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Arguing Judaism, Negotiating Jewish Identity

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Arguing Judaism, Negotiating Jewish Identity

Becoming American Jews: Temple Beth Israel of Boston. By Meaghan Dwyer-Ryan, Susan L. Porter, and Lisa Fagin Davis. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2009. xvii + 259 pp. Illustrations, appendix, notes, index, and bibliography. \$24.95 (paper).

Orthodox Jews in America. By Jeffrey S. Gurock. Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2009. ix + 381 pp. Photos, illustrations, notes, and index. \$65 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper).

American ethnic groups have assimilated into society in distinctive cultural groups, and in the process, what has come to be thought of as distinctly American is an evolving pattern of diversity within an evolving framework of unity. Though the precise nature of the integrative processes involved varies from one people to another and over the course of time, in general people are no more American than when they are ethnic, the two sources of identification working in tandem to define the individual and the group in cultural terms. As these two excellent books—coming out of very different parts of the experience of the practice of Judaism in America—make clear, American Jews represent an excellent test case for this understanding of our pluralism. Over the course of the last two centuries, while some have simply ceased entirely to be Jews, many American Jews have become more self-consciously Jewish as they have become both less like their immigrant ancestors and more at home in America. But the more American Jews have argued among themselves about the meanings and practices of Judaism, the more self-consciously Jewish-in-America they have become.

Three authors have combined to produce an engaging history of Boston's Temple Israel, from its founding by German-speaking immigrants from Central Europe in 1854 to its current status as the largest congregation of Reform Jews, and certainly one of the most affluent and prestigious, in New England. The book is a commemoration planned by the congregation in honor of its sesquicentennial, but in sharp contrast to many commemorative histories of individual religious institutions,

this volume can stand on its own as a significant contribution to understanding American religions at the ground level. The narrative progresses largely through the logical but not completely satisfying histories of the tenure of the congregation's succession of rabbis. This is the equivalent for religious history of the old presidential synthesis in American political history, which provided an individualized, chronology-driven story that skated over continuities and underlying social, cultural, and political processes. Readers might at times find themselves wishing to learn more about the continuities and discontinuities provided by the synagogue's members, in their class, gender, and generational diversity. The authors do plausibly generalize about rank-and-file congregants in the context of discussing arguments within the congregation over ritual, Jewish education, pastoral and sociability issues, and the synagogue's place in the larger Boston community. These arguments are linked, without much systematic social analysis underlying the argument, to the forces working on Jewish identity, such as socioeconomic mobility and the current state of Jewish relations with the Gentile world, whether locally, nationally, or outside the United States. Within this rabbinic synthesis, the book traces the ongoing, interrelated struggles both between ethnic distinctiveness and assimilation and between tradition developed in the European diaspora and innovation inspired by the American environment.

Temple Israel was founded after a decade of struggles within the early cohort of Jewish immigrants in Boston over ritual practices. While for its first decades it worshipped according to German Jewish custom, in the 1870s the congregants would begin to adopt various aspects of Reform Judaism, a new movement simultaneously taking root since midcentury in the United States and in western Europe. For many of the Orthodox Jews who are the subjects of Jeffrey Gurock's book, the self-consciously modern-minded Reform Jews who became the congregants at Temple Israel would have seemed incomprehensible, heretical, and no longer real Jews. They were at once eager to fit their synagogue into a local American religious environment dominated at equivalent social class levels by mainline Protestant churches, anxious to avoid the attention of anti-Semites, and wanted to shed all evidences of the European ghetto, and in all of these competing desires, hopeful about creating good public relations for Judaism and Jews in general.

Temple Israel's congregants experimented, alongside other Reform Jews throughout the country, with a number of radical departures from Jewish tradition. For tradition, they substituted an essentialized conception of Jewish values that at times took on the forms of American Protestantism. In traditional Judaism a cantor (*hazan*) chanted prayers; at Temple Israel an organ and choir were installed to accompany the cantor. In traditional Judaism male and female worshippers are separated by a curtain or sit on separate floors of the synagogue during worship; at Temple Israel mixed seating and family pews became the rule. In traditional Judaism the customary Sabbath is inviolable, for honoring it is, after all, one of the Ten Commandments. At Temple Israel, in deference to American work and commercial schedules that

defined Saturday as a weekday and to American law, which defined Sunday as a day for worship and rest without labor, the Sabbath became for decades Sunday. In traditional Judaism, alongside circumcision, the central male rite of passage was bar mitzvah at age thirteen. Temple Israel did away with bar mitzvah for a time, and replaced it with Sunday school, for both boys and girls, and a confirmation ceremony for its graduates. In traditional Judaism the synagogue is exclusively a house of worship and study. At Temple Israel the synagogue also became the site of sociability, with Sunday morning lecture programs that attracted large numbers of Gentiles, and within women's groups raising funds through public teas and fairs that also attracted Gentiles. Temple Israel's rabbis, who led a decorous, disciplined worship—in contrast to traditional worship in which the males recited the prayers, each at his own pace, and talked among themselves while others were praying—presented a sermon in English, the language of the service with a few exceptions for Hebrew, as the culmination of worship.

The oratory of these imposing spiritual leaders, and the language in which the synagogue's official representations of itself were expressed, resemble the bland, nondenominational theism of American civil religion—what journalists covering Nelson Rockefeller years ago identified in the New York governor's predictable oratorical repertory as BOMFOG (“The Brotherhood of Man and the Fatherhood of God”). Masters of this brand of Americanism, some of Temple Israel's rabbis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries acquired reputations in the larger Boston community, especially among elite Protestants, for the quality of their sermons, the scope of their learning, and the power of their English expression. Especially at times of congregational strife, they seemed more popular with Gentiles than with their own congregants.

The congregants' optimism about becoming a proud, accepted part of American society, which the authors see accounting for much of this innovation, must be qualified by the simultaneous existence of much anxious glancing back at the Gentile world for confirmation. A turn of direction, however, occurred when such anxieties reached a crescendo in the twentieth century because of the international growth of anti-Semitism in the 1920s and in the 1930s, when Father Francis Coughlin's Irish Catholic followers attacked Jews in the streets of Boston, and because of the subsequent destruction of Europe's Jews during World War II. Temple Israel's response was not to become less Jewish, but to move in the opposite direction.

Beginning in the 1930s and accelerating after World War II, Temple Israel sought a reengagement with more traditional elements of Judaism, forging a neotraditionalism that nonetheless continued to carry with it Reform Judaism's distinctive embrace of American democratic values and commitment to English and to the decorous worship of its past practice. Bar mitzvah was restored in 1941 after a lapse of almost six decades, and was complemented in 1956 by bat mitzvah for girls, which while not traditional, is a neotraditional innovation that began with Reform and Conservative Jews and would eventually, in a modified form, be adopted by

some Orthodox congregations. In the late 1930s a traditional Friday evening and Saturday morning Sabbath observance replaced Sunday worship. The return to the traditional Sabbath was facilitated by the Rooseveltian New Deal. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 made the five-day workweek the rule in most large industries and commercial businesses. Over the next four decades, too, successive court decisions would do away with mandatory Sunday closing laws for smaller commercial businesses, enabling Jews to keep their stores open on that day. The temple's neotraditionalism was influenced by the fact that among its members increasingly were eastern European immigrants and their American-born children, and their expectations were more inclined to tradition than the congregation's former Central European majority.

An embrace of global Jewish peoplehood, which added the challenge of dual loyalties to the complexities of Jewish American ethnicity, arose simultaneously with changes in ritual. The members of Temple Israel had, by and large, like many affluent assimilating Reform Jews in the early twentieth century, been hostile to Zionism. They had argued that the Jews were not a people but a religious group, and that America was the homeland of American Jews. In the 1930s the congregation began a tentative embrace of Zionism, in view of a perceived need for a homeland for the world's most oppressed Jews. This evolved swiftly after 1948 with the establishment of Israel, with which the congregation has for decades maintained a number of exchange programs. In the 1980s, too, its members would be deeply engaged in the international campaign to put pressure on the Soviet state to allow Jewish emigration, and it sponsored the resettlement in the Boston area of Soviet Jews allowed to emigrate. These developments mirrored the evolution of Reform congregations throughout the United States.

These new understandings of Jewishness were given articulation in 1954 by Rabbi Roland Gittleson, who advocated a public stance in the larger American community not founded upon denial, defensiveness, or apology, but rather in pride in the congregants' ancient heritage. Gittleson urged his congregants to seek a "positive acceptance," in which their Gentile neighbors respected Judaism and those who practiced it. Following Gittleson's direction has been rendered much easier to the extent that models of homogeneity for understanding American belonging have been supplanted since the 1950s by the widespread embrace of multicultural diversity. Difference is now valorized as never before in American history. But Temple Israel's embrace of elements of neotraditionalism, and hence Jewish distinctiveness, must not be confused with an embrace of fundamentalism or retreat from engagement with the American mainstream. The congregation remained loyal to the understanding that the practice of faith must remain responsive to progressive changes in values and practices in the larger American community. Shortly after Reform Judaism's rabbinical seminaries began to ordain women, Temple Israel hired its first woman rabbi, who joined the temple's three male rabbis in 1990. Within a few months after the Massachusetts Supreme Court established the legality of

same-sex marriage in 2004, rabbis at the temple had performed eleven marriage ceremonies of gay and lesbian couples. Throughout its twentieth-century history, the synagogue and individual members were engaged along parallel tracks in a variety of general, local and national, social justice, and civil rights activities.

Such has not been the way of the Orthodox Jews, about whom Jeffrey Gurock writes in this definitive work. It is no incidental matter that Gurock did not title his book "A History of American Orthodox Judaism," thus suggesting a progressive process of integration and assimilation. While there is surely something American about Orthodoxy in the United States, self-conscious adoption of American ways and beliefs for its own sake on the order of what has transpired at Temple Israel has not been the point. While the Reform Jews at Temple Israel have invited the world in, sought to learn new ways from its example, and in the process become Americanized, Orthodox Jews have proceeded tentatively outward into the world, struggling as their primary obligation to remain true to fundamentalist and traditionalist conceptions of Jewish law and custom. Gurock's work is a densely packed, deeply researched, and rich amalgam of history, speculation, and mediation between contending positions that is written, as the author informs us on numerous occasions, from within the tradition of Jewish worship he seeks to analyze. The book illustrates both the difficulties and substantial benefits to be derived when thoughtful historians write from within the religious tradition that claims them.

Influenced by his own participant-observer status in the present, Gurock writes enthusiastically and confidently about the core processes of Orthodox Judaism, in all its diversity, and is able to balance in a nuanced way the simultaneous treatment of believers, congregations, institutions, and religious authorities and their mutual impact upon one another. His ongoing analysis of the role of personality and interpersonal networks in the central controversies by which Orthodoxy has established itself in America is especially significant. He understands the central position of the powerful rabbinic personalities who built Orthodox congregations, day schools, colleges, and seminaries in an American environment that has until recent decades not been favorable to the Orthodox way of life, and who functioned as "decisors" in mediating practical conflicts arising between fundamentalist and American ways for the faithful. He understands the fierce loyalties these men have commanded, often long after their deaths, and the critical role of discipleship in the intergenerational transmission of rabbinic legacies. With Orthodox Jews a "rabbinic synthesis" appears often to be effective analytically.

Yet he is occasionally slow to explain matters that outsiders to Orthodoxy cannot understand without a patient guide, so that basic concepts, some with Hebrew names, are introduced but go unexplained for a time. He is slow, too, to help the uninitiated to understand the shifting boundaries across the wider spectrum of American Judaism. His introduction is concerned with presenting the diversity of Orthodox practice at the congregational and individual levels, as he has experienced it since his childhood, rather than explaining its outer boundaries. His historical discussion

employs the word “Orthodox” analytically with reference to time-periods prior to those in which his historical subjects actually used the word to identify themselves. But one must appreciate Gurock’s difficulties here. Those boundaries have hardly been stable, whether within Orthodoxy or between the various branches of Orthodoxy and other Jews. Nonetheless, it may take some time for those outside Judaism to feel confident as they seek to digest Gurock’s detailed discussions of belief and practice.

But the work is well worth the effort, for its great value to students of Judaism aside, it provides historians of American religion with an excellent example of the great difficulties and the unexpected triumphs religious traditionalists and fundamentalists have experienced in this society. After all, so much seems to militate against their success: individual socioeconomic and geographical mobility; frequent custom-shattering transformations of the means of production; and relative to Europe, a lack of positive government support for and subsidy of religious authorities and institutions.

The requirements of a strictly traditional life within Judaism have historically been quite difficult to maintain in the United States. Not a few of Orthodoxy’s numerous founders in America would have agreed with Rabbi Jacob Willowski, a formidable Lithuanian Torah scholar whose sojourns in America were characterized by controversy, who famously exclaimed in 1904 that America was “a treif [unkosher, as in “contaminated”] land in which even the stones are impure” (p. 133). A few examples will suffice, though because Orthodoxy is ultimately a way of life rather than simply a belief system, any effort to abstract one practice or another from the lives of believers is artificial. Orthodoxy requires strict observance of the Sabbath—not only refraining from work, but from cooking, using appliances or tools, carrying objects, and using conveyances for travel. Essential Sabbath tasks often fell to a Gentile (*Shabbes goy* [Sabbath Gentile]) hired to do such things as set a fire, or later turn on the lights. To obey Jewish dietary laws, both store-bought food and ritual wine must be certified as kosher by those elaborately trained and paid to make judgments on its manufacture; the ritual food matzoh, which also has to be certified kosher, must be consumed at Passover in place of leavened bread; and animals slaughtered for meat must be killed in a prescribed way. Staples of the historical American diet, pork and bacon, which have been cheap and universally available, are strictly forbidden. A married couple may not resume sexual relations after the wife’s menstrual period until she has visited a ritual bath (*mikvah*) for purification.

Orthodox observance, therefore, requires proximity to a synagogue of a sort that both Jewish settlement and American residential patterns, except in the most densely populated Jewish neighborhoods in cities, have often made difficult. It also requires a dense denominational infrastructure of religious institutions, specialized shops, and religious authorities that have often been absent in the rural areas and small towns and cities where Jews settled. Observance of the Sabbath and obedience to Sunday closing laws put Orthodox Jewish storekeepers at a competitive

disadvantage in business, and a Sunday alternative for worship was unimaginable within the framework of their religious understanding.

Those wishing to lead an Orthodox life have dealt with the difficulties in their path frequently, but mostly reluctantly and with a guilty conscience, by strategic compromises that allowed for distinctions between individual aspirations to a pious life and the types of public behavior needed to live effectively in America. For example, they worked on the Sabbath when there was no choice but unemployment or losing customers. They drove to synagogue on the Sabbath and on other Holy Days when they needed to traverse great distances (but parked far enough away to be inconspicuous). They kept kosher in their own homes but have eaten America's diet when away from them. They substituted the private bath tub for the *mikvah*.

The community has at times sought informally to censure egregious lapses by its members while remaining aware of the exigencies that make strict compliance so difficult. But Orthodoxy covers a significant spectrum, including its tentative modernizers, of internal diversity, and it grew more diverse in the twentieth century, especially just before and after World War II, as the ultra-Orthodox, eastern European Hassidic Jews, refugees and survivors of the Holocaust, established themselves in the United States. In contrast to the fundamentalist Hassidim, not all communities of the Orthodox have been equally uncompromising. Rabbis might insist on the sanctity of custom and law in theory but have had to cast a blind, if hardly indifferent, eye to violations under difficult conditions. Group strategies have been available from within tradition to address some of these challenges in ways that preserved Jewish law and served the needs of convenience. For example, the creation in cities of an *eruv*, a bounded area, physically demarcated by, say, the wires of utility poles, within which carrying is allowed on the Sabbath, has for many decades allowed Orthodox Jews to push baby carriages and strollers to synagogue while remaining obedient to Jewish law.

In recent times, as Gurock relates in detail, the strenuous demands of the Orthodox life have been rendered somewhat easier by technology, American law, the generalized cultural embrace of diversity, and strategic accommodations by the Orthodox themselves. In the twentieth century, Orthodox day schools, alternatives to the public schools, taught traditional Judaism and Hebrew, but to accommodate middle-class parents' hopes for the conventional success of their children, also taught an American curriculum approved by state education bureaucracies and geared to admission at prestigious colleges and universities. Automatic devices for programming electric lights, appliances, and elevators within apartment buildings began to make their appearance in the 1950s, while the constitutionality of the construction of an *eruv* was tested in courts and consistently approved as legal accommodation ensuring religious liberty. Supermarkets began to have kosher food sections, airlines began making kosher meals available to travelers as Yankee Stadium did for Orthodox baseball fans, and accommodations for kosher dining were installed at colleges and universities throughout the country. Alternative days

for taking standardized tests required for admissions to colleges and professional schools allowed Orthodox Jewish students to remain both competitive and observant. At the organizational and lobbying levels in their quest of public accommodation, some Orthodox Jews have found allies among fundamentalist and moral majoritarian Evangelical Christians, with whom they share conservative social values on questions of sexuality, gender, and reproductive rights.

Institutional Orthodox Judaism, its rabbinic authorities, and its most committed laity remained wary of too intimate an embrace of American culture. This was the case even as some Orthodox spokesman—animated, Gurock argues, by an unexpected triumph in a local court case involving a dispute with Conservative Jews over practices at a shared Mt. Clemens, Michigan, synagogue in which the judge invoked minority rights, and more generally by the changing cultural climate—began in the late 1950s to speak proudly of the possession of inalienable rights as Americans. The engagement with contemporary modernity that the Reform Jews of Temple Israel demonstrate in the early twentieth century in such matters as support for the ordination of women and gay and lesbian marriage cannot be an overriding concern of Orthodoxy, which, while its mainstream has expanded women's sphere in Torah study and ritual, has embraced neither ordination of women nor gay and lesbian marriage and holds to the Judaism's ancient patriarchal traditions. Yet the diversity of American Judaism remains a product of the singular openness and appeal of a society that has become as accommodating to those uncertain in their negotiation of its cultural claims as those enthusiastic about them.

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