

JONATHAN D. SARNA. *American Judaism: A History*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004. Pp. xx + 490.

The Ambivalent American Jewish Historian

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AMERICAN JUDAISM: A HISTORY is a masterpiece. Published so as to coincide with the 350th anniversary of American Jewry, this engaging tour-de-force narrates the history of Jews in America, commencing with their arrival in New Amsterdam in 1654. The work displays not only the historian's craft at its finest but demonstrates and draws upon Sarna's extraordinary erudition, and the stunning scope of sources, evidence, and contemporary commentary under his command.

Moving from period to period, and issue to issue, Sarna deftly threads together the saga of American Jews' encounter with America. He writes a history appropriate to the current moment in American Jewry, one where the leaders and likely readers of his work are asking, in one version or another, what may be termed "the continuity question": Will the openness of American society bring about a significant dissolution of American Jewry, leaving Jews much reduced in number, vitality, and community?

Through its six historically focused chapters, ranging from "Colonial Beginnings" to "Renewal"—an aptly entitled chapter that runs from the end of World War II to the present day—Sarna presents an upbeat portrait of ongoing Jewish adjustment to America and repeatedly successful attempts to contend with new challenges. Notwithstanding their ongoing fears for their very survival (and in part because of them), American Jews, in this rendition, innovate compelling developments in culture, community, and identity, even as they evolve a civilization in the United States that is distinctively American. Throughout the (nearly) 350 years covered in this work, several key themes emerge.

First, Jews repeatedly renegotiate and reshape the social, religious, and cultural boundaries that separate them from the larger society, while they continually invent and establish intragroup boundaries that reflect

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Jewish diversity and internal multipartisanship, features reflecting a vital and creative religio-ethnic community.

Second, their ongoing innovation in culture, politics, and religious life both generates and reflects the emergence of vigorous and effective leadership. Despite rather diminutive numbers, American Jews have managed to amass an impressive record of achievement in such diverse areas as economic advancement, political influence, cultural contribution, religious organization, ethnic community, and in such specific realms, as Sarna notes, as scholarship, feminism, and spirituality.

Third, their success in boundary maintenance and leadership generation comes because of, if not in spite of, their assimilation of American cultural traits, most notably the radical individualism of American society. From their first encounter with emerging American culture and society, Jews find that they cannot replicate the taken-for-granted communitarian assumptions of their European past, nor do they wish to. Individual freedom, autonomy, diversity, and a modicum of fragmentation characterize the history of American Jews, Jewishness, and Judaism from its very beginnings, an appropriate response to a society that values freedom of conscience and enshrines as sacred the notion that, in the very first words of the First Amendment, "*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.*"

Fourth, it comes as no surprise that, in light of these factors, Jews in America produced a Judaism characterized by fragmentation, conflict, and disunity, never to the point of complete schism, but one marked by sharp divisions along several dimensions. Among these are social class, gender, and generation, all of which, in turn underlay resulting divisions in politics, traditionalism, and religiosity. With a culture renowned for its centuries of fractiousness, how could it be otherwise?

In his final reflections, an epilogue-like chapter entitled "Conclusion: American Judaism at a Crossroads," Sarna takes a turn in tone and substance. In the transition from historical scholar to contemporary analyst, his mood shifts from upbeat and almost buoyant to cautious and almost worried.

Sarna's concern begins with Jews' reported decline in "their absolute numbers in America" (a debatable inference, in my view, at least as of the present moment) and the rise in "their rate of intermarriage" (empirically indisputable, and, unquestionably the single major challenge to American Jewish "continuity" in the twenty-first century). He further expounds upon his argument, citing four challenges, in which "the issue of boundaries stands at the top of the list." Others include "the broad area of authority and leadership"; "contemporary culture" (by which he means

“a host of liberal twenty-first century American values”); and, in the face of American society’s individualism, “the challenge of preserving Jewish unity.” Notably, all four themes of the current challenges run contrary to the optimistic inferences embedded in Sarna’s compelling historical narrative.

His concluding paragraphs cite the plausibility of two sharply opposing scenarios. In one, “Judaism in America is doomed . . . should high rates of intermarriage continue and the community grow complacent.” Alternatively, “History . . . also suggests another possibility: that . . . American Jews will find creative ways to maintain and revitalize American Judaism.” Sarna comes down in favor of neither prognostication, nor does he lay out the conditions under which to anticipate either complacent doom or creative revival.

Oddly, nothing in the first 355 pages of his book prepares one for the nearly one-sided articulations of four critical challenges to American Jewry in the early twenty-first century. In point of fact, the not-at-all covert message of the major part of this extraordinary piece of scholarship is to counter concerns of contemporary readers with such matters as group boundaries, authoritative leadership, societal individualism, and Jewish unity. If anything, the historical portion of the scholarship by the most accomplished historian of the American Jewish experience in our time conveys a message of reassurance. It is one which places contemporary concerns in a historical context, suggesting that the major motif of Jewish history in America is one of constant and repeated adjustment, marked by periods of revival, and of successful absorption of larger societal cultural elements to the ultimate benefit of American Judaism.

To make the case for concern, Sarna would need to argue forcefully and convincingly that the current moment is radically different from all the previous eras of American Jewish history and that contemporary challenges are so very different in quality from those experienced in the past three and a half centuries. Alternatively, to substantiate the claim of radical shift in the American Jewish condition, differences in quantity must amount to differences in quality. In my view, matters relating to boundaries, leadership, individualism, and fragmentation—while troubling—fail to constitute a significant departure from the past, as Sarna’s history so amply demonstrates. Rather, only one challenge, one to which Sarna himself devotes considerable and deserved attention, does qualify as truly extraordinary in both historical and sociological terms: the challenge of intermarriage.

The evidence, as Sarna correctly and thoroughly recounts, points not only to historically unparalleled levels of intermarriage but to disastrous

consequences for the perpetuation of Jewish attachment in succeeding generations. By my own calculation, a mere 12 percent of the grandchildren of intermarried Jews identify as Jews themselves. Moreover, after more than a decade of heightened community awareness of the challenge of intermarriage, all the welcoming and all the outreach efforts have failed to bring substantially more of the intermarried and their families into active Jewish life than in the past. In fact, scattered pieces of evidence point to a contrary trend: the in-married have become more engaged in Jewish life and the out-married have moved even further from patterns of engagement than in the past.

I certainly agree with Sarna that the result of these patterns points to an interim configuration that he labels the "Bipolar Model." In this model, larger numbers of Jews move toward both intensified and marginal modes of Jewish engagement, shrinking out the once numerous middle of the Jewish identity spectrum. My sense is that we have already entered a period of bipolarity.

With the passage of time, perhaps in another generation or two, the descendants of Jews at the less engaged pole of the identity spectrum may well only faintly affirm the identity of their intermarried forebears. In such a circumstance, we may well anticipate shrinkage of the American Jewish population. Yet it would be a population with an educated, committed, and active core of several million. And, if Sarna's history repeats itself, that more fully engaged core—with its higher rates of communal affiliation, Judaic skills, in-marriage, and birthrates—may well lead yet another period of rebound, renewal, and revival in Jewish life, replicating a pattern stretching back several centuries.

Whatever its merits or degree of accuracy in portending the future, *American Judaism: A History* stands as a brilliant, engaging, readable, profound, thoughtful, and provocative history of American Jewish group life. Its reading of American Jewish history provides the context and concepts by which to insightfully comprehend the American Jewish present and, perhaps, to think incisively about its future as well. The volume is a testimony to the historian's artistry at its best, and to the work of an extraordinary student of American Jewish history drawing upon his decades of original scholarship.