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America and the Jews: Different, or the Same?

By Jack Wertheimer

In 2004, a commemorative medal marking the 350th anniversary of Jewish settlement in North America quoted, on one side, from George Washington's letter assuring the Jews of Newport, R.I. of their rightful place in the fledgling republic of the United States; the reverse side portrayed huddled masses of Jews yearning to breathe free; around the outer edge, in Hebrew and English, ran the biblical passage, "proclaim liberty throughout the land."



RELEVANT LINKS

My Heroes Barry A. Kosmin, *Jewish Identity and Religious Commitment*. Asked to name their Jewish heroes, teens in a mid-90s survey named personalities from the Bible, Israel, the Holocaust, and their families. The only American public figure? Sandy Koufax.

This same message—of, in brief, the perfect fit that exists between America and the Jews—has been ubiquitous for well over a century in American Jewish culture. So the historian Beth Wenger demonstrates in her wide-ranging new book, *History Lessons: The Creation of American Jewish Heritage*. Marshalling evidence from war monuments to children's school books, from official pronouncements to "civic performances" on Jewish and American holidays, Wenger deftly sketches the main elements of what she calls "the central myths of American Jewish culture."

The first element is that "America is different." The U.S., in this telling, has provided opportunities never enjoyed elsewhere, making it possible for Jews to attain unprecedented heights, both occupational and social. Second, exposure to the American environment created a historically new kind of Jew—a belief that, as Wenger notes, would compete with the Zionist notion of creating a new Jew in the land of Israel. Third, not only do American and Jewish values converge, but influential shapers of the American ethos were inspired by ideas imbibed from the Hebrew Bible and other Jewish texts. According to Wenger, some of her students at the University of Pennsylvania continue to assert with perfect certitude that Judaism is itself the source of American democratic ideals.

It is on the basis of such assumptions, Wenger argues, that American Jews constructed a self-confident narrative both about American "exceptionalism" and about their own "at-homeness" in America. Having arrived on these shores at the earliest stages of the national experiment, and having sacrificed blood and treasure in the country's wars, surely American Jews had every right to feel a strong sense of belonging, of being accepted as equals, and of participating in a truly exceptional historical experience.

To this "cult of synthesis"—the historian Jonathan Sarna's term for "the belief that Judaism and

Americanism reinforce one another"—Wenger brings a creditable degree of skepticism. For one thing, she points out, the very fervency with which Jews proclaim their belongingness may hint at an underlying uncertainty or insecurity. After all, it is not as if American Jews have been immune to housing and job discrimination, social barriers, quotas at universities, anti-Semitic demagoguery, and at times physical violence: symptoms of a more complicated reality that the protestations are designed to deny or obscure.

More importantly, while acknowledging, as any fair-minded observer must, just how generous America has been to its Jews, Wenger reminds her readers that Jews in other lands, too, including France, Germany, England, and even Poland, have constructed similar narratives about their rootedness in their respective native lands and have pointed, with justice, to the successes achieved by their coreligionists (if nowhere so broadly or on anything like the same scale as in America). In respect of such national mythmaking, one might even say, American Jews have been remarkably *unexceptional*.

All of this is a welcome corrective. But a question that naturally flows from Wenger's analysis, though one she leaves unexamined, concerns the possible costs exacted by this mythmaking. Have American Jews, as a group, paid a price for blurring the lines between the cultural assumptions of their own religious and civilizational heritage and the values of their American environment? Has Judaism itself been falsified in the bid to reconcile its distinctive worldview with those values?

In considering the past, such questions may be of only academic interest; but in our own time they have assumed critical importance. Even as individual American Jews encounter few, if any, barriers to their socio-economic advancement, Jewish group existence has become highly insecure. The problem is not a lack of "at-homeness"; to the contrary, in the minds of American Jews, American and Jewish values have "coalesced" (the word is Sylvia Barack Fishman's) into so seamless a whole that many no longer see a point in maintaining a distinctive collective existence. And indeed, if Judaism's norms are so perfectly convergent with America's, why bother to remain Jewish?

Significant numbers of today's American Jews have already made up their minds on this issue, and are voting with their feet. Meanwhile, as that 2004 commemorative medal suggests, the official community continues doggedly to promote the cult of synthesis—without even appearing to notice how obsolescent its original assumptions have become. For, on both the American and the Jewish side, many of today's regnant cultural values diverge rather markedly from those of the past.

To take but one example from Wenger's study, there was a time when American Jewish leaders chose their heroes and communal role models from the ranks of figures like Haym Solomon, a financier of the American Revolution. They may have overstated Solomon's contributions to the war effort, but at least he was an engaged and observant Jew. Today's public honors are more routinely bestowed on successful individuals in finance, or industry, or the arts whose personal lives are bereft of Jewish content.

Is this the road to Jewish group survival? In light of what is at stake, one wonders who is prepared to undertake the urgent task of constructing a more honest and more challenging story about the place of Jews and Judaism in America, a story of gratitude, patriotism, and compatibility, but also of difference, dissent, and distinctiveness.

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