I
n Edith Calisch's 1930 play The Jews Who Stood By Washington, young Isaac Franks explains his decision to join the American Revolutionary army: “I am a Jew, sir,” he tells his commander-in-chief, “and above all, a lover of peace. But for many generations we Jews have struggled against those who would take our home and possessions from us, and here in America we have at last found refuge. We cannot sit idly by and see our liberty torn from us, and we will not let a British tyrant make slaves of those who have given us freedom from tyranny.”

With such stories, some of them “enhancements” of history, Beth Wenger, the director of the Jewish Studies Program at the University of Pennsylvania, indicates, American Jews consciously crafted a narrative of their experiences in the US “and wove themselves into the narrative of the nation.”

Motivated by an urgent need to use the past to foster a sense of collective identity, gain acceptance in the New World and confer meaning on the present, they emphasized that their forebears played a constructive role in the founding of America, drew parallels between themselves and the Puritans, identified Jewish ideals as sources of American democracy and demonstrated that Jews had served their country, conscientiously and courageously, during wartime.

Engaging, informative and illuminating, History Lessons catches American Jews in the act of stitching together their two cultures and trying, not always successfully, to hide the seams. Although she tends, at times, to underplay the conflicts, Wenger makes a compelling case that the “invented harmony between Judaism and Americanism persisted for generations and emerged as an enduring axiom of American Jewish culture.”

Setting aside canons of historical accuracy, for example, American Jews seized Columbus Day as an opportunity to “situate themselves at the root of the national story.” They claimed, from time to time, that Columbus was a Jew, and that Luis de Torres, an interpreter and the only crew member of certain Jewish descent, was the first to set foot in the New World. Adding to the power of the myth was a coincidence: In 1492, the year Columbus sailed the ocean blue, Ferdinand and Isabella expelled the Jews from Spain. “Is it not true, a Columbus Day speaker declared, “that God had again showed Israel, in its hour of need, the Promised Land?”

The “most enduring heroic figure” of American Jewry, Wenger points out, was Haym Salomon, the “financier” of the American Revolution. With little actually known about him, Salomon became a “malleable legend,” easy to enlist as both a devout Jew and an icon of Jewish-American patriotism. In one widely circulated (entirely fictional) account, Salomon received an urgent appeal from George Washington while he was in synagogue on Yom Kippur, suspended servicemen, secured pledges for funds and returned to the solemn service.

In the early 20th century, Polish Jews tried to claim Salomon, who was born in Leszno, as one of their own. Their efforts to build a monument to him, Wenger reveals, were part of a broader movement of “new immigrants” from Eastern Europe to gain legitimacy in the US at a time when anti-Semitism was growing. Their actions ignited a turf war with the more established “German” Jews, who had arrived from Central Europe in the mid-19th century and were determined to remain the principal arbiters of Jewish identity in America. Once hailed as a patriot, Salomon was now disdained by some Jews as “only a moneylender.” The controversy receded in the 1930s, Wenger concludes, and Salomon (somehow returned to his privileged place in the pantheon of Jewish-American heroes.

Wenger implies, however, that the 1930s constituted an exception to a “triumphant celebration” of the US as the best possible home for Jews and a consensus about the compatibility of Jewish and American values. During the Great Depression, at the height of a romance with communism, some American Jews unleashed harsh critiques of capitalism. The radicals, Wenger points out, did not ground their analysis in Jewish history, culture or religious values. By the end of the decade, Stalinist purges and the rise of Nazi Germany gave many of the militants a renewed appreciation of freedom in America.

There have been other occasions, it is worth noting, for a “counter-narrative” to the dominant portrayal of the US and the American-Jewish past. As Wenger acknowledges, albeit very briefly, Jewish-Americans have tapped prophetic traditions (and their own heritage and history) as they spoke out against the exploitation of workers, discrimination based on race and ethnicity and claims that the US was founded as a Christian nation.

With the creation of the State of Israel, of course, some Jews in the US reconceptualized commitments and identities. Nonetheless, Wenger concludes, for the vast majority “the fundamental paradigms endure.” American Jews continue to believe that they are in the US not “on sufferance but as of right”; they have borne their responsibilities as citizens in war and peace; and they are entitled to share “its fruits and its destiny.”