

LOOKING BACK ON AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY

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I must begin with the deeply felt statement that this chance to be here represents a tremendous honor for me, indeed one which qualifies as an honor on so many levels that I do not know exactly where to begin. First, since this is the first time this now venerable institution has had such a lecture, I am a bit overwhelmed to inaugurate what am sure will be a long and stimulating tradition. Secondly, the honor stems in great measure from the fact that you know me. I am a known commodity and as such perhaps someone you might expect more from than if I were a stranger. [If I did not know you –or you me—I could just slink off at the end of the lecture and that would be that.]

This then leads me to thinking of this on next level of honor. I have always been so impressed by the intellectual level of Farbrangen. You have for decades made the thinking about texts and ideas one of the hallmarks of your extraordinary community. You are so very different, in all sorts of ways, from the “ordinary” –if there is such a thing—synagogue audience with its wide spectrum of knowledge, conceptual sophistication, education on both a Jewish and general level. As such it makes my task that much more demanding and the honor so much more palpable for me. Finally, I am both deeply honored and profoundly saddened that the person who was to have stood before you was Paula Hyman, someone who can never be replaced and whose shoes cannot be filled. So, for all of that, thank you and it is a pleasure to be back with Farbrangen.

At one point in my negotiations over date, and details Marsha noted that the topic which Paula had suggested was entitled something like, “The Future of American Judaism From the Perspective of a Jewish Historian.” I would have enjoyed hearing what she had to say, would not doubt have learned much from her and above all that I knew that I admired her willingness to take on a talk with such a title, such an intellectually risky one.

It would have been a risk because, after all, historians are trained to think about what happened rather than what will (or even might) happen. We are loathe to comment on the future in as much as it go against our grain which requires temporal distance, immersion in archives, and some sense of resolution to issues and problems rather than at the moment seem significant but might indeed fade with time, or take twists and turns which we cannot possibly anticipate.

We, historians, are not even so plugged into the analysis of contemporary trends and indeed take something of a jaundiced eye to such enterprises in that we know about all the predictions made in the past, all the statements about what will be based on observations, no matter how carefully garnered, of matters in the present. Precisely because we are historians we know the problematics that predictions, even those undergirded by the best contemporary data collection available to the sharpest minds at their time, and we know that much of what was projected in the past as a logical result of observed and measured on-the-ground phenomena, just did not turn out that way.

Historians of American Jewry love to point out that in the 1950s sociologists of the Jews like Marshall Sklare, using the best survey research methodologies --so popular in the postwar years—predicted with great certitude that orthodoxy was doomed to

extinction. There would be, he and others declared with great aplomb, no place for it in the newly forming suburbs as American Jews –the children and grandchildren of the east European immigrants of the early decades of the century—entered into American “normalcy.” Orthodoxy would be too foreign, too old fashioned, too constricting for the newly minted doctors, lawyers, dentists, accountants, who had been in the Army during the war and now found themselves in so many Levittowns. [I had actually flirted with the idea of keeping Paula’s title for the talk but instead using my time with you to explore the history of the predictions that had been made at various points in the American Jewish past, by both social scientists and “spokesmen” for the American Jewish polity and measure them up against what actually transpired.]

It is also interesting, in keeping with my explanation as to why I will not (and think that I cannot) talk about predictions, to look back and see how those predictions had been embedded in a certitude that whatever trends seemed to be at work at the moment, would just continue uninterrupted and unabated. Whether the analysts as predictors applauded those trends or feared them, they could and did not imagine that developments would deviate from what they believed to be a step by step process, positioned along a seemingly inexorable path.

Notably the Jewish sociologists and the communal leaders who paid for (or just used) such work never predicted such developments mostly of the later part of the 1960s and into the 1970s as the rise of Jewish feminism and the feminist challenge to the “old order,” as well as the emergence of a Jewish counter-culture in those same years wherein young Jews –educated and politically engaged—challenged the *status quo* of communal life and took on in word and deed in particular the style and format of the suburban

synagogues whose ubiquity on the American Jewish landscape functioned as a key theme in the sociological work, like Albert Gordon's 1959 *The Jews of Suburbia*. [In large measure Farbrangen is an exemplar of that development and in that sense the social forecasters who concerned themselves with things Jewish would not have anticipated that we would all be here tonight.] They would be, if we could bring them back and converse with them, with the idea that the demands of gay women and men for ordination at HUC, JTS would have been successfully achieved.

They did not envision the rise of Jewish studies as an academic discipline, comfortable ensconced not just in seminaries but on so many American universities. Nor did they predict that the Association for Jewish Studies, founded by two dozen men – many of whom with rabbinical as well as academic training—would someday bring over 1,000 faculty and graduate students to an annual meeting, presided over by a woman.

They certainly did not and could not, a grand scale, predict the fall of the Soviet Union, the dissolution of Communism in eastern Europe with both the vast exodus of their Jews and the rebuilding of Jewish life in Germany, Russia, among others, or the emergence of a colossal culture of Holocaust commemoration in which public (that is, state) institutions and the organs of popular culture committed themselves to “remember,” nor could they have foreseen the half century of inner Jewish turmoil launched by the inappropriately named “Six Day War,” a turmoil which among other developments made the Christian evangelicals with their long history of seeking to convert the Jews, into the “friends” of the Jews, while the liberal Protestant denominations, which had abjured the evangelizing message which they made it possible

for Jews to forge a strong political bond in the earlier half of the twentieth century, would come to be seen as critics, if not enemies.

I could go on. They could not, and did not, imagine the resurgence of klezmer music, the emergence of pilgrimage tours to the Lower East side, or that cities across the United States would be the venues for “Jewish film festivals;” that Jewish day schools, outside the orbit of the “dying” Orthodox world, take off in communities of all sizes.

Instead of continuing to berate the prognosticators who had attempted to imagine a Jewish future for their failings, both positive and negative, I do want to capitalize on the theme but in reverse: I want to, as the title of my talk indicated, think with you as to the nature of American Jewish life, as it evolved and provide a set of explanatory contexts in order to think about what happened and why. Those explanations grow out of the soil of American history and provide a way for us to examine why the history of the Jews of the United States has been –my contention here—so notable in terms of Jewish history more broadly. Those contexts were historically contingent. That is, these factors which I will specify **were** present as Jews made their way to the United States (and indeed the colonies of North America before that to some degree) and it was their convergence that needs to be thought of to understand the magnetic draw of America for the Jews.

While perhaps, at the end, it might be worth pondering the fact that some of those factors may no longer be present or are in the process of being renegotiated and as such the future of the Jews of this country may take a different course, the talk is based on a developmental model. That is, the factors which I want to offer which both shaped American Jewish life and which made it **the** destination choice for Europe’s emigrating Jews, developed over time. They were not necessarily always there but evolved. To some

degree Jews actively played a role in facilitating that evolution, while to a larger extent they were the beneficiaries of major forces well beyond their control. The degree to which they recognized how they benefitted from such forces may help us explain their political and cultural choices.

Just as a starting point or overview I want to note that America made possible over time, and its Jews created there the largest, most elaborately organized, well endowed, least fettered, institutionally plastic and culturally pluralistic Jewish community in the world possibly in all of Jewish history. This state of affairs, with its high levels of accomplishment and acceptance, evolved over the course of time. It did not just begin that way. This development, both its internal and external condition, had to be won, or achieved. Jews did not arrive in seventeenth century North America with anything like the bundle of rights and the communal élan which would develop over time.

We know that this history began with Jews being in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries numerically insignificant portion of the population who interacted with the larger American society devoid of any assumed entitlements and over the course of the next two centuries arrived at a point in their history where they could claim utter privilege, chained down by no fetters as they enjoyed access to every “nook and cranny” of American life.

In that process Jewish women and men of America proceeded from a situation in which they affirmatively sought anonymity as Jews, occupying in their early history literally unmarked Jewish spaces [It was not until the 1850s for example that American synagogues had anything marked on their facades be it words, symbols, or architectural

styles which denoted that Jews did something inside] to ultimately boldly and assertively putting their particularistic stamp on the American landscape. That is of the history which I want to explore conceptually with you tonight involved an arc by which Jews came over time in America to feel comfortable and empowered to make their case (or better cases) in their own name. At some point in their history they felt able to state that as Jews they had a group-specific stake in the great public issues of the day.

Over time, for example, Jews, as demonstrated by the words and actions of their organizations, organs of public opinion, networks of communication, and network brokers, moved from quietly asking the vastly larger Christian society to give to Judaism some of the same privileges which the Protestant denominations enjoyed to eventually standing up and demanding not only equal rights for Jews and Judaism, but pushing American society to change itself. From a population that figuratively pleaded that Judaism be considered a legitimate American faith community, Jews ultimately felt able to take on America, and demand that some of the nation's most fundamental institutions change.

Three examples should suffice here. By the late nineteenth century many American Jews began to chide America for its deep commitment to the idea of laissez-faire as the best way to structure relations between the classes. Many American Jews including the leaders of some of the most prestigious bodies came to demand that the state enter into the economic life of the nation not as an advocate for business but as an advocate for workers and for the poor. By the early twentieth century nearly all American Jewish organs of public opinion, in English and Yiddish, joined in an avante-garde assault on American race relations, lambasted the United States for the pervasiveness of racism and

calling upon Americans to fully live up to the nation's rhetorical creed of equality. Finally Jews by the middle of the twentieth century willingly stood out and apart from the many times larger Christian population, in their critique of the persistence of cracks in the wall between church and state. They willingly told the overwhelmingly Christian population of the United States that they did not in fact have the right to claim America as a Christian nation.

It will be beyond the scope of my talk tonight to explore the internal changes within American Jewry particularly vis-à-vis the practice of Judaism in any detail, but suffice it here to say that central to this history is one in which Jewish people in America came to define and redefine Judaism and the nature of Jewish life as a malleable entity, as something which they, often, indeed usually, quite ordinary and unlettered women and men, could mold to fit their various beliefs, sensibilities, and tastes. Over such deeply significant issues of language, ritual, governance, and structure, American Jews in their local communities created religious practices and institutions that worked for them.

No issue has been more central to this part of the discussion, and here I want to acknowledge the pioneering work of Paula Hyman, was that of gender and women's rights. In America Jewish women moved from behind the curtains of public invisibility to the center stage of the leadership of American Judaism. "Only in America"—to invoke a hackneyed but still useful phrase—did Jewish women find ways to give themselves voice and make demands upon the male leadership of their community to decouple religious responsibilities and rights from gender. Women, they asserted, should literally count and that when it came to participating in the public manifestations of Judaism, biology should not be thought of as destiny.

Much of what I have to say does smack of a much maligned, and deservedly so, paradigm, labeled “American exceptionalism,” a discarded mode of thinking and doing history which had assumed that America had a history unlike that of so many other places in the world, and that history was cast as a particularly positive one. In general in the field of American history the old idea of exceptionalism has in fact been thoroughly replaced by a much more nuanced view, informed in part by comparative research.

But in the case of Jewish history, it is notable that the aura of exceptionalism still holds forth. It conforms to a long held view in the field of Jewish history which maintains that America and the history of its Jews stood in a class by themselves. Notably in the academy only American Jewish history is thought of as a field separate from modern Jewish history. While obviously some historians specialize in German Jewish history, Polish Jewish history, French Jewish history and the like, only we American Jewish historians have a journal, a society, a biennial conference of our own. Courses in “modern Jewish history” do not include America but take Europe, and increasingly the Ottoman Empire and North Africa, as their geographic focus. The rationale behind this organization of knowledge assumes, probably rightly, that not only was America different but as the embodiment of the idea of modernity, the history of the Jews in America deserves its own intellectual context.

In large measure the history of American Jewry has been largely built around the fact of the absence of a process of emancipation. American Jewry never went through this excruciating and excruciatingly long ordeal. While it was the case that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries different colonies maintained different policies vis-à-vis Jewish settlement and more importantly Jewish political rights these represented the carry-over

of English policies. It was also the case that in the early Republic, a few states of the original 13—Maryland, New Hampshire, and North Carolina—continued—each differently—to maintain disabilities on Jewish office holding, these restrictive laws were not limited to Jews, but to a members of a number of outsider religious communities and most importantly, to “non-believers.” These restrictions faded out in the 1820s in Maryland and in the other states in the 1860s with the passage of the 14th Amendment. Similarly American Jewish history has been defined as different in large measure because of the kind of anti-Jewish behavior which took place in the United States as opposed to those places which have been understood in the context of the legacies of ghettos, pogroms, expulsions, and ultimately the Holocaust. The absence of meaningful state discrimination have in part made the narrative of the American Jewish experience not only a basically upbeat one, but has forced us to think about it in its own terms and not as part of the larger narrative of “modern” Jewish history. .

It is in fact difficult to swerve to far from the “whiggish” –positive-- assertion that in the context of modern Jewish history the experience of the Jews of the United States has stood in a class by itself. That experience has in fact produced a “community” – however amorphously defined—that had a history that would best be analyzed quite apart from that of other Jewish communities, and that America –the United States—played a key role in making that possible. What I would like to offer, however, is a set of contexts for exploring and explaining those conclusions.

At least five overarching realities of American life, extending from the seventeenth century outward, but becoming more prominent and manifest in the middle of the nineteenth century, provided the basic soil in which American Jewish communal

life could take root and then flourish and which made it a –indeed the most attractive— destination for emigrating European Jews and in turn facilitated Jewish integration. Each one of these notably existed in conjunction with the others and in each case we could say that the confluence of these forces functioned as the matrix around which this singular history –that of American Jews—proceeded.

The factors that I will be developing involved the nature of immigration to America, America’s enduring obsession with color, American materialism and the degree to which the society’s basic nature sprang from economic forces, the role of religion in America, and finally, the structure of America’s political life. I cannot say with certainty that if any one of these had been different or absent that the history of the Jews would have taken a different course. I do not believe in the practice of counter-history, but suffice to it say here that these factors did all exist and they did all pivot around each other. Therefore we should focus on them to understand how and why vis-a-vis the Jews, America did differ.

IMMIGRATION

We can begin here with a simple fact. Between 1820 and the 1920s about one-third of Europe’s Jews crossed a national border to make new homes within the geographic boundaries of some other nation-state. Of that one-third, about 85 percent opted for the United States. Of that 15 percent or so who did not, there is good reason to presume that they would have made that same move, had circumstances made it possible. It would actually be possible to end my talk right there. The United States had to be seen as *sui generis* in modern Jewish history simply by the fact of how European Jews voted with

their feet. But obviously I do want to go on further and place this fact in a deeper and broader analytic context.

That America, both before national independence and after, owed its basic character from the fact of constant flows, indeed floods, of voluntary immigration has been well documented by historians. While the size of those population movements into America waxed and waned, with the period after 1924 until the early 1970s representing the nadir due to congressional policy, American social and cultural life took much of its tone and shape from the fact that most Americans—native Americans, the descendants of African slaves, and residents of certain parts of the southwest excluded—stemmed from women and men who had with some degree of volition chosen to leave someplace else and to transplant themselves to America. At the high water period of European immigration, the late nineteenth into the early twentieth century, Jews differed little from most of their neighbors as a result of their overwhelmingly foreign birth, their accented and limited (or no) English, and the newness of their American experience. Likewise their American-born children resembled the children of other immigrants around them, who also stood between parents of non-American nativity and the larger expanses of American culture.

America was the western world's largest receiver of immigrants. In the great century of migration, from 1820 through 1924—again a coincidence between the experience of Jews and of all other European immigrants—three-fifths of all Europeans who shifted residence across national borders, chose the United States. While Americans, from a number of political perspectives, have generally overstated the degree to which the romance of America propelled the emigration and the uniqueness of America as an

immigrant destination and have as such minimized the importance of immigration to the histories of Canada, Brazil, Argentina, Australia, and even Great Britain, the fact remained that immigration to the United States had certain distinctive characteristics which in turn left their mark on the Jews who participated in this historic transfer of population.

Immigration to the United States differed from all of the flows to all the other places by the sheer diversity of its immigrants. To Brazil and Argentina, for example, two places which immigration shaped, the vast majority came from the Italian peninsula, with Spain sending a sizable but decidedly smaller percentage. Of those who chose Canada and Australia, the British Isles sent an overwhelmingly large proportion.

Yet as to the United States, a vast variety of Europeans, with none dominating the flow, contributed to the “national character.” While certain decades saw larger and then declining migrations from certain places, over time no one group could be held up as the core population or as the embodying the quintessential immigrant experience.. Over the course of the century of migration Italians and Germans arrived in just about equal number and immigrants from eastern Europe more than doubled the number from the British Isles.

Additionally, the flow into the United States proceeded on a continuous basis. For sure, some years, those characterized by a vigorous economy, saw more immigrants than others, and other years, when the state of the economy went into a temporary decline, witnessed a dip in immigration. But over the course of the great century of migration, the steady and inexorable process of Europeans choosing America continued apace. Again

this tended to distinguish immigration to the United States from the other immigrations in that those extended over more limited spans of time.

In this the Jews of America resembled their non-Jewish neighbors for their immigrant status and the immigrant nativity of their parents. In 1900, 1910, immigrants made up nearly half the population of New York, Chicago, and the other large cities. If we add to that figure the percentage made up of their American born children, we understand how urban America constituted an immigrant world and Jews did not in any way differ from those around them. Since no one group dominated the population, of the large cities in particular, Jews like all the other immigrants and their children learned to negotiate America from the reality of this on-the-ground diversity. That the official creed, however problematically operationalized, valorized immigration as central to the fulfilling of America's exceptional mission, gave Jews a claim to one key aspect of the nation's central narrative.

Furthermore in the discourse launched by nativists from the 1850s onward about the defects of "the immigrants" and in their crusades to limit the rights of immigrants, Jews did not figure centrally. Unlike the Irish of the pre-Civil War period and Italians of the late-nineteenth century, both of whom functioned as the chief European targets of xenophobic fantasies, Jews attracted relatively little negative attention. Without understating the degree to which anti-Jewish rhetoric flourished and anti-Semitic stereotypes functioned as the stuff of cartoons, stage portrayals, and popular fiction, the bulk of the discourse about Jews as immigrants tended to see them as hard-working, studious, adept when it came to entrepreneurship, and set on a course, albeit one a bit too rapid, toward economic mobility. In the United States, as such, words like "foreigner" or

“alien” did not connote Jew. Jews might be included under those usually negative labels but they did not stand out prominently as embodying them.

Not so in many of the other destination points for central and east European Jews. In those countries, Australia and South Africa, which constituted colonial outposts of larger empires, the Lithuanian or Polish Jews who came to settle, stood out as distinctive for their language, citizenship, and relationship to the imperial project. For those Jews who opted for Argentina, the overwhelming predominance of Italians as the main immigrant group who quickly constituted the majority of the entire population, differences in religion and language, made them obtrusive “others” And finally, the Jews who moved westward to Germany, France, and Great Britain in the last half of the nineteenth century, found themselves relatively alone as occupying the immigrant category. In England, for example, except for colonials from Ireland, Jews made up the largest group of newcomers, the largest category of non-natives, non-English speakers. In the halls of parliament and in the press the debate over passage of the Aliens Act at the start of the twentieth century amounted to primarily a debate about the Jews, their merits and mostly demerits. Jews there and in other non-American receiving societies, stood out as quintessential immigrants, foreigners, and problems in the construction of a national “type.”

RACE AND COLOR

When contemplating the broad contours of American history and trying to understand the points of intersection between it and the history of its Jews the issue of race and color cannot be ignored. Indeed no aspect of American history can be

conceptualized without factoring in the deep, wide, and pervasive American obsession with color. The entire history of America has been a history of color and racial classifications. This has been the dominant motif of the national experience and the very existence of the nation grew out of the encounter of Europeans, native people, and Africans on the shores on North America. The history of its Jews must follow suit.

In this place, since the earliest moments of Europeans colonization, perceived color mattered greatly. In fact, historians can, and have, rightly postulated that no other factor mattered as much, including gender. Color, assumed and constructed as it was as a category, meant the difference between rights and no rights, control over one's body or no control, entitlement to the protection of the state or not. To be on the wrong side of the color equation, which obviously meant the non-white side, subjected individuals not only to the absence of the privileges which accrued from basic definitions of being human or being a citizen, but it exposed them to the full fury of the power of the state and society which served as agents of subjugation and violence.

Despite some recent assertions to the contrary, in every meaningful way, Jews in America always enjoyed the benefits of whiteness. At no time did the formal apparatus of the society, the state and its agents, declare them to be unable to acquire naturalization and citizenship because of their color. At no time did Jews, men in the main, not expect the protection of courts in which to press their claims, equal access to the ballot boxes to voice their opinions, and freedom of movement to go unimpeded wherever they chose. As white men they could enter contracts, hold office, serve on juries, and all the other basic rights that came with being an American.

Certainly rhetoric, particularly by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, could be heard which questioned the whiteness of the Jews. Particularly with the rise of scientific racism and the respectable proliferation of biologized views of difference, some writers, thinkers, and others categorized Jews as something other than white. But these voices remained just that.

Even in the many places where Jews in America suffered limitations and discrimination, in particular in the housing field, in employment, access to higher education, and in entry to places of leisure like clubs and hotels, anti-Jewish practices came from private individuals. The state stood aloof from all these matters. It would take in fact almost the entire course of the 350 years before the state, the federal government, wiped away the distinction between discrimination perpetrated by private sources versus discrimination which came from the state. The 1964 and 1965 civil rights acts (and on a state by state basis the civil rights laws passed after 1945) made private acts of discrimination the business of the state.

Jews, unlike African Americans, Americans of Chinese and Japanese ancestry, and Native Americans, never needed to view government—the formal apparatus of the society, its courts, its legislature, its elected leaders, and indeed even its key text, the Constitution—as the source of their sorrows. In all matters relating to the fundamental and extensive formal privileges which flowed from the state, the Jews in America benefited from the fact that phenotypically other Americans saw them as white.

Having this privilege represented in some ways a unique moment in Jewish history. Here, in the United States, for probably the first time, they did not have access to the fewest rights and the sparsest bundle of privileges the society had to offer. Others

stood many rungs below them in the scale of entitlement. Here, in the United States, they could distinguish between their enemies –particular colleges, particular hotels, particular companies—and the state, the standard of the nation. The former, they condemned for its hostility to the Jews, while the latter, they lauded for the privileges it gave them. Keenly aware that they benefited from American realities, including those which accrued to them from the right skin color, some American Jews recognized that their entitlements came from the deep and profound stigmatization endured others. That our subjects –American Jews of the past—recognized that they fell on the other side of the color line means that we historians should also be aware of this history of racial privileging. Being seen as white made all the difference for Jews in the positive fit that took place between them and America.

MAKING A LIVING: JEWS AND THE AMERICAN ECONOMY

So too, in a much less problematic context, but no less significant context, we can think about the synergy between Jews and America, in matters economic. The massive transfer of Jewish population to America—just to repeat because it is so significant, about 85 percent of Europe’s cross-border migrating Jews chose the United States—brought these millions of Jews from places of low productivity and stagnant development to the most dynamic economy in the world. America from its earliest days until well into the twentieth century experienced a constant and chronic labor shortage, set amidst the vast natural resources waiting to be exploited.

This reality undergirded the entire European immigrant flood to America, that of the Jews as well. Like all other Europeans Jews left settled places where economic opportunities did not exist and opted for America where they did. However much the

American Jewish communal narrative has focused on the outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence of life in Europe –the pogroms in particular—as the engines which drove the population transfer, analytically the more mundane story of a group of people, Jews, seeking out places to live better –and ultimately to live well-- has greater validity.

The American-Jewish economic fit also reflected the long history of Jews and commerce and the long-observed, and often deprecated, American proclivity towards material acquisition. In nearly every period of American Jewish history we can see a confluence between American material needs, or better wants, and Jewish economic skills. Let me briefly sketch out three eras in American Jewish history as they reveal this symbiotic relationship.

In the earliest decades, in the eighteenth century, the British colonies of North America and the Caribbean existed in large measure to facilitate international trade. These Jews, both the small group of Sephardim who actually became the minority by the 1740s with their roots in the Iberian Peninsula and the Netherlands, and their far flung family members in the “Levant,” as well as the larger group of Ashkenazim from Poland who operated at the lower and domestic end of this international commercial network helped do what the colonial authorities wanted, extract profit. Commerce between the “mother country” and the colonies as well as the importation of slaves from Africa, created a highly lucrative and integrated Atlantic world of trade, designed to benefit Britain. Jews, with their global Jewish trading connections that spanned Europe, the Mediterranean basin, and around the Atlantic, while small in number helped make possible what we used to call the “triangular trade route.” While not alone in fueling the development of the Americas, they used their Jewish contacts to help ensure that goods

and capital moved from one point to the next. Jews in the American colonies gained acceptance in the eyes of both colonial officials and the vastly larger non-Jewish population for their contribution to both the Empire's riches and the usefulness which the colonies could show to London based officials.

From the middle of the nineteenth century into the earliest years of the twentieth as the American white population moved westward to the remote and least settled areas, families and communities of "settlers" articulated a desire for cosmopolitan goods. The westward movement of Americans across the continent made it possible for the commercial interests to gain access to vast stretches of "uninhabited" land which could be farmed, mined, and logged. The nation's penetration of the hinterlands, romantically and jingoistically, described as "manifest destiny," required capital, and it required women and men willing to work the land, fell the forests, dig the mines, lay the railroad tracks, and the like. It also needed intermediaries to bring to these people the kinds of "stuff" that made it bearable for them to live in these undeveloped places.

Some central and east European Jews met America on the shifting peddlers' frontier. Tens of thousands of Jewish men, well-acquainted with itinerant merchandising after centuries of life in Europe, turned their long time economic niche into an American opportunity. The Jewish peddlers, many of whom became the owners of Jewish dry goods stores in the small towns which served the hinterlands, the Jewish retailers in the big cities who outfitted the peddlers, and the Jewish tailors who sewed the clothes which then traveled in the peddlers' wagons and ended up on the bodies of rural dwellers, made up a Jewish economy that served the basic needs of the expanding United States. While behind this historic drama lay many complicated economic and political relationships, on

the surface what transpired involved a marriage between Americans' desire for consumer goods –buttons, thread, needles, curtains, eye glasses, pictures and picture frames, fabric and ready made clothing—and the willingness of Jews to pick up the familiar peddler's pack and venture out to pretty much anywhere they could find paying customers.

By the 1860s yet another match took place between American economic needs and Jewish history. The expansion of the garment industry which began with the invention of the sewing machine at nearly the same moment in time as the Civil War coincided with a series of linked, but independent developments, which transformed not just America but European Jewry. Late nineteenth century urbanization, the movement of young women into industrial and white collar jobs in the years before marriage, the rise of the advertising industry, the emergence of “style” as something within the reach of working class women, new sanitary standards, all lead to the reality that by the end of the nineteenth century the garment industry took off as one of the most dynamic sectors of the American economy. Factories, heavily although not exclusively housed in New York, sewed the garments which clothed women and men around the world. The ready-to-wear clothing industry spread its dresses and blouses, shirtwaists, hats, and undergarments around the nation and the world fueling American economic development.

In this sector Jews as employers and workers found, and helped create, a niche for themselves. Jews in Europe had long made a living by means of the needle, but in America, they could use that lowly skill to create a vast enterprise which did nothing less than clothe Americans and others, employ in massive numbers successive streams of Jewish immigrants, as well as others, both women and men.

In addition this field with its relatively low need for start up capital provided to Jews one of the few means by which immigrant industrial laborers could move into the ranks of the employing class.

These convergences between Jewish history, the peddling and the garment making, and the needs of the American economy had tremendous implications for Jewish economic mobility. Here we can see writ large an example of being in the right place, at the right time, with the right skill set.

AMERICAN RELIGION AND THE JEWS

The Jewish encounter with America, an encounter that took place in a relatively harmonious manner, reflected the significance of religion as a factor in American history. Here at least three factors shaped that meeting and they enabled the Jews to be helped by the fact of their particular religion rather than hindered by it, as they were elsewhere. It is note worthy that Americans –non-Jews—came to accept Jews more readily as bearers of a religious tradition, however different from Christianity, than as we might call an ethnic group, a collectivity of men and women who lived differently from others, spoke a different language, adhered to different values. While this bifurcation reflected a misreading of what the category “Jewish” meant, one which did not see religion and peoplehood as separable, it did provide a comfortable path for Jewish integration.

First among the religious realities which stimulated the acceptance of the Jews reflected the reality that to the primarily Protestant population which dominated America from the colonial period well into the early twentieth century, Jews were not Catholics. Jews could, in America, breathe easily in that for much of American history anti-Catholicism functioned as a powerful force in public life. Catholicism had long been

deemed unsuitable for a democratic, egalitarian nation which venerated personal freedom and individual choice. An aggressive strain of anti-“Papism” dominated the public discourse of the Protestant nation and spilled over from the churches to the political realm. One of the country’s most successful third parties, the Know Nothings, made anti-Catholicism a core principle and with this it enjoyed a brief, but still notable, hour in the political spotlight.

Judaism, by contrast, while seen as overly legalistic, at times, medieval and retrograde, particularly vis-a-vis the status of its women in public ritual, enjoyed a place or respectability in the American setting. From a negative standpoint, antipathy to it spawned no political movements nor did its arrival and transplantation into America cause American Christians to redefine public policy in order to lessen Judaism’s possible and pernicious impact.

From a positive perspective, from the middle of the nineteenth century onward the appearance of Christian –Protestant clergy—at the dedication of synagogues and the pulpit exchanges between rabbis and ministers indicated that Judaism found for itself a legitimate space on the American religious landscape. While a hint of exoticism can be discerned in the Christian discourse on Judaism as well as a note that signaled the desire of evangelicals to convert the Jews, by and large, Protestantism in America did not demonize the planting of Judaism on American shores.

This no doubt reflected the general valorization of religion in America. Americans, observed since the days of Alexis de Tocqueville’s now storied visit to the relatively new nation, saw religion –in part because it had been decoupled from state power—as a benign force for promoting civic virtue. While historians of the American Jewish

experience may debate the degree to which the veneration of religion in America pushed Jews to repackage themselves as a “faith community” as opposed to a people or a nation, the prevailing positive view of religion in America allowed Jews to argue for extending to their religion the benefits which all other denominations enjoyed. By being bound to each other through a “religion,” a concept somewhat extraneous to normative Judaism, American Jews could stand under the protective umbrella of American culture.

Finally, no discussion of the harmonious relationship which evolved between the Jews and the United States would be complete without considering the impact of religious diversity and the concomitant political commitment of the society to the constitutional principle of the separation of church and state. Obviously the complicated history of these two twinned phenomenon has been the subject of vast scholarly and legal analysis. To simplify in order to detail this crucial issue within the constraints of time here, the fact that even from before the creation of the Republic, too many denominations had established themselves in British North America and its successor state –and states— to allow any one church to impose an iron grip on civic life. While many gray areas, such as Sunday closings continued to vex groups of religious outsiders, most aspects of public life fell outside the gray zone. Even so simple a fact that the state did not collect statistics on the number of members of particular denominations meant that private beliefs, that is, matters of the spirit, did not require public declarations. No check-off boxes on census forms or on tax statements which demanded, or suggested, that individuals divulge to government officials their religious affiliations, made a world of difference.

In matters of faith and society, the decoupling of religion and government rendered the former powerless to control peoples’ lives and slowly forced the latter to validate

many religions rather than any one. Religion, without the strong backing of the state, lost its authority and essentially defanged it. Religious institutions either conformed to the demands of their dues paying members or they died out.

For Jews the divorce between state and church not only afforded them the possibility of participating, over time, in the polity as equals to Christians, but it gave them the freedom to mold Judaism to fit their wishes, tastes, and sensibilities. Jews like all others enjoyed the freedom to structure their institutions as they wanted and the state could do little, indeed nothing, to stymie creativity.

POLITICS

A final aspect of American history left an indelible mark on the Jews, facilitated their political integration, and should be included in this survey. This involves an analysis of the political sphere directly. In nearly all paeans to America and its ability to integrate (white, male) immigrants, stump speakers and historians alike have cited the ease of the naturalization process for those of foreign birth and the fact that political realm did not exclude anyone because of their religion. Vis-a-vis politics and governance, for nearly all of American history, not only did religion not matter in matters of naturalization, acquisition of citizenship, voting, and office-holding, but neither did nativity. With the exception of the constitutional requirement that the president of the United States needed to be native born, no barriers to political participation needed to be overcome for white men (and later women), regardless of how (or if) they prayed and where they had been born. This obvious fact deserves to be stated here because of its tremendous impact.

But it hardly represents the totality of the political context for understanding how the Jews “met” America and how America “met” the Jews. Rather in politics, on a more

abstract yet equally formative level, the long reality of the two-party system facilitated the American-Jewish symbiosis. The United States, for reasons well beyond the scope of this presentation maintained a long tradition of living with two parties relatively evenly matched with each other. Third parties, for sure, developed and nearly all of them failed. While those parties, from the right and the left nudged the two giants in one direction or another, and as such cannot be dismissed analytically as having had no significance, they still died and since the 1850s the political scene has been dominated by the Republicans the Democrats alone.

Particularly since the end of the Civil War and the resolution of the issue of slavery, the two parties tended to converge ideologically. These two parties, which have functioned without formal membership and only the vaguest of platforms, have often been issueless and as such, have valorized pragmatic majoritarianism. Much to the chagrin of those with political agendas, whatever their message, the nature of the political system frustrated any effort for real change. American politics, were since the latter part of the nineteenth century, castigated by those eager to pursue important causes as utterly compromising and voters got only a choice between the often invoked “Tweedledeedum and Tweedledee,” two indistinguishable characters from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice and Wonderland*.

What seemed to matter most over the course of much of American history in this kind of politics was simply who got the most votes. One political scientist, Daniel Bell offered a powerful image to think about this historic reality. American parties, he wrote, resembled giant bazaars, under whose canopies, multiple hucksters sold their wares. The same hucksters appeared in each of the big tent and peddled their “stuff.”

The barkers in the twin bazaars represented the various interest groups: labor, farmers, manufacturers, ethnic groups and the like. While both parties essentially served the interests of business, under the shelter of the two tents, the parties brokered among these constituencies. The parties wanted votes and each group had a particular, and usually practical, agenda.

Compromise and accommodation ruled the parties and in all of this politics, like religion, became tamed. America saw no party of the aristocracy or the clergy, the peasants or the urban proletariat. Rather each party sought to claim as many constituency groups as possible and had little incentive to offend any identifiable block and as such write off any potential voters.

And here, Jews fit in. Neither party defined “the Jews” as a problem, but rather both wanted their votes. Neither party wrote them off as not potential voters, nor did either refuse to provide them with some tangible rewards for voting correctly. From the middle part of the 19th century onward, Jews got incorporated into party politics, usually at the local and state levels and it was not particularly noteworthy to see Jewish office holders, Jewish operatives for the parties [we could call them “bosses”], Jewish political clubs. Even in places where few Jews lived, the appearance of a Jewish man on a city council, on a county board of supervisors did not seem out of place. Many of the former peddlers whose experiences I indicated before were so crucial, became shopkeepers and from their places behind the counter of the stores on so many Main Streets, they entered into civic and political life. Until the end of the 1920s Jews divided fairly evenly between the two parties and neither party could be seen as either their obvious friend or enemy.

Even when Jews had by the late 1920s become comfortably ensconced in the ranks of the Democratic Party, the Republicans did not incorporate antipathy towards the Jews into their political rhetoric. They rather, actually, hoped to woo the Jews over to their camp. By functioning in this bazaar type setting, Jews could literally shop around and make their case to both parties on the local, state, and national levels. They –no differently than midwestern farmers, blue-collar workers, or “members” of nearly every ethnic and religious group-- could see who would make them the best deal in exchange for showing up on election day and doing the right thing. In this non-ideological political structure which quashed extremism, Jewish men since the middle of the nineteenth century (and then women as well by the end of the first quarter of the twentieth century) found ample space to join in the competition for the attention and rewards that accompanied political participation.

This non-ideological defanged political process may not have helped the Jews secure everything they wanted. Obviously the tragic history of their mighty efforts and limited results in the Hitler era to influence American policy stands as a great failure. But in this they similar to other interest groups, particularly those which represented ethnic and immigrant communities, they got little when their agenda deviated from public opinion and as such from the desideratum of the parties and politicians to offend the only the fewest number of people.

The hurly-burly of the political marketplace made it possible for them to get some of what they wanted, but clearly not everything. They got just enough to allow them to feel part of the civic whole and to believe in the basic goodness of the system.

And as a result of this system as well as the other overarching attributes of American history and the culture which evolved from it and in tandem with it, Jews arrived into an environment which synergistically worked well for them. They arrived in a large enough –but not too large—a number to be able to thrive, to build the communities that they wanted, to take advantage of fundamental realities which often worked to the disadvantage of others, and to apply their economic skills sharpened in very different environments to American material realities. In the process they helped make the history which we have spent all this year thinking about.

These five factors may not, in the end, be the stuff of celebration, but hopefully they offer analysts a way to think about what this particular history involved. It may not facilitate celebration, but in the ideal it can help stimulate analysis, the activity which in fact represents the historian's project.