

Urban Jewish Transformations

Journal of Urban History
2015, Vol. 41(3) 501–507
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Tobias Brinkmann (2012). *Sundays at Sinai: A Jewish Congregation in Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. viii, 369, illustrations, notes, index, \$45.00 (cloth).

Saskia Coenen Snyder (2012). *Building a Public Judaism: Synagogues and Jewish Identity in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 350, illustrations, notes, index, \$45.95 (cloth).

Meaghan Dwyer-Ryan, Susan L. Porter, and Lisa Fagin Davis (2009). *Becoming American Jews: Temple Israel of Boston*. Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, pp. xvii, 259, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index, \$24.95 paper.

Fred Rosenbaum (2009). *Cosmopolitans: A Social and Cultural History of the Jews of the San Francisco Bay Area*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. xviii, 439, illustrations, photographs, notes, index, \$39.95 (cloth).

Eric J. Sundquist (2005). *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 662, illustrations, notes, index, \$35.00 (cloth).

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DOI: 10.1177/0096144215571561

In October 2013, the Pew Research Center released the findings from their survey of American Jews. The survey garnered much attention from the organized Jewish community as it grappled with the controversial, though not unexpected, findings of a shrinking and perhaps weakening Jewish population. Previous studies found that the aging population has an intermarriage rate that remains high at near 50 percent. Additionally, about half of all American Jews are unaffiliated with the institutional Jewish community and more and more Jews are defining themselves as Jewish culturally and ethnically, rather than religiously. These trends are not new. They have a long history that stretches back to the 1800s as urban Jewish communities have attempted to accommodate Jewish life to modern political, social, and cultural developments. The five books reviewed here trace the structural, organizational, and theological development of several Jewish communities throughout Europe and the United States, demonstrating the shift out of Europe to a new promised land in America.

Saskia Coenen Snyder's *Building a Public Judaism* describes the historical settings in which new synagogues became the literal, structural manifestations of the size, location, and unity (or divisions) of the Jewish communities in Berlin, London, Amsterdam, and Paris. The location and design of the synagogues in each city reveal not only the extent of Jewish emancipation across Europe prior to the world wars but also the strategic attempts by Jews to define their Jewishness to both themselves and others. Coenen Snyder details the "aesthetic and symbolic politics" (p. 268) of synagogue construction in this highly readable social history that nevertheless assumes a familiarity with European synagogue architecture and frequently leaves German-language concepts undefined. She begins with the most familiar of her examples—the Oranienburgerstrasse synagogue of Berlin. With the spectre of the Holocaust looming, the Oriental grandiosity of the structure morbidly highlights the sense of optimism among Berlin's Jews as they tried to carve

out a place for themselves within the newly unified German state. Contrary to popular assumptions, the Moorish style was not a favored choice for synagogues across the continent. She describes how in Berlin, it was eventually selected for use in this monumental structure in order to invoke a sense of Jewishness that would stand in contrast to Gothic architecture, which had become associated with the secular and Christian.

Coenen Snyder's chapter on the Berlin synagogue focuses on the planning and construction of the building that began in 1846 and was completed in 1866. The controversial inclusion of an organ in the new synagogue (instruments are banned within traditional communal worship) is symbolic of the attempt to modernize worship services and to demonstrate the modern and moral refinement of the community. The Jews of Berlin increased their wealth and prestige along with their city and saw their numbers soar from 12,675 in 1855 to 28,000 (p. 44) by the time the Oranienburgerstrasse was inaugurated. The size of their rapid rise and fall is mirrored by the construction and design of this new center of Jewish communal life. The tragedy is evident in the community's attempt to carefully design a building that would positively represent the size and cultural authority of the community as intellectually, aesthetically, and morally refined citizens of the new nation. Coenen Snyder does not belabor the obvious point that in their attempt to claim space within Germany by literally marking the centrality of their institutional life as orderly and united, not diffuse and chaotic, others would soon come to view its very ostentatiousness as a sign of the Jews' foreignness.

The Berlin example stands in stark contrast to the more modest structures in London, Amsterdam, and Paris. Unlike in Berlin where Jewish communal membership was mandatory and whose population had only recently been granted conditional citizenship, the Jews of the other three cities had no need for an "architecture of emancipation" (p. 257). With populations that were less affluent and more spread out across the cities, smaller worship and communal structures and institutions were favored over centralization. Traditional—or what would become described as orthodox in contrast to the growing Reform movement in Germany—practices predominated in these cities, where Jews did not feel the same threat or need to define and justify how their Jewishness fit into their national cultural milieus. Still, the communities of each city variously debated centralization, the number of *hevrot* (small, independent congregations), the purchase of an organ, mixed seating for males and females, and codes for bodily comportment during services (e.g., swaying or singing or reciting prayers in unison). More than the buildings themselves, the extent to which each city's Jewish community engaged with reforms coming out of the burgeoning German Reform movement became the preoccupying concern of European Jewish communities. These concerns followed Jewish immigrants across the Atlantic and indeed came to define the American Jewish religious marketplace.

Meaghan Dwyer-Ryan, Susan L. Porter, and Lisa Fagin Davis's *Becoming American Jews* is a synagogue-sponsored account of the temple's history, beginning in 1842 with the idea of founding a congregation for the newly arrived Jewish immigrants. Exhaustive in its detailing of the course of its 150-year history, they document the temple's origins and transition from being a traditional German (i.e., Orthodox in modern denominational terms) *shul* to becoming the largest Reform congregation in Boston. Like the Jewish communities of London and Paris during the late 1800s described by Coenen Snyder, the Jews of Boston were not concentrated in one urban neighborhood, as they were in Berlin and Amsterdam. They initially maintained their traditional European worship styles even as they lived decidedly un-orthodox lives outside of synagogue (working on the Sabbath, eating non-kosher foods, etc.). Described as upwardly mobile and free from the historic and civic-related institutions of European Jewish communal life, the authors describe how the Jews of Boston began to create new ways of being Jewish and defining Judaism. In Europe, Orthodoxy remains the norm for worship today and most Jewish communities still have a chief rabbi who represents "the" Jewish community and acts as a liaison to local governments, governments that in some cases financially support Jewish life in the city. These rabbis

thus help to maintain an Orthodox definition of Judaism, even if this definition is still mostly an ideal represented by the rabbi and does not reflect the reality of the lived Judaism of the people. In contrast, in the U.S. today, Reform Judaism dominates. Larger trends such as this are addressed only peripherally within this particular congregational history, yet their account is representative of the development of a uniquely American brand of Judaism—or, more accurately, Judaisms—and of an American Jewish identity.

Reform Judaism is rooted in the urban Germany described by Coenen Snyder where Jews sought to refine their practices according to modern, secular and even Christian mores. But it is in America where Reform Judaism blossomed. Today, the majority of American Jews identify as Reform when asked for a denominational affiliation. The separation of church and state, in combination with a community that grew to incorporate multiple and diverse immigrant groups over time, helps to explain the American inclination toward Reform Judaism. This detailed, chronological account documents the temple's leadership, but also devotes great attention to the participation of individual members who created and managed various types of congregational committees. Reflecting the larger American context, various factions were formed in Boston and some eventually broke away to form new congregations according to their preferred styles of worship. In addition to a change in worship style, new reform theological interpretations began to be adopted, such as when the Boston congregation began to refer to its building as a temple, not a synagogue. The new terminology is evidence of the rejection of the notion of a messianic redemption that is still present in more traditional forms of Judaism. Further, in their desire to appear more American, like their German Reform counterparts' efforts to appear more German, they began to include weekly sermons into their worship services and purchased an organ to accompany a paid choir. They also began to conduct themselves in a more orderly way when praying that contrasted with the traditional mode of prayer, which can appear chaotic to outsiders as congregants mumble and sway their way through prayers at their own pace. These changes attracted new members previously unaffiliated with temple life. Though the changes were not met without dissent from established members, some of whom chose to leave, the authors describe how the gradual adoption of these modern changes continued to meet the needs of an increasingly American populace.

As the synagogue came to be a center for Jewish life, bringing together religious, educational, social, and civic activities, lay leaders were increasingly in charge of running special committees for programs for single and young adult members, for students through the temple's religious school (especially for new immigrant children), for social welfare, for the fundraising of new buildings, and for the hiring of new temple leaders. The constant debates and disagreements between the religious leadership and temple members highlight which issues were contentious when and demonstrate the gradual pace of change. The congregation has included many prominent American Jewish leaders and families such as Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman who introduced Friday night services, who was a Zionist when the idea had not yet taken hold of the American Jewish imagination, and who provided spiritual support in the aftermath of the Holocaust through his radio program and book *Peace of Mind*, a *New York Times* bestseller. However, the model of a community that stood in deference to its leaders and rabbis appears to have lost sway across the Atlantic. Voices such as Liebman's may have helped to guide the way, but it is the story of a growing and demographically shifting population that became increasingly affluent, educated, and *American* that explains the changes in organizational practice and theological orientations that were adopted at Temple Israel. While the chronological play-by-play of the congregation is evidence of the audience of temple members for whom this work was written, the book nevertheless provides an important contribution to the historical record of the development of American Jewish life.

Tobias Brinkmann's *Sundays at Sinai: A Jewish Congregation in Chicago* provides greater analysis of the contextual and historic elements that influenced the adoption of new practices and

beliefs by another newly formed congregation in America during the mid-1800s. Written for a more general audience than *Becoming American Jews*, Brinkmann provides a richly historically situated account of the development of one of the country's oldest and largest Reform congregations. Unlike Temple Israel of Boston, which gradually transitioned into becoming a Reform congregation, Chicago Sinai was founded as a Reform congregation, embracing the movement's most "radical" elements, such as mixed seating and a prayer book in the local vernacular (at the time, German), from the start. Brinkmann traces the earliest stages of the synagogue's development, a development that paralleled westward expansion and the influx of eastern European immigrants to the United States, through to the 1920s and tapering off with the congregation's diminished status by the 1960s.

On the eve of the American Civil War, Temple Sinai was created by a group of reformers who sought to break away from one of the two existing congregations in the rapidly growing city of Chicago on the edge of the expanding American frontier. The cause of the split demonstrates that these Jews of the borderland were not caught up in debating *if* change should happen, as both the Jews of Boston and the Jews in Europe were debating at the same time, but *when* and at what pace change should take place. The founders sought to distinguish their congregation from those affiliated with Isaac Mayer Wise's movement to adapt Judaism to American life at a steady pace that he controlled in his efforts to bring together all of American Jewry. Brinkmann describes how the Jewish population was growing increasingly diverse as immigrants arrived from a variety of small towns with their own languages and customs where, in this rapidly industrializing city, they were free to abandon traditional practice. Wise sought to unite them not so much to preserve Judaism, but to create and preserve a Jewish community. However, the "secessionists" were unwilling to re-create the type of strictly controlled hierarchical religious system that they experienced in Europe (p. 53) and they sought to acculturate the new immigrants into a uniquely American form of Judaism. Despite a desire to create a set of Jewish practices that were recognizable as a reputable religion within the contemporary Christian American religious landscape, these reformers looked to Germany for ideological guidance as well as leadership because they saw Germany as the model of what it meant to be modern, educated, and cultured.

All of the Reform training centers were in Germany when Sinai was founded. Although some of the movement's leaders were born in the States, having a sophisticated German Reform-trained rabbi was a mark of prestige. While the American version of Reform was shocking to some German reformers, Brinkmann shows that there was a lack of predictability in practice across the two settings. For example, mixed seating was still controversial in Berlin at the same time that it was becoming commonplace in American synagogues and Sunday services were the new norm in *both* Berlin's largest synagogue and at Temple Sinai beginning in 1873 and continuing through to today (along with Friday night services). Eventually, America would take over as the center of the Reform movement. Brinkmann devotes much attention to the man who embodied this shift from Europe to the States at Sinai: Rabbi Emil G. Hirsch. Hirsch became Sinai's rabbi in 1880 and remained there until his death in 1923. He is credited with leading the congregation into a period of growth and worldwide recognition as a radical, Progressive congregation. Much like the Reform Judaism of today, political and social action were central to Hirsch's theology. His death occurred as an ideological shift began in American Jewry's support of Zionism and its orientation toward and relationship with Europe changed. This marked the end to the golden age of Temple Sinai's history. While *Sundays at Sinai* and *Becoming American Jews* both offer accounts of the structural and organizational changes of two key American Reform congregations, it is their detailing of the theological developments in America that together tell the larger history of American Judaism.

Fred Rosenbaum's *Cosmopolitans* offers another local history but focuses not on one particular congregation but on the origins and development of the Jewish community across the San Francisco Bay Area. Rosenbaum is the founder of the Bay Area's Lehrhaus Judaica, a popular

nondenominational center for Jewish learning, and he is clearly well connected and knowledgeable of the Jewish history of the area. He provides some historical contextualizing of the changes evident in the Jewish community as connected to some larger cultural and political trends locally and nationally, but the history he presents reads more like a congregation-sponsored piece. Many Jewish leaders and their personal histories are briefly described, including their connections to other Jews and key figures, but these descriptions are offered more to document their presence and contributions rather than to present an analysis of their contributions as situated within a larger historical narrative. The relative influence of the names, events, and organizations he presents is flat.

Unlike the Jews in the first three books reviewed, Rosenbaum's Jews are not necessarily, and in fact are rarely described as being, connected to a synagogue or formal Jewish community. Many of the Jewish people he describes appear to be what some describe as "just Jewish," meaning that they were Jews by birth, by chance, and the influence of their Jewishness on their interests and choices is left uninterrogated. He suggests two themes that distinguish the Bay Area Jewish community's identity: the arts and social justice. However, the evidence presented to support each theme is weak. While names like Gertrude Stein stand out for those with a even fleeting knowledge of contemporary art, the significance of her and others' cultural contributions, either to the local Jewish community or the larger public, are left out of the descriptions of their work here. The focus is on the connection of these Jews to Bay Area life.

Rosenbaum is perhaps too embedded and invested in a positive narrative of the presence and contributions of Jews and the Jewish community of the Bay Area to be able to avoid meaningful criticism or contextualizing. While highlighting the social justice orientations that motivate many of the Bay Area's Jews today and briefly describing the more spiritual and less theologically oriented Jewish population, Rosenbaum leaves out a deeper discussion of why they have this particular orientation and why and how this conforms to or conflicts with larger trends in the American Jewish community. In fact, he relies too easily at times on stereotypes. For example, he describes the way in which Jews overcame economic discrimination in the 1850s as similar to the way in which Asians today overcome economic insecurity with familial and community support. Further, he cites "quantitative analysis" (34) that supports the idea that the Jews of the area were exceptional in their economic achievements relative to their numbers and leaves the topic of race completely out of the discussion. The lack of a discussion of race in Dwyer-Ryan, Porter, and Fagin Davis's *Becoming American Jews* is more understandable in the context of their primary concern of writing an internally focused congregational history. In contrast, race and other social dimensions such as class and political orientation are all central to both Coenen Snyder and Brinkmann's works as they elaborated on how various synagogues were situated, literally and sociohistorically. One would expect a work such as *Cosmopolitans* to include a greater awareness of and sensitivity to these dimensions as it seems to aim to place the San Francisco Jewish community on the radar of the American Jewish public, adding to the plethora of works on the Jews of New York and various cities across the east coast. The extensive list of key names, events, and organizations presented here, however, do not in and of themselves provide evidence of a Jewish community whose history is intertwined and representative of the booming metropolis in the hundred years following the Gold Rush of the mid-1850s. A Jewish presence as part of the diversity of the area is documented, but Rosenbaum fails to persuade that the Jewish story of the area is a San Francisco story. This text is best understood as an attempt by a key Bay Area figure to document a Jewish west coast while leaving a larger, more detailed historical narrative of the significance of the Bay Area Jewish community to others.

Coenen Snyder demonstrates how the beginnings of a shift away from traditional Eastern European theological interpretations and, more importantly, practice, is illustrated by the debates and decisions that went into building new synagogues. This shift went even further on American soil and, together, the three books on three different American Jewish communities provide a less

exoticized account of American Jewish life than is typically featured in both the mainstream media and academic research. Despite the continued fascination with Orthodox Judaism and its obvious adherents with their black hats, beards, wigs, and adherence to strict observance of Jewish laws (walking on *Shabbat*, going to a *mikvah*), most American Jews today are *not* Orthodox, and in many ways the non-Orthodox history of the American Jewish community, as detailed in these three books, parallels Jewish integration into the fabric of American life. A perhaps similarly exotic fascination with the black-Jewish alliance during the Civil Rights era of the 1960s has spawned numerous academic accounts of this historical partnership, as well as the divisions and tensions between blacks and Jews in America.

Eric Sundquist's *Strangers in the Land* adds to the archive of this alliance by contributing a unique cultural history as seen through an extensive array of literary works. Though *Strangers in the Land* does not focus on one particular urban area, it provides a meta-level perspective of the significance of the relationship between the American Jewish and African American communities in their quests for freedom. Nonchronological in its orientation, Sundquist instead traces the reality and myth of the intertwined narratives throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries as they coalesced within some of the post-Holocaust era's greatest literary works. The two themes of Exodus and Holocaust—and, later, Zionism—are found throughout as Sundquist demonstrates how each group (and occasionally those who claim membership in both) utilized these stories as ethical frameworks that justified their efforts toward aspirational positions of equality within American society. With the Exodus story serving as an explicitly embraced metaphor, the shared history of diaspora, oppression, and racism provided the substance that helped to unite blacks and Jews during the Civil Rights era. He explains how the Exodus story is still central to Jewish identity today and came to serve as the primary allegory of the freedom songs and narratives that came out of slavery and an allegory that helped blacks to understand the death of Martin Luther King Jr. Sundquist shows how the Exodus narrative is so deeply engrained as part of each group's religious and political positioning that elements of the story are contorted at times in order to justify new political narratives and movements.

Like slavery for African Americans, Sundquist suggests that the tragedy of the Holocaust helped to unite American Jewry, shifting the center of the Jewish world away from the Old World and over to the New. In this new home, Jews assimilated while also demanding equal status under the law and began to see their calls for equality as connected to that of other oppressed peoples within their new homeland. He explains how the black-Jewish alliance is embodied in the relationship between King and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Yet, by the time of King's death, he notes that the anticolonialist, anti-Zionist, and even anti-Semitic elements of an increasingly radical black movement was growing. As distance from the Holocaust grew, Jews increasingly became part of the white majority, securing greater and greater economic and social equality in the United States while blacks remained trapped in new forms of American slavery, trapped within the "Egypt of America" (110). Jewishness became, to a large extent, part of whiteness in America as Jews assimilated, an assimilation made possible by their skin color.

Sundquist demonstrates elaborately and convincingly how blacks came to view their current existence as a holocaust of their own. Sympathy for the Jews of Europe was replaced by growing frustration with their own oppression, and a new era of revolutionary calls for black nationalism and Black Power began. The rift between the two groups grew as the black movement came to be anti-Zionist in its "anticolonial inversion" (110) of the Exodus story where blacks are claimed as the true and original Israelites. Sundquist traces out the course of the black-Jewish relationship through a vast array of literary evidence, including detailed analyses of the works of James Baldwin, Bernard Malamud, and Toni Morrison, while demonstrating the ways in which black narratives are almost always dependent on Jewish religious and political narratives. The almost mythological place that the relationship holds within the American conscience is perhaps best evidenced in his analysis of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). Sundquist points to this

novel as a literary mirror that reflected back to the American public how close it came to a genocide of its own. Though Jews are not central to the novel and the main characters are white, Sundquist suggests that Lee, a non-Jewish, white woman, someone outside of the black–Jewish frames of reference, managed to use the histories of each to tell a uniquely American story of race, racism, and social change that still captivates. Neither black nor Jewish himself, Sundquist demonstrates a comprehensive knowledge of Jewish and African American religious and cultural texts while also utilizing evidence from law and sociology to complement and frame his arguments. His immense literary critique itself proves how symbolic the black–Jewish alliance and tension remains for exploring the possibilities for ethnic particularism and multiculturalism in America through the example of these groups on different ends of the racial spectrum, groups who nevertheless remain deeply connected through their shared frameworks for self-comprehension.

Author Biography

Genevieve Okada Goldstone is a doctoral candidate in the anthropology department at the University of California, San Diego. Her research interests include religious cultures and conversion and their intersection with racial and ethnic identities. She is currently completing a dissertation on the changing demographics of the American Jewish community in Los Angeles.