

to government political influence. His (qualified) defense of commercialism and approval of other aspects of American media development add up to a positive judgment on the path it has pursued.

As readers enjoy the stories told in *The Creation of the Media*, they may wish to ponder another critique of commercialism that Starr doesn't address, namely the view that the media should educate and raise popular tastes. Much of the "public service" ideology of traditional European radio and television monopolies was based on the notion that the media should fulfill an educative function for the public, rather than always react to what people want. In this view, the problem with commercialism is not that it is too elitist and insufficiently reflective of popular interests, but that it is not elitist enough.

## Accentuating the Positive

### American Judaism: A History

By Jonathan D. Sarna  
Yale.

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**A**MERICAN JEWRY is currently marking the 350th anniversary of its communal presence in this country. In 1654, 23 Jews seeking to escape the extended arm of the Inquisition arrived in New Amsterdam from the Brazilian port city of Recife. Ousted with the rest of their brethren when the Portuguese conquered Brazil, the 23 were granted permission by the Dutch to establish an enclave in North America. The festivities include a host of exhibits, public programs, academic conferences, and publications focusing on the various remarkable achievements of what became the United States' largest non-Christian religious minority.

Yet even as they celebrate their proud past, American Jews have reason for grave concerns about their uncertain future. For the first time in their history, their numbers

are steadily declining, the Jewish population having diminished by slightly over 5 percent between 1990 and 2000. Simultaneously, the rate of Jewish intermarriage with Gentiles has continued to soar and is at present approaching 60 percent, while conversions to Judaism have been dropping for the past half-century. Furthermore, the nationwide birthrate of American Jewish families is today just below zero population growth. Some sociologists speak of American Jews seeming to perform a slow disappearing act.

Demographics aside, the practice of Judaism itself is in serious peril in the U.S. Among those who still consider themselves Jews, religious observance and education is, to put it generously, very weak. Regular attendance at synagogue services is below 20 percent. And despite the dramatic recent growth of Hebrew day schools, less than 15 percent of American Jewish children—largely from Orthodox homes—receive so much as an elementary day school education. Unlike any Jewish community since the deeply Hellenized Alexandrian Jews of first-century Egypt (who eventually disappeared), the vast majority of American Jews are illiterate in any Jewish language. Yiddish has virtually vanished, except among the ultra-Orthodox Hasidim, and Hebrew is spoken (barely with competence) only by the graduates of the declining number of day schools where it remains the language of instruction in Jewish studies.

Nevertheless, Jonathan Sarna's new book accentuates the positive. *American Judaism: A History* will almost certainly be the most important, enduring and comforting product of the 350th anniversary celebrations. With its emphasis on the numerous "revivals," "renewals" and "awakenings" that, for Sarna, uniquely characterize the American Jewish experience, its very purpose often appears

to be allaying the justifiably deep anxieties about the survival of Jews and Judaism in America. Indeed, this is not only the most comprehensive single-volume examination of the Jewish religion on American soil yet written, it is the most relentlessly optimistic.

Starting with colonial times and concluding with some speculation about the state and probable fate of Judaism at the dawn of the 21st century, *American Judaism* is in many respects an unparalleled work. Besides his erudition, Sarna com-

combines fine narrative skills with an uncanny ability to maintain the focus on Judaism, the religion, as he sets its history in a wider context. He is blessed, too, with a discerning eye for engaging and instructive details. An example of the literary gifts that make this book such a pleasant read is his evocative description of Rabbi Solomon Schechter, the father of Conservative Judaism:

"A large, lumbering man who exuded warmth with his grandfatherly white hair and long handsome beard, he united within himself the spiritual heritage of Eastern Europe where he had been born with the scholarly heritage of Western Europe where he had studied and taught. He spoke Yiddish natively and retained warm memories of his Hasidic childhood. Yet, his scholarship and outlook were thoroughly modern; the leading luminaries of Cambridge were his friends."

The author thus artfully places Schechter in the context of his general discussion of the *kulturkampf* raging between the German Jews, who had arrived in America during the middle of the 19th century, and the Russian Jews whose massive migration began in response to the pogroms of the 1880s. Schechter's confidence-inspiring demeanor and his ease in both worlds of the American Jews' origins go far in explaining his success in establishing what would quickly become



**JONATHAN D. SARNA**

the largest branch of American Judaism.

Sarna is also particularly good at narrating the most interesting developments in the popular pursuit of Judaism within the larger framework of American legal, economic and social trends. Typical is his lively and often amusing treatment of Prohibition's impact on the fortunes of the Jews, many of whom became famously rich from bootlegging, and its lesser-known effects on their religious behavior. After noting that the National Prohibition (Volstead) Act specifically allowed the use of wine "for sacramental purposes or like religious rites," he cites a "cynical inspector" who raised an eyebrow at the "remarkable increase in the thirst for religion," and concludes:

"Judging from official records, in fact, 'blessing the fruit of the vine' became during Prohibition the most widely and scrupulously observed of all Jewish religious practices. In response to this abuse and to the unsavory publicity that it generated, Reform rabbis used only unfermented wine [i.e. grape juice] for their rituals: The law of the land demanded it, the rabbis declared it, and Jewish law permitted it."

**S**ARNA'S SCHEME for telling the story of American Jewry is quite original. To begin with, he deliberately rejects the tradition of presenting the American Jewish experience in terms of successive "generations." He compellingly argues that this *World of Our Fathers* approach lends itself to both nostalgic distortion of an idealized past and inflated fears about the ravages of "assimilation," another loaded word that he pointedly avoids.

Instead, Sarna replaces the "chain of tradition" with a consideration of broader tendencies in the sociology of American religion, especially the distinctly American phenomenon of periods of religious "awakening" and "renewal." The result is a thorough and enjoyable overview that is likely to be the standard for many years, if not decades, to come.

Despite all of its many fine qualities, though, *American Judaism* is simply that: a lively, reliable book based almost entirely on secondary sources. Except for the last part of his final chapter, suggestively called "Renewal," where Sarna deals somewhat innovatively—and to my lights

too optimistically—with the postwar period, very little of what he details will be new to those already familiar with the subject. Another limitation is his barely mentioning the theology or philosophy of the Jewish religion.

Particularly disappointing is Sarna's neglecting the literally thousands of hitherto unmined Hebrew and Yiddish works of American rabbis and intellectuals, issued by now defunct Jewish publishers in dozens of large cities and small towns across this land. (Sarna's bibliography includes only one reference to a Hebrew source and not a single Yiddish source.) Given the book's preoccupation with synagogues, seminaries and community centers, it should properly have been subtitled "A Social and Institutional History."

Its discussion of the Holocaust's impact on American Judaism, for instance, never refers to any of the seminal writings of this country's leading Holocaust theologians, like Richard Rubenstein, Arthur Cohen, Irving Greenberg, and Eliezer Berkovits. Sarna fixes, rather, as he does throughout, on what he perceives as the rebirth of Jewish religious life in the aftermath of the European catastrophe.

This also causes some serious imbalances in his coverage of Jewish leaders. Marginal neo-Hasidic figures from the "Jewish Renewal Movement" such as Rabbis Shlomo Carlebach ("the singing rabbi") and Zalman Schachter-Shalomi ("the psychedelic rabbi") receive 10 pages of coverage, while the three most prominent Jewish theologians on this side of the Atlantic, Rabbis Abraham Joshua Heschel, Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Emil Fackenheim, are together disposed of in a single sentence.

Although Sarna insists in his Introduction that his purview extends to secular expressions of Judaism, his coverage of the very rich secular Yiddish culture is woefully inadequate. Nor does he ever cite any of the thriving Yiddish daily newspapers of the first half of the 20th century, which contain troves of important, relevant information. Sholem Aleichem, the greatest Yiddish writer of all time, whose funeral procession in Manhattan remains to this day the largest ever in the city's history, is not even mentioned.

The one Yiddish writer referred to

in the book is Yankev Glatshteyn. His angry declaration, "I'm going back to the Ghetto," in his famous poem "Goodbye World," is misconstrued as a signal of the poet "re-embracing traditional Jewish life." Sarna mistakes Glatshteyn's angry posture of ethnic seclusion for more evidence of one more religious "awakening" among America's Jews, this time the secular Yiddishists. But no such awakening ever took place. As for Glatshteyn, anyone familiar with his post-Holocaust poetry—consisting mostly of bitter denunciations of the Jewish God in whom he very firmly disbelieved—will know, nothing could be further from the truth about the radically secular poet.

**T**HE AUTHOR'S persistent optimism, I suspect, contributes to the insufficiency of his treatment of anti-Semitism, which is almost entirely relegated to the pre-Holocaust era. His observation that it is primarily, if not exclusively, at Christmastime that Jews "feel the clash between the country they love and the faith they cherish" could not, I would argue, have been written since the release of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*.

According to a recent nationwide survey of American Jews cited toward the very end of the book, 83 per cent of the respondents identified with the following statement: "It bothers me when people try to tell me that there is a right way to be Jewish." The same survey found that only 47 per cent of the respondents agreed that "I have a special responsibility to take care of Jews in need around the world."

Yet Sarna ends *American Judaism* with this almost supernaturally happy prediction: "With the help of visionary leaders, committed followers and generous philanthropists, it may still be possible for the current 'vanishing' generation of American Jews to be succeeded by another 'vanishing' generation and then still another."

Perhaps Sarna's belief in the magic that will allow the eternally disappearing Jew to continue endlessly to reappear and flourish, is not without merit. Jews may sprout forth from all kinds of unexpected quarters and in hitherto unimaginable ways. In a country where no one—including a rabbi—can instruct the large majority of Jews on the "right way to be Jewish," there is, after all, no wrong way.