

Inventing American Jewry

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Innovation has been the defining feature of American Jewish culture since its inception. Never before in modern history had Jews created a new community entirely from the ground up, constructing a culture on a blank slate, with virtually no restrictions imposed on them by the government. A community that began its history far away from the vital centers of Jewish culture and the authority of established traditions, America's Jews operated in an environment that nurtured creativity and multiple expressions of Jewish identity. The freedoms afforded to American Jews coupled with the openness of the new nation laid the groundwork for novel expressions of Jewish culture and led to the creation of a Jewish community founded on the principles of pluralism and diversity.

In the early 1900s, one of American Jewry's earliest historians identified the United States as "the first experiment of its kind" for Jews, where they enjoyed unprecedented freedoms for the first time in their history (Wiernik, 1931, p. ix). The prevailing notion that "America was different" rested on the fact that, from the nation's founding, the United States granted individual rights to Jews without any debate over emancipation. More recent scholarship has tempered such stark assertions, noting that the United States followed legal patterns prevalent in Holland and Britain, where rights were gradually extended to Jews without heated struggles over emancipation (Sorkin, 2010).

Nevertheless, while the expansion of Jewish rights was not entirely without precedent and, indeed, Jews encountered limits on their rights in early America, it is fair to say that Jewish equality in the United States proceeded at a far more sweeping and comprehensive pace than in other countries, particularly when it came to federal rights. Moreover, America's liberal government offered Jews not only political but also religious freedoms, providing fertile ground to cultivate a plethora of options in all aspects of Jewish culture. The distinctiveness of the American Jewish experience thus derived not simply from greater personal and political liberties afforded to Jews, but equally important from the freedom that individual Jews and Jewish institutions had to shape Jewish life on their own terms.

In the formative years of the American Jewish community, which by 1800 numbered no more than 2,500 people, Jews built the first foundations for Jewish culture. From the start, Jews in the United States operated in an environment of choice, which set the stage for how individual Jews negotiated their lives and how Jewish institutions functioned. Jews themselves decided whether and to what extent their lives would revolve around the Jewish community. For example, in the early 1790s, Rebecca Samuel was living with her family in Petersburg, Virginia, where she lamented the lack of Jewish practice in the small town. While she celebrated "what a wonderful country this is for the common man," she

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became increasingly dismayed that her Jewish neighbors kept their businesses open on Saturdays and worshiped without even a Torah scroll on Rosh Hashanah. “Jewishness is pushed aside here,” Samuel explained in a letter written to her parents in Hamburg, Germany. “I crave to see a synagogue to which I can go.” The Samuel family ultimately made the decision to seek out a richer Jewish life for their children, leaving behind a successful business and relocating to the more substantial Jewish community of Charleston, South Carolina (Samuel, ca. 1792, pp. 142–143).

Living Jewishly was easier in the larger communities of the young nation, but the nature of Jewish identity remained entirely a matter of individual choice. Consequently, Jews could also stray from Jewish practice and from the Jewish community, and some did. In 1742, in one of the first documented discussions of intermarriage in America, Phila Franks devastated her mother Abigail, and the other members of her prominent Jewish family, when she chose to marry Oliver DeLancey, son of a leading Christian family (Gelles, 2004, pp. 123–134). The decision caused permanent estrangement between mother and daughter, even as it testified the unprecedented level of integration that Jews experienced in early America and to their ability to determine the extent of their own Jewish commitments.

Synagogues, which emerged as the center and singular hub of early Jewish life, took some time to adapt to the openness and options that Jews found in the United States. In the eighteenth century, when communities contained only one synagogue, congregations controlled the Jewish cemetery, paid the *shochet* who provided kosher meat, offered rudimentary Jewish education to children, and supervised every Jewish life-cycle event from the cradle to the grave. Initially, America’s first synagogues attempted to exert firm authoritarian control over their members as well. At New York’s Congregation Shearith Israel, leaders endeavored to enforce strict adherence to Jewish law, warning those who “daily [sic] violate the principles [of] our holy religion, such as Trading on the Sab[b]ath, Eating of forbidden Meats & other Heinous Crimes” that they might lose their membership or, more seriously, be prohibited from being buried in the Jewish cemetery. But such threats proved ineffective in the New World, where no basis existed to support hierarchical religious authority, and synagogue leaders quickly opted for more gentle means of persuasion (Earliest Extant Minute Books, Congregation Shearith Israel, 1757, p. 256). Although they initially attempted to replicate European models of religious community on American soil, Jews soon realized that coercive methods would not succeed in America’s open society. Instead, American Jews carved out new paradigms to sustain Jewish life—ones that reflected the pluralistic quality of their adopted homeland.

The Judaism invented in America rejected hierarchies and reflected the will of the people who created it. With no rabbis living or working in the United States until approximately 1840, laypeople controlled all aspects of Jewish life. In the absence of rabbinic authority and in a religious environment free from government interference, American Jews crafted religious practices according to their own needs and desires. For instance, in 1824, a group of young Jewish men in Charleston, South Carolina, petitioned the city’s only synagogue, Congregation Beth Elohim, demanding shorter services, prayer in the vernacular, weekly sermons delivered in English, and other reforms. When their request was denied, the group seceded to form its own religious society. In an environment where

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Jews were free to abandon Judaism entirely, members of the Reformed Society of Israelites had no desire to do so. Rather, these young men were convinced that, without significant changes designed to appeal to the rising generation of American Jews, the future of Judaism in America was in danger, threatened both by widespread apathy and the conversion efforts of Christian missionaries (Liberles, 1987).

Although the events that transpired in Charleston have been widely chronicled as the first stirrings of religious reform in the United States, the pattern reflected broader trends in American Judaism. By the Civil War era, competing synagogues existed in every major American city; larger communities came to house as many as four or more congregations. Moreover, American Jews often defended their desire to break away from existing congregations by relying on the nation's principles of religious freedom. In 1825, the predominantly Ashkenazic Jews of New York's newly formed congregation B'nai Jeshurun broke away from the Sephardic Shearith Israel to worship according to their own customs. In doing so, they pointed out that "the wise and republican laws of this country [had given] every citizen and sojourner the right to worship according to the dictate of his conscience" (Goldstein, 1930, pp. 55–56). American Jews took it as their fundamental right to innovate Jewish practice as they saw fit. As migration to the United States increased throughout the next century, multiple congregations, a range of Jewish religious movements, and competing leadership and institutional structures came to define the American Jewish landscape. While schisms certainly characterized modern Judaism elsewhere in the world, the American environment nurtured diversity from the start. Variety, multiplicity, and an assortment of ideologies became the very lifeblood of American Jewish culture (Sarna, 2004, pp. 59–60).

Jewish religious, political, and cultural expressions multiplied exponentially in the United States, particularly by the twentieth century, as millions of Jews arrived on American shores. Encountering a Jewish society already built on a foundation of innovation and diversity, new immigrants wove new textures into the fabric of American Jewish life. Not only did they enrich the mosaic of American Judaism, but these new immigrants also lent new dimensions to Jewish culture, particularly in the political and cultural arenas. From socialism to communism to Zionism, politics suffused the lives of East European immigrants, and they not only brought those sensibilities—along with Yiddish language and culture—to American shores but also used them to shape new movements.

Most American Jews took pride in proclaiming that they represented no single voting bloc. In America, they argued, Jews were regarded and regarded themselves as individuals and free citizens in the realm of politics. In the mid-nineteenth century, Isaac Leeser boldly asserted that, in matters of politics, "Jews have little concern, except to vote for those whom they individually may deem most fitting to administer the offices created for the public good" (Leeser, 1855, p. 561). In some respects, Leeser correctly described the political behavior of American Jews, who voted across the political spectrum for much of their history, before aligning solidly behind Franklin Roosevelt and the Democratic Party in the 1930s.

That said, Jews consistently organized to represent their own interests, both at home and abroad, creating a unique brand of American Jewish communal politics. Always engaged with the condition of Jews worldwide, American Jews created the Board of Delegates of American Israelites in 1859 to respond to the case of Edgardo Mortara, the Italian Jewish boy secretly baptized and taken from

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his Jewish parents. In later years, Jews continued to advocate for Jewish rights across the globe and in their own backyards through organizations such as the American Jewish Committee and Anti-Defamation League, even as they founded an array of philanthropic, cultural, and social institutions to serve communal needs. Although each had a distinct purpose and constituency, they all represented Jewish political interests in the broadest sense. Organizational proliferation became a defining feature of American Jewish life, as likeminded Jews of every persuasion joined together to pursue their Jewish concerns and agendas.

But politics also had a broader meaning within the Jewish community, particularly in the years following the mass migration of East European Jews, when political culture began to emerge as a particularly potent aspect of Jewish identity. Jewish politics extended far beyond supporting a particular candidate or party. As Irving Howe has explained, for immigrant Jews, politics constituted an “encompassing culture, a style of perceiving and judging” the world (Howe, 1982, p. 9). Politics meant not only labor militancy and union activity but also a lively dialogue of street-corner debates and evening lectures and a running commentary provided by the Jewish press. Politics had certainly been a vital element within Jewish culture long before Jews arrived in America, but the United States gave them unparalleled freedom to express their diverse political passions, whether they were socialist or democratic, Zionist or communist, liberal or conservative. In America’s free marketplace of ideas, Jews constructed a rich political culture that blended Jewish sensibilities with American expressions.

Newer scholarship about Jewish socialism sheds light on the spirit of innovation that often characterized Jewish politics in the United States. The thriving Yiddish culture that bolstered leftist politics was not, as commonly assumed, an import from Eastern Europe. On the cusp of the twentieth century, Jewish socialist intellectuals who came to the United States had little connection to Yiddish, having embraced Russian as the language of the movement. They employed Yiddish simply as a means to reach the Jewish masses, but the culture of Yiddish quickly took on a life of its own, flourishing in the United States in the realm of politics and beyond. Moreover, as historian Tony Michels has demonstrated, East European Jews learned from America’s example and adopted Yiddish as a strategy to build the Jewish labor movement in Russia. The American Jewish community, Michels explains, “served as a laboratory of political and cultural innovation that influenced eastern Europe in ways historians are just beginning to recognize” (Michels, 2005, p. 5). Thus, even during the years of mass Jewish migration, American Jewry was not simply an importer of European Jewish ideologies and movements, but an innovator of new Jewish cultural models.

Like virtually all American Jewish phenomena, Yiddish culture in the United States had a range of expressions, evidenced clearly by the sheer variety of the active Jewish press. At the height of the immigrant era, more than 150 Yiddish newspapers, periodicals, and other publications made their way into circulation. The Orthodox had their papers, as did socialists, anarchists, Zionists, communists, and all brands of secularists. The socialist *Jewish Daily Forward* began publication in 1897 and grew into the most popular Yiddish daily, reaching a circulation of two hundred thousand copies per day. In the *Forward*, readers kept abreast of political struggles at home and abroad, while they also learned about American customs, sports, and consumer products. Like most of the Jewish press, the

Forward kept alive a flourishing Jewish culture among immigrants eager to adapt to American life (Rischin, 1962; Soltes, 1969).

In every generation, American Jews created new incarnations of Jewish culture to suit the needs of the time. Perhaps no one articulated the importance of constant reinvention as clearly as Mordecai Kaplan, who understood in the 1920s and 1930s that the rising generation of American-born Jews would require new forms of Jewish community and practice. During the interwar years, Kaplan grew anxious about the American Jewish future, as he watched Jews become more comfortable as Americans and less connected to Jewish identity. According to Kaplan, American Jews were denizens of two civilizations—American and Jewish—and he wanted them to engage fully in both. He insisted that for Judaism to survive in America, it must appeal to the gamut of Jewish needs and experiences and include all expressions of Jewishness. Urging Jews to “rediscover, reinterpret, and reconstruct” their own culture, Kaplan defined Judaism as a religious civilization, which included the totality of Jewish culture, art, music, literature, drama, and language, as well as religion (Kaplan, 1934/1994, p. 522). Although Kaplan’s Reconstructionist Judaism, the only branch of Judaism created entirely on American soil, did not emerge as a separate movement until the late 1960s, his program captured the ways that most American Jews conceived and practiced their identities. Kaplan’s vision of American Judaism had significant impact throughout the twentieth century, most notably in popularizing the synagogue center—another American Jewish innovation—that transformed the traditional house of worship into an all-encompassing Jewish institution that blended the secular and the sacred.

Throughout the twentieth century, American Jews continued to invent and reinvent their communities. An extraordinarily mobile population, Jews were constantly moving to new neighborhoods and new regions of the country and, with each relocation, came the creation of new Jewish institutions. In the 1920s and again in the post–World War II era, American Jews engaged in two enormous synagogue-building booms: the first when Jews left crowded city neighborhoods for better urban housing and the second when they joined in the American exodus to the suburbs. This meant that Jews frequently rebuilt and reimagined not only their houses of worship but also their community centers, educational institutions, and communal organizations. And along with these new institutions came new cultural productions, political expressions, and newspapers and journals to suit every Jewish ideological predilection.

In the years following World War II, when Jews began to move to Sunbelt cities, they viewed their fledgling communities as “a laboratory for innovation.” As historian Deborah Dash Moore has explained, Jews who ventured to these new areas of the country “fashioned a Jewish way of life focused upon the individual and responsive to the rapidly changing experiences of the present” (Moore, 1994, pp. 78, 264). In the last third of the twentieth century and in the opening decade of the twenty-first, the openness and creativity that characterized these Southern and Western Jewish communities in the postwar era have become perhaps the most dominant features of Jewish culture throughout the nation.

Again and again in each generation, the Jewish community that had been created on a blank slate in colonial America found ways to adapt and innovate to meet the needs of the day. In the last half-century, American Jewish life has grown

increasingly diverse and has developed in unpredictable directions. Once forecast to be on the brink of disappearance with the passing of the immigrant generation, Orthodox Judaism has been revitalized, in forms ranging from Modern Orthodoxy to the burgeoning Hasidic population. At the same time, both feminism and the counterculture have decisively transformed the American Jewish landscape, bringing women into positions of religious and communal leadership and encouraging established institutions to focus on new forms of spirituality and individual expression. The variety of contemporary American Jewish life defies categorization and is full of contradictions. America offers more kosher restaurants and food products than ever before, even as most American Jews do not consider keeping kosher part of their Jewish identities. While the secular Jewish culture of the first half of the twentieth century has faded, a majority of Jews continue to regard politics as an integral part of their Jewishness. Even as intermarriage rates have risen, so too has enrollment in Jewish day schools and college Jewish studies courses. The spectrum of Jewish identity has never been wider, both in religious terms and in the range of political, literary, artistic, intellectual, and communal expressions.

From the start, the spirit of invention that characterized American Jewry has coexisted with lingering doubts about the quality of American Jewish life and the direction of its future. As much as the freedoms afforded to Jews in the United States allowed for myriad expressions of Jewish identity, they also had the potential to lead to apathy and disaffection. Such are the inevitable consequences and challenges of maintaining a religious and ethnic community in a society governed by freedom of choice. Yet, although predictions of doom and dissolution have been a part of American Jewry since its inception, American Jews have proved remarkably capable of sustaining, and indeed revitalizing, Jewish life in each generation.

At a time when Jewish identity is a matter of choice throughout most of the world, the Jewish communal model established by American Jews more than three centuries ago turns out to be particularly instructive. From the very beginning of its history, the United States became the paradigm for how a voluntary Jewish community functioned, with all of its perils and possibilities. In the open climate of America, Jews invented an entrepreneurial Jewish culture in which Judaism and Jewish identity were governed by the marketplace of needs, ideas, and desires. Creating and sustaining Jewish communities in an environment of freedom required innovation, supported an extraordinary range of Jewish ideologies, and sparked multiple definitions of Jewish identity. When the nation was founded, the United States stood on the edge of the Jewish world, testing the waters of a Jewish community that developed without restrictions, guided only by the investment and desire of its members. In retrospect, it is clear that the American mode of Jewish communal life was on the vanguard of the Jewish future, providing a key model for Jewish culture in an age when choice has become the norm for Jews worldwide.

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