical. Many in this group see their practice of Judaism as an all-encompassing pursuit, determining not only religious ritual but also ethical behavior. Another sizable group sees the specifics of Judaism as playing a crucial but more limited role in their lives, believing that their commitment to universal ethical causes derives from their core Judaic values – even if they do not frequently articulate these values in a synagogue or temple. These Jews see liberalism as applied Judaism, identifying Judaism with liberal social causes. However, in recent years, even among this group there has been a pronounced move toward greater ritualism as well. The essays in this collection attempt to analyze various aspects of this *American Judaism*, a term that – as we shall see – does offer some tentative unity to a religious people with tremendous diversity.

There are a variety of perspectives in the American Jewish community that are reflected in attitudes toward specific questions dealing with personal and communal Jewish identity today, such as patrilineal descent, Outreach, the role of the non-Jew in the synagogue, rabbinic officiation at mixed-marriage ceremonies, the ordainment of women, and gay and lesbian participation in the synagogue. All of these issues are being heatedly debated within and across the different denominations (also referred to as movements, streams, or even wings). In addition to these strictly “religious issues,” there are also debates on social and political issues that affect American society as a whole. It is not possible to say that American Judaism has a particular position on abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, or homosexual rights. Many of the denominations have taken official stands on some of these issues, but in most cases there are minorities even within those streams who believe that their religion holds a different view.

The most passionately debated question is whether Judaism can survive in an open American society that has, since the 1950s, become increasingly tolerant toward Jews. Since the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) found that American Jews were intermarrying at a rate of 52 percent, there has been a frantic debate in the American Jewish community: Is Judaism in danger of disappearing in the United States? Some of the optimistic contributors to this volume support the transformation argument: Contemporary American Judaism is not vanishing but is rather transforming itself. These individuals believe that it is essential to look at what is happening in a more sophisticated way and not restrict one’s perspective to outdated criteria. Many American Jews are creating new ways of “doing Jewish,” blending their own traditions with non-Jewish family rituals favored by spouses or embracing a syncretic creation of American culture and Judaism. Because of all of these changes, one must look in new places to find new approaches.

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The pessimists feel that the majority of American Jews have lost all interest in Judaism, and many others have only nominal links. These individuals believe that their future as a people is threatened and only a “return to tradition” can reverse the radical decline. These pessimists argue that low levels of synagogue affiliation, high rates of intermarriage, low levels of Jewish literacy, and weak commitments to ritual observance are undermining Jewish continuity.

Another debate centers on the future makeup of the American Jewish community. Some contributors accept the polarization argument that there will be two completely separate Jewish communities in the near future – the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox. The two groups have less in common and have less contact with one another than ever before. They disagree not only on how Judaism should be practiced but also on the very definition of who is a Jew. Without some consensus on such a basic question, the pessimists believe that American Judaism will split into two separate sects. The optimists hope that some common ground can still be found.

CONTENTS OF THE VOLUME

So that we can better understand and contextualize these questions and issues that occupy the American Jewish community, this book is divided into two sections.

Part I provides three historical overviews of American Judaism. Eli Faber deals with the period from 1654, when the first Jews arrived in New Amsterdam, up to 1880, when the mass immigration from Eastern Europe was about to begin. Faber reports that some colonial Jews posed for portraits without head coverings, violated the Sabbath laws, and even ate pork, particularly when they were traveling. A small percentage even married out of the faith. Others were highly observant and followed Jewish law scrupulously. The main difference between then and now was that all five synagogues founded before the Revolution followed Orthodox Sephardic custom. However, American Judaism changed dramatically in the years during and immediately after the Civil War. Faber writes that “the impulse to change Judaism in America surged between 1860 and 1870.” Reforms were introduced, including mixed seating, the elimination of the head covering for men, and the use of an organ. New prayer books were edited that eliminated certain theological concepts that were now found objectionable.

Lloyd P. Gartner describes the “reshaping” of American Judaism from the late nineteenth century until after World War II. The large-scale Eastern European immigration completely changed American Judaism. Hundreds of

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small Orthodox synagogues were created in mostly urban neighborhoods. Many people attended Orthodox synagogues because that was what they were comfortable with, but they refused to follow the Halacha strictly, despite the many sermons preached by Orthodox rabbis. Gartner reports that the immigrant congregations reached their peak during the World War I period and then began to decline slowly. New, larger, and more affluent congregations were established. English replaced Yiddish, and American ways replaced European Jewish customs and practices.

In the postwar period, large numbers left the urban neighborhoods for the suburbs. As I describe in my chapter, a Jewish civil religion developed that stressed loyalty to both the United States and to the Jewish people. Levels of anti-Semitism declined, and Jews became fully integrated into American society. They felt a great deal of pressure to express their Jewishness religiously rather than ethnically, and hundreds of suburban synagogues were soon built. The Conservative movement became the largest American Jewish denomination, and the Orthodox denomination continued to decline. However, this pattern began to reverse in the 1970s. Orthodoxy began a remarkable revival, spurred on by the missionizing done by the Baal Teshuva movement among other Jews. Lubavitch (also called Chabad) sent emissaries to hundreds of Jewish communities around the country and the world. Among the non-Orthodox, the Reform movement grew, which was due in large measure to the joining of many intermarried couples.

Part II, the bulk of the volume, deals with essential topics in contemporary American Judaism. This Themes and Concepts section is subdivided into Religious Culture and Institutional Practice, Identity and Community, Living in America, and Jewish Art in America. It has essays on religious belief and behavior, structures and institutions, and patterns and stages. Considerable attention is devoted to the Jewish civil religion, Judaism and democracy, and the essence of American Judaism, as protean as it may be. Other writers focus on gender roles, life-cycle rituals, interfaith dialogue, and religious economics. Particularly innovative are the essays that focus on American Judaism broadly conceived. Mark Kligman explains the role that music plays in American Judaism and Matthew Baigell describes the visual arts. Murray Baumgarten talks about “American Midrash,” by which he means the new American Jewish literature that focuses on Judaic story lines.

The final essay by Bruce Phillips is a separate subsection entitled “Present and Future Tense: American Judaism in the Twenty-First Century.” The volume then concludes with an afterword written by Jonathan Sarna.

There are certain ideas and concepts that are essential for understanding the essays. Let us begin with the two defining events of twentieth-century Jewish history.

## THE TWO DEFINING EVENTS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Since the end of World War II, there have been enormous changes in American Judaism. The essays in the second part of this collection attempt to describe the what, where, when, and how of this transformation. For a whole generation that came of age after 1945, the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel were the two defining events. Even today, studies show that most American Jews believe memorializing the Holocaust is one of the most important obligations that they have as Jews. In one survey mentioned by Lynn Rapaport, the respondents felt that remembering the Holocaust was more important than celebrating the Jewish holidays or participating in synagogue services. All Jews realize that the Nazis would have murdered them, regardless of denominational affiliation or level of piety. All Jews are therefore part of what Joseph Soloveitchik calls the *B'rit Goral*, the covenant of fate.<sup>2</sup>

What kind of religion can lean so heavily on a terrible tragedy for inspiration? Many years ago, the famous Jewish historian Salo Baron spoke of the lachrymose conception of Jewish history. Baron felt it was harmful then, and were he to be alive today, he without a doubt would continue to rail against a dark vision of Jewish life preoccupied with destruction and death. Fortunately, the American Jewish obsession with the Holocaust has had a positive parallel – enthusiastic identification with the State of Israel. Philosopher Emil Fackenheim has written that there should be a 614th commandment – not to “give Hitler posthumous victories.”<sup>3</sup> Anything that contributed to the weakening of Judaism or the Jewish people fell into this category, so it was important to do everything possible to strengthen what was left. The most obvious response was to support the State of Israel, which was created just three years after the end of the Holocaust. The American Jewish community also raised large sums of money to help endangered or embattled Jewish communities throughout the world. “Jewish survival,” the perpetuation of Jewish identity through the generations, assumed paramount importance for its own sake.

The Six Day War of 1967 was a radically transforming event for most American Jews and certainly for American Jewry as a group. American Jews felt a sense of responsibility for and commitment to the State of Israel that awakened their Jewish inner selves. Arthur Hertzberg remembers how “the immediate reaction of American Jewry to the crisis [preceding Israel’s miraculous defeat of the Arab armies] was far more intense and widespread than anyone could have foreseen. Many Jews would never have believed that the grave danger to Israel would dominate their thoughts and emotions to the

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exclusion of all else.”<sup>4</sup> Yet, as Steven T. Rosenthal explains, “the relationship of Zionism and Israel to American Jews has long been notable for its ironies and contradictions.” As Rosenthal bluntly puts it, “the vast majority of American Jews have remained astonishingly ignorant of the object of their devotion.” He explains this by arguing that the American Jewish devotion to Israel has been “circumscribed by American priorities and needs.”

In recent years, the American Jewish community has shifted some of its attention away from the State of Israel and toward its own concerns at home. Many American Jews are interested in the personalistic aspects of the Jewish spiritual message, while others are focusing on how to combat assimilation and fuel an American Jewish renaissance. A series of events over the past twenty years has contributed to this change. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the Jonathan Pollard spy case, the Palestinian Intifada, the “Who is a Jew?” controversy, and the recent outbreak of Palestinian–Israeli violence have all been contributing factors. In short, many persons in the American Jewish community have come to realize that support for Israel cannot be a substitute for a substantive Judaism. Rosenthal explains how “there has been a belated recognition that a half-century of obsession with Israel has prevented the laying of the spiritual, cultural, and intellectual bases for future generations.”

## RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

The United States has a unique history that has influenced how American Judaism has developed. This history is very different from that of Europe and has prompted a number of Jewish writers to stress that “America is different!” The United States was, for the Jews, a post-emancipation society from its beginning, whereas in Europe, Jews were legally restricted in many ways until the French Revolution and even after. The United States was a brand new nation that was composed of people with diverse backgrounds. The new nation was inherently pluralistic, and even when many hoped that immigrants would jump into the “melting pot,” there was always a strong tradition of cultural pluralism.

The first article in the Bill of Rights states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The Founders of the United States believed in the free exercise of religion and the non-establishment of a state religion, which has allowed for the growth of a rich religious pluralism. Because there was no establishment religion that would benefit from state support and funds, churches and other religious organizations needed to hustle to attract and keep congregants. The

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separation of church and state meant that this idea of pluralism was actually a legal obligation.<sup>5</sup> Jews therefore had greater opportunities in the United States than in almost any other society and were accepted to a far greater degree.

When Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1820s, he was surprised to find that, despite a lack of state support, religion was thriving in tremendously diverse forms of expression. At first, tolerated religious differences stopped at the different Protestant denominations. After World War II, it expanded to include Catholics and Jews. Since the Immigration Act of 1965 eliminated quotas linking immigration to national origins, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Zoroastrians, and people with all sorts of other religious affiliations have settled in this country and begun creating American forms of their respective religious traditions.

SPIRITUALITY AS A MATTER OF PERSONAL CHOICE

Today most Americans regard religion as a matter of personal choice rather than an inherited obligation. Many Americans are looking for existential meaning. They hope to create a spark of spiritual holiness by participating in various religious experiences. This participation will, they hope, enrich their lives by uplifting their souls. An emerging, privatized Judaism stresses how one feels, in contrast to the Jewish law that stresses what one does. The accumulated religious wisdom of the ancient Sages or even belief in traditional notions of God in order to search for spiritual fulfillment is no longer necessary. The majority of American Jews want to create an American Judaism that would be distinctly American and, at the same time, distinctly Jewish. They want the synagogue to meet them where they are rather than accepting that a divinely revealed religion has certain truths that have to be believed and observed.

But how far could they go? Charles Liebman writes in this volume that, at one time, it was easy to say that American Judaism had an essence. Judaism in the United States “contained a set of norms, values, and beliefs, many of which, all would agree, refer to God and to the relationship between the Jewish people and God. These norms, values, and beliefs existed independently of how individual Jews behaved or what individual Jews believed.” However, there is no longer any Judaic “essence” if individual religious autonomy allows each Jew to interpret his or her own Judaism. American Jews are then free to mold their Judaism to fit their personal needs, privatizing a religion that has always stressed the collective. This privatization frees individual congregations and even entire religious denominations from the need to legitimize the religious innovations that they introduce by appealing to

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historical precedent. Unmoored from history, Judaism begins to reflect more readily contemporary individual needs.

Because of the voluntaristic nature of Jewish life in the United States, levels of observance could be puzzling to someone expecting religious consistency. Some practices attract a large enthusiastic following, while others are observed mainly by the most devout or, more precisely, the most observant. For example, the three pilgrimage festivals are all important Jewish holidays, but Passover is widely observed whereas Sukkot and Shavuot are not. Why? Many Jews are interested in observances that reflect their “affection for Jewish family, food, and festivals.”<sup>6</sup> In a much more privatized religious environment, many Jews gravitate toward the more familial holidays. That explains why the Passover Seder is attended annually by so many American Jews and why large numbers light Hanukkah candles, while eating latkes (potato pancakes) with applesauce.

One aspect of Judaism that most American Jews do observe is life-cycle events. Rela Mintz Geffen writes that “every religion, ancient and modern, has special rites of passage tied to both biological and sociological events that typify life.” In the United States, American Judaism has developed distinctive life-cycle rituals. Ceremonies now recognize men and women in nontraditional as well as traditional families. Geffen argues that life-cycle commemorations are the most democratic Judaic rituals because all men and women are entitled to celebrate their births, marriages, and deaths. Many people reinterpret traditional ideas to fit their understanding of what a life-cycle event means to them in a modern (or postmodern) context.

Throughout the book, the reader will find interesting innovations that have been adapted for the American reality. For example, Chaim I. Waxman explains how the Jewish Renewal Movement has reinterpreted traditional views of certain religious concepts. Specifically, the leaders in this movement argue that American Jews should practice “eco-kosher,” which would expand the categories of what is kosher and non-kosher to include new criteria. According to this way of thinking, modern conceptions of kashrut have to take environmental, social, and financial factors into account, as well as the traditional considerations. In this context, it may be more important to think about where the paper used to produce a newspaper comes from, or where a bank invests its money. This is not what the Sages at least explicitly understood by the term *kosher*, but it may be important to expand what is covered by this term in order to keep Judaism relative and contemporary and to better establish its engagement with the larger world.

Some Jews seek to combine Jewish institutional affiliation with spiritual elements from Eastern practices, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, and Sufism. Many are interested in combining practices from outside of



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their religion with some that are from traditional Jewish practice. Some are willing to experiment with different types of religious ceremonies, rituals, and practices ranging from Kabbalistic meditation to Hebrew tattooing. This syncretistic approach is appealing to many Americans. For most American Jews, it is acceptable to blend some degree of foreign spiritual elements with Judaism. The one exception is Christianity, which is perceived to be incompatible with any form of Jewishness. Jews for Jesus and other Messianic Jewish groups are thus seen as antithetical to Judaism and are completely rejected by the majority of Jews.

#### THE TENSION BETWEEN ETHNICITY AND RELIGION

Despite a diminution in the ethnic component in Judaism in recent years, the Jewish religion remains tethered to the Jewish people. A generation ago, sociologist Marshall Sklare wrote that American Judaism was an “ethnic church” in which virtually everyone in the ethnic group followed a single religion and all of the believers in the religion had the same ethnic background. Today, the situation is radically different. Substantial numbers of non-Jews have converted to Judaism, including Asian Americans, African Americans, and Latinos. Even larger numbers have married Jews and may participate with them in home rituals and even synagogue observances. Some have become so active that they are regarded as practicing Jews, despite the fact that they never formally converted.

This is one of many reasons that privatized Judaism is becoming dominant over ethnic identity. Ethnic Judaism stresses community solidarity. For years, the United Jewish Appeal (UJA) raised money using the slogan “We Are One.” American Jews were urged to give money and volunteer time for an impersonal, ideologically motivated cause. Privatized Judaism, in contrast, emphasizes a journey of discovery and a search for individual meaning and spiritual fulfillment. It is interpersonal rather than collective and stresses sincerity and authenticity rather than ideology and group achievement. Privatized Judaism is relatively non-judgmental and nonobligating, whereas ethnic Judaism makes demands and requires loyalty.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, even adherents to some form of a more personalized Judaism see themselves as part of the Jewish people and therefore part of the same symbolic family. “Historical familism” is the ability and willingness to see oneself as part of an extended family.<sup>8</sup> A family is usually that group into which a person is born and is composed of one’s blood relatives. In this context, the term is broadened to include the entire Jewish people. The Jewish people have endured a common experience through 4,000 years of history and are seen as sharing a common fate. While all Jews share this

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feeling, American Jews interpret what familism means differently from that of Israeli Jews and most Jews throughout the world.

American Jews mediate tribal loyalties with a strong streak of universalism. While they publicly affirm that they have a strong connection with other Jews in the United States and throughout the world, most American Jews stress that their religious heritage leads them to a universalized commitment to fight against all manifestations of evil. It is acceptable to affirm particularity, but it has to be balanced with an equal or greater degree of concern for the universal. For many Israelis, no such balancing act is required. Indeed, the political environment encourages just the opposite. This dynamic has obvious implications for the manifestation of religious belief in general and for the American Jewish receptiveness to pluralistic expressions of religious identity.

#### THE CENTRALITY OF SUBURBAN SYNAGOGUE LIFE

The American synagogue affords greater opportunities for religious participation than any other Jewish voluntary institution in the United States.<sup>9</sup> Whereas most congregations were once located in urban settings, the vast majority have followed the mass exodus to the suburbs. Nathan Glazer writes that “for better or worse, Jewishness in the United States is now centered in the large suburban synagogue. The alternative and competitive forms that once existed have virtually disappeared.” Suburban Jews have come to depend on the synagogue for much of the inspiration that the family unit once provided. While Judaism has popularly been regarded as a religion based on home practice, the synagogue attempts to fill the void left by steadily declining levels of home-based ritual observance.

This attempt has been more successful in some cases than in others. Some congregations grew larger and became known as vibrant and lively places, while others developed reputations as “bar mitzvah factories.” People looking for a painless life-cycle event were attracted, but those searching for something more spiritually meaningful were disenchanted. A whole generation grew up seeing their suburban parents’ Judaism as vapid and pointless. The children were sent to Hebrew schools that ironically failed to teach Hebrew, and most learned very little about the Jewish religion. One such child, now an adult, remembers that “I walked away from Judaism – even ran sometimes, disliking the Hebrew school I attended three times a week after public school.” He believes that the “ordeal of Hebrew school left me not only with a distaste for Judaism, but also with a strong lack of interest in religion.”<sup>10</sup>

Now, many of the younger Baby Boomers and Generation Xers are finding their way back to the synagogue. Some are spiritually hungry; others are