American Jewish History: 350 Years in 3 Easy Lessons
by David Kaufman

This year, the 350th anniversary of Jewish settlement in North America (1654-2004), is an opportune moment for Jewish educators to renew their commitment to the teaching of the American Jewish experience. I say "renew" because nowadays, American Jewish history doesn't occupy a very central place in the Jewish classroom — and so the question arises, why teach the subject at all? For the teacher, it may prove useful to think of the history of American Jews as a series of narratives, each with its own basic plot, characteristic figures, key themes, and ideological perspective.[1] There are, allow me to suggest, three principal narratives of American Jewish history, each deriving from a particular historical perspective: 1) an integrationist, or "Americanist," point of view; 2) a culturally specific, or "Judaic," perspective; and 3) a culturally synthetic, or "American-Jewish," take on the American Jewish experience. Let's consider them one at a time.

An "Americanist" Viewpoint

The narrative I am calling "Americanist" is the story, first, of how Jews came to America and became American, and, ultimately, of how Jews and Judaism became integral parts of American life. The story begins in the colonial period, when individual Jews joined the early settlers in what Europeans called "the New World" (of course, for the native inhabitants of "America" — also a European term — there was nothing new about it). A number of "Conversos" — Sephardic Jews forcibly converted to Christianity — accompanied Columbus on his famous voyage of 1492; and somewhat less famously, in 1585 a Jewish metallurgist and mining engineer named Joachim Gaunse appeared in the English colony on Roanoke Island. By the middle of the seventeenth century, a number of Jewish businessmen had stayed for brief periods in port cities along the Atlantic seaboard, and, finally, in September 1654, the first group settlement of Jews took place in Dutch-ruled New Amsterdam (ten years later, it was taken over by the British and renamed New York). We commemorate the arrival of those twenty-three refugees from Portugese Brazil for a number of reasons, but one above all: the fact of their arrival proclaims, in no uncertain terms, WE WERE HERE. Jews were present at the infancy of the American nation and have been here ever since. The narrative suggests that, at least in terms of seniority, we are as American as descendants of the Mayflower. Of course, Jews remained a very small minority of the population throughout the colonial period (1/10th of one percent), but were on the scene nonetheless, laying the groundwork for others to come.

The Americanist narrative continues with a look at the role Jews played in the American Revolution. As freedom-loving colonials, the majority of Jews joined the revolutionary effort, and, in the process, acquired a new sense of national identity — through the crucible of war, they were forged into Americans. As a trope, a repeated theme, it is recited again for the Civil War of the nineteenth century and yet again for the World Wars of the twentieth. But certainly the most romance surrounds the Revolutionary War tale, for the same reason as above — we do not expect to find Jews so early in the American historical narrative, and yet there they are. You may recall learning in Hebrew school of the Jewish hero of the American Revolution, Haym Salomon, who was not a soldier, scholar, or communal leader, but a financier. It remains somewhat of a mystery how a bond broker was drafted by our mythmakers and textbook writers to represent the Jewish contribution to the Revolution; yet there he is, enshrined as the most famous and consequential Jew of the time. Let me suggest one possibility: Given his critical (and purportedly selfless) financial contribution to the war effort, Salomon is apt to appear in general historical accounts as well as in Jewish histories. He is therefore part of the American

apt to appear in general historical accounts as well as in Jewish histories. He is therefore part of the American narrative as well as the Jewish. And this is the constant bias of the Americanist narrative — concerned most of all with Jewish experience resonant with and confirmed by the "real" history —American history.

Likewise, the nineteenth century figures our textbooks highlight most often are Levi Strauss, purveyor of denim jeans ("Levi's") to prospectors of the California Gold Rush and later a wealthy industrialist in San Francisco; Judah Benjamin, high-ranking official of the southern states government during the Civil War era and known as "the brains of the Confederacy"; and Emma Lazarus, the Jewish poet who penned the stirring words engraved on the base of the Statue of Liberty, "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore." At first glance, these three share little in common, save their Jewish background; but look again at the reason we choose to celebrate them. Each one, in his or her own way, participated in and contributed to the making of American history. To the trope, "we were there," they add: "and we made important contributions to American life." No matter that they were all highly assimilated Jews — they are venerated in American Jewish history for their Americanness. Of course, many more examples could be added for the twentieth century, but rather than list them, take a simple test — who are the best known Jews of the last century: Brandeis? Jolson? Bernstein? Kissinger? Streisand? Koufax? Spielberg? Whatever you answered, the odds are good that their fame rests on their success in America — and we celebrate them for it, happily disregarding the quality of their Jewish lives. If they chance to act Jewishly — as Los Angeles Dodger Sandy Koufax did once by not pitching on a Jewish holiday — well then, that's just an added bonus.

The Americanist narrative extends well beyond noteworthy individuals. As suggested by the words of Emma Lazarus, this type of American Jewish history highlights the wider experience of immigration. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Jews arrived in two major waves of migration: German-speaking Jews from Central Europe, called "German" Jews, arrived between 1825-75, increasing the Jewish population a hundredfold, from approx. 2,500 to 250,000; and a still larger wave of Yiddish-speaking immigrants from the cities and shtetlach of Eastern Europe, who came to be known as "Russian" Jews, arrived during the half century between 1875 and 1925, and comprised some two million souls, approximately 10% of the overall mass immigration. Immigration is itself a central theme in American history; and so, not surprisingly, the recounting of both these Jewish immigrant experiences relates them explicitly to broader American historical themes. In the case of the German Jews, their experience is linked to the expansion of America and the settling of the frontier. Like other pioneer Americans, they spread out across the continent, contributing significantly (those words again) to the development of new states and cities — Levi Strauss in San Francisco is a case in point. The Russian Jews, on the other hand, concentrated in large urban centers and in one city in particular — New York — and thus were able to play a major role in the development of the modern urban economy of professional services, mass media/communications, and especially, popular culture. We'll come back to that last item. But regarding immigration per se, the story of both German and Russian Jews—their journey and arrival, settlement and initial adjustment, and then acculturation and social mobility—parallels the experience of millions of other immigrants. It is a shared narrative uniting Jews with other Americans — the keynote theme of the Americanist version of American Jewish history.

The "Judaic" Viewpoint

Switching now from Americanism to Judaism, let us move on to the "Judaic" narrative. This is the story of how Jews, following their initial settlement in America, built Jewish community and preserved Judaism on these

Jews, following their initial settlement in America, built Jewish community and preserved Judaism on these shores. Rather than fitting into the general narrative of American history, this more properly belongs to Jewish history, whose central theme is the survival of Jews and Judaism. Living in Diaspora lands for over two thousand years, Jews have repeatedly formed minority communities, established a wide range of communal institutions, and transferred Judaism from generation to generation. The American experience of Jews is no exception, and American Jewish history may be read as yet another chapter in this saga of survival. Of course, Judaism would be transformed while being preserved, and a new Jewish culture would be woven from the cloth of continuity. But this, too, places the American Jewish experience firmly within the tradition of past Jewish life. Thus, just as the Americanist narrative ties Jews more firmly to America, the Judaic narrative works to locate us within the greater continuum of Judaism.

Early on, the 1654 settlers won the right to live as a religious community, first gaining permission to establish a Jewish cemetery, and, later, a congregation. That congregation, called Shearith Israel (the remnant of Israel), built the first synagogue in North America in 1729. The Sephardic community furthermore created a new style of communal Judaism in which the synagogue became paramount. In the absence of rabbis, yeshivot, and the kehilla structure characteristic of Europe, every function of Jewish life became the responsibility of the congregation. Such a comprehensive and lay-led "synagogue-community" was later replicated by the other colonial communities in Newport, Philadelphia, Charleston, and Savannah and has influenced the nature of American Judaism to this day. Just as the synagogue was reinvented in the American context, the role of the rabbi underwent significant change as well. Before the first ordained rabbis arrived in the 1840s, the synagogue factotum, or hazan, transcended the role of liturgical reader and took on all the responsibilities of religious leadership: teacher, preacher, pastor, sexton, kosher butcher, circumciser, and, most importantly, representative of the Jewish community to the outside world. Under the Americanizing influence of the Revolution, hazanim such as Gershom Mendes Seixas (1745/6-1816) came to be seen as equivalent to the Protestant minister of the church next door. By the time European-trained rabbis arrived, the expectation that they replicate the multiple duties of Christian clergy was well entrenched. Like the synagogue, the rabbinate had become an all-in-one institution.

The latter part of the nineteenth century saw the continuing Americanization and professionalization of the rabbinate. German-born leaders such as Isaac Leeser (1806-1868) and Isaac Mayer Wise (1819-1900) were later remembered as founders of American Orthodoxy and Reform Judaism, respectively, but each in his day was primarily concerned with adapting traditional Judaism to the American context. Both advocated the creation of a training school for rabbis on American soil, and Wise succeeded in establishing the first American seminary, the Hebrew Union College, in 1875. Subsequently, the more religiously conservative Jewish Theological Seminary and Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (later a part of Yeshiva University) were founded in 1887 and 1897. Concurrent with the rise of an American rabbinate, three major denominational movements arose — organized unions of congregations and rabbis, each with its own ideological approach to Judaism. Competitive yet cooperative segments of the Jewish community, the triad of Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox movements is a first in Jewish history.[2]

American Judaism came into its own during the twentieth century, with numerous advances and innovations unparalleled in the European past. Early in the century, Mordecai Kaplan devised the first Jewish religious ideology native to America, called Reconstructionism (later blossoming into a small movement of its own). One of its tenets was the full integration of the social and religious aspects of Jewish life, which implied the creation

of its tenets was the full integration of the social and religious aspects of Jewish life, which implied the creation of a new type of Jewish institution, the "synagogue-center," a combination synagogue and Jewish community center.[3] Synagogue-center programs of the 1920s-40s were infused with the ideology of cultural Zionism, making Hebrew and love of Israel integral parts of American Judaism. At mid-century, influenced both by existentialist philosophy and Jewish mysticism, American Judaism turned in a more "spiritual" direction — the principal guru being Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972). Heschel is but one example of what may be called the "Americanization of Hasidut," ranging from the international outreach of the Lubavitcher Rebbe to the folk-music ministry of Shlomo Carlebach to the renewal ashrams of Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. Following the 1960s, the major catalyst for change in American Judaism became the feminist movement, whereby women were empowered as rabbis, cantors, and educators; and, in many ways, Judaism itself was "feminized." Under the combined influence of Hasidism, feminism, sixties counter-culture, and Jewish summer-camping, the havurah movement began to emphasize participatory community, group study, spirituality, music, and healing. Today, picking up on these themes, a "synagogue transformation" movement is in full swing.

The American-Jewish Viewpoint

And so, America has added one more illustrious chapter to the 3,000 year long history of Judaism. Yet beyond the Judaic narrative of American Jewish history lies one more — the synthetic "American-Jewish." Its defining feature is the merging of the narratives, the conflating of American and Jewish symbols and images. The story begins at the 1841 dedication of the new temple in Charleston, when hazan Gustavus Poznanski proclaimed: "...this synagogue is our temple, this city our Jerusalem, this happy land our Palestine, and as our fathers defended with their lives that temple, that city and that land, so will their sons defend this temple, this city, and this land…"[4] Poznanski's statement that America is the new Zion provides the first indication that Americanism and Judaism would be joined together in the minds of many American Jews.

This "myth of synthesis" reached a crescendo in the 1910s when Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis promoted an Americanized version of Jewish nationalism, arguing the consonance of American, Jewish, and Zionist ideals. In describing his own conversion to Zionism, Brandeis recalled, "gradually it became clear to me that to be good Americans we must be better Jews, and to be better Jews we must become Zionists."[5] The sentiment relied on a new theory of Americanism called "cultural pluralism" — defending the preservation of ethnic culture in America, and thus legitimating the acculturation patterns of many ethnic Americans. Cultural pluralism, the counter-ideology to the notion of "melting pot" assimilation, was largely the contribution of American Jews.

Likewise, Jews contributed to American life while drawing on their own culture in the realm of popular entertainment. The dominant role of Jews in show business — including the Hollywood movie industry, the Broadway musical, early radio and television, and stage performance — is usually seen through the lens of the Americanist narrative, e.g., seeing Irving Berlin as an American composer (whose Jewishness was incidental). More and more, however, scholars are interpreting this remarkable history as a form of Jewish culture, that is, as an expression of Jewish sensibilities and experience. Perhaps the best illustration is the overwhelming role of Jews in comedic entertainment — upon close consideration, a phenomenon created by a confluence of three factors: East European Jewish immigrant humor, American assimilatory anxieties, and a generation raised on the street corner "shtick" of the New York Jewish neighborhood. And note: the common denominator of all three is the encounter of Jewish culture with America. American Jewish humor is characteristically an

expression of the tension between an acutely observant Jewish insider culture and the ironic sensibility born of being outsiders to America. Comedy greats such as Fanny Brice, the Marx Brothers, Jerry Lewis, Lenny Bruce, Mel Brooks, Woody Allen, Bette Midler, Jerry Seinfeld, and so many others may be seen, therefore, to represent an American-Jewish cultural synthesis.

The synthetic narrative, describing the hybrid American-Jewish culture created over the last century, is not yet fully developed in the writing of American Jewish history.[6] Other subjects best viewed through this lens include American Jews and Israel, American Jewish communal organizations, the Jewish response to anti-Semitism, Jewish groups on the fringe, Jewish foods and holiday celebration, Jewish youth culture, and various Jewish political endeavors — all combining Jewish and American expressions in a synergistic yin and yang. As Jews become evermore American, and as America becomes evermore "Jewish" (i.e., more ethnically diverse, more influenced by Jewish culture), the narrative will prove indispensable in helping us to understand the American Jewish experience.

Why Teach American Jewish History?

Which brings us back to the question of utility — what, after all, is the good of American Jewish history? First, let it be said that all three of our narratives are valuable as history. Jews are indeed part of American history, from colonial days to our own; and the American experience of the past 350 years is certainly a significant part of Jewish history. Hence, both the Americanist and the Judaic narratives are viable; and the emerging narrative of American-Jewish synthesis is likewise a valid perspective on the American Jewish experience.

But why teach them? What are the educational goals to be attained? I will leave a more thoughtful explication of objectives to the educators, but let me conclude with some brief suggestions.

The Americanist narrative, by definition, fosters identification with America. This operates in at least two ways: first, emphasizing the American aspect of American Jewish history creates a closer bond with America overall, its people and history, its values and ideals; and second, and more critically, it should encourage greater sympathy with those Americans who, like American Jews of the past, are impoverished immigrants, manual laborers, victims of discrimination, and generally underprivileged. Similarly, the Judaic narrative may increase students' connection to Jews around the world and throughout the past. We have paid scant attention of late to the teaching of Jewish "peoplehood," and this is one way to address that key issue.

Teaching the history of American Judaism furthermore serves to legitimate our diverse expressions of Jewish religious life, liberating and encouraging students to find their own Jewish voice. And finally, the synthetic narrative of American Jewish history also serves a legitimating function —learning about the various forms of a blended American Jewish culture in the past can only serve to encourage further cultural creativity in the future.

If our history of 350 years has anything to teach us, it is that the encounter of Jews and America has been a remarkable alchemy, producing many surprising and beneficial results — and thus we can look ahead to the future of American Jewish life with optimism, resolve, and hope.

Endnotes

1. History, it should be noted, is not always constructed in the form of narrative, i.e., told like a story.

More commonly, historians portray past human experience as a series of causes and effects, often viewing it through a particular interpretive lens such as economics or feminist theory — making history a useful analytical tool for understanding the world in which we live.

2. Neither the Pharisees/Saducees/Essenes nor the Rabbanites/Karaites nor the Hasidim/Mitnagdim, etc., were ever formally institutionalized as competing factions. On the split between Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Judaism, see: Wertheimer, Jack. A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America. New York: BasicBooks, 1993.
3. I have argued elsewhere that Kaplan's philosophy derived (at least in part) from the institutional experiment, not the other way around. See: Kaufman, David. Shul with a Pool: The "Synagogue-Center" in American Jewish History. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999.
4. Reznikoff, Charles. *The Jews of Charleston*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1950, p. 140.
5. "Brandeis, Louis Dembitz," entry in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971), 1298.
6. A raft of works on the Jewish role in popular culture has appeared of late, most recently: Buhle, Paul. *From the Lower East Side to Hollywood: Jews in American Popular Culture.* New York: Verso, 2004.

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