Living the American Ethos

Books

By Glenn C. Altschuler

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Commissioned to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the American Jewish Archives and the 10th anniversary of Gary Zola as the AJA’s current executive director, “New Essays in American Jewish History” is testimony to the variety — and vitality — of scholarship in Jewish Studies.

Like Jacob Rader Marcus, the eminent historian who founded the AJA, most of the 22 contributors to the collection focus on individuals to explore American-Jewish identity, ideology and experience. Subjects of the collection include naval captain Jonas Levy; Isaac Moses, architect of the Union Prayer Book; philosopher Nachman Krochmal; historian Ellis Rivkin; Henrietta Szold, founder of Hadassah, and the Yentl of Isaac Bashevis Singer and Barbra Streisand. Although no single theme emerges from the volume and, perhaps inevitably in a festschrift, the essays vary in quality and importance, “New Essays in American Jewish History” helps us reassess the evolution of Jewish culture in the United States and the process of assimilation.

In an essay explaining the relative weakness of anti-Semitism in America, Paul Finkelman, professor of law and public policy at the State University of New York at Albany, relates how Governor Peter Stuyvesant asked officials of the Dutch West India Company to expel 23 Portuguese Jews from Brazil who arrived in New Amsterdam in 1654. Despite widespread hostility, however, they were allowed to stay, largely because the company needed hard-working immigrants to help the colony grow. Within a few decades, the newcomers had helped create a climate conducive to religious tolerance.

Episodes like this one, implies Robert Seltzer, professor of history at Hunter College, led historians such as Ellis Rivkin to conclude that Jews did not encounter much discrimination because America’s social and economic structures encouraged fluidity, mobility, enterprise and thrift, and its political ideology prohibited any formal state establishments of religion. Seltzer indicates that Rivkin, a faculty member of Hebrew Union College from 1949 to 1988, even predicted that if the economy experienced steady growth in post-industrial America, “the Jews can anticipate an end to their status as a vulnerable minority.”

Most Jews, then, developed a deep affinity for the liberal American ethos. Nonetheless, many of the contributors to “New Essays” remind us that Jews tried to balance their embrace of American customs with a desire to retain their own culture. The Americanization of Hanukkah, Dianne Ashton, professor of Religion and American Studies at Rowan University, demonstrates, is a case in point. According to Ashton, Jews transformed Hanukkah from a minor festival to a major holiday to lend a religious cover to their participation in a December ritual of gift-giving; to make a case that the Maccabees fought for values similar to those espoused in the American Revolution, and to counter stereotypes of effeminate male Jews. The “Grand Chanucka Revival,” Ashton adds, was also designed to address the alienation of young American Jews from religious life.

Such phenomena were further spurred by the Holocaust, writes Hasia Diner, professor of American Jewish History at New York University. The calamity in Europe “lent new urgency to pre-existing Jewish cultural ventures,” she argues, and “gave them a boost and provided them with a new rationale.” Some Jewish Americans felt that following the slaughter of one-third of their people they had been thrust into a dominant role in the life of world Jewry. Their sense of urgency was altered, but not eliminated, by the founding of the State of Israel. To confront change with courage, conviction and wisdom, Diner concludes, in what ought to serve as an epitaph for this volume, Jews need to know “where they had come from [and] how America had left its mark on them.”
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