



PROJECT MUSE®

America?

David N. Myers

Jewish Quarterly Review, Volume 94, Number 4, Fall 2004, pp. v-viii  
(Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jqr.2004.0058>

The  
Jewish  
Quarterly  
Review  
Volume 94  
Number 4  
(Fall 2004)

The Jewish Quarterly Review (ISSN 0021-8758) is published quarterly  
for the Society for the Study of Jewish History,  
and the University of Pennsylvania  
by the University of Pennsylvania Press.

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/390226/summary>

## America?

THIS ISSUE OF *JQR* marks a new chapter in the long life of our journal. When we assumed the editorial mantle in 2003, we envisaged a forum that would be faithful to *JQR*'s tradition of scholarly excellence, while at the same time open to important new themes, trends, and innovations in the various fields of Jewish studies. As we've sought to strike this balance, we have delighted in initiating, sometimes by stumbling upon, new features that periodically alter the profile of the journal. Thus, our first issue, volume 94, number 1, opened with "Recoveries"—a series of brief reflections on a favored text, event, or moment written by a distinguished array of authors. The next issue (94.2) included a review forum in which three scholars, expert in different subject areas and writing from very different points of departure, meditated upon Daniel Goldhagen's discussion of Catholic (and more broadly, Christian) attitudes and behavior toward Jews.

The current issue features another new direction for *JQR*. In general, we do not plan to turn the journal over to regularly scheduled theme issues. But when a subject catches our fancy, we are prepared to explore it in depth, especially when novel perspectives can be brought to bear. We hope—and believe—that this standard has been met in the issue before you.

*JQR* 94.4 is organized around the Jewish experience in America, coinciding with the ongoing 350th anniversary celebration of Jewish settlement in what would become the United States. The aim is less to celebrate than to investigate, probe, and question the American Jewish experience, as well as to take stock of the vitality and innovation in recent scholarship on that experience. To assist in these tasks, we have invited a number of colleagues to offer critical reflection. Rather than write full-length research articles, they have been asked to take up the more supple and suggestive form of "Notes." The result is a series of illuminating essays that reveal the richness, diverse legacies, and fault lines of the American Jewish experience.

The work of questioning begins in Arthur Kiron's opening essay. Kiron

*The Jewish Quarterly Review* (Fall 2004)

Copyright © 2004 Center for Advanced Judaic Studies. All rights reserved.

wonders what is actually being celebrated in the current commemorative year. He notes that the arrival of that fateful boatload of twenty-three Jews to New Amsterdam in 1654 was greeted with indignation, disgust, and attempted expulsion by Peter Stuyvesant—and thus may not be the most appropriate historical moment to celebrate. Kiron also wonders whether the source of celebration—and more broadly, of study—should be America in the geographically circumscribed sense of the United States. *American Jewish history*, he suggests, might well be reconstrued as a history of the *Americas*—set against the sweeping backdrop of transatlantic mobility, trade, and migration.

This essay pushes to the foreground a recurrent theme in the deliberations of Americanists: the motif of exceptionalism, of a belief in a unique—and uniquely supervised—historical path for America. The Jewish variant of this theme posits that no community in history has been as affluent, successful, or well-integrated as the Jews of the United States. While this claim is indisputable in many respects, there is real value in examining more carefully some of its mythic underpinnings. Thus, David Hollinger takes on frontally the assertion of Jewish exceptionalism, urging that we neither ignore nor romanticize the overrepresentation of Jews in a number of notable vocations or fields. For Hollinger, the assertion of Jewish overrepresentation should be less a matter of ethnic pride than a spur to empirical research—followed by serious comparative analysis with other ethnic and religious groups in America.

The Notes that follow undertake, each in its distinctive way, to complicate the triumphalist narrative of American Jewish history, which itself serves as a counterweight to more “lachrymose” conceptions of European Jewish history. Thus, Kathryn Hellerstein’s commentary on her great-great-grandfather, Edward Rosewater, who was a telegrapher for Abraham Lincoln (and responsible for transmitting the Emancipation Proclamation), reveals the quotidian concerns and bourgeois aspirations of a mid-nineteenth-century Jewish immigrant to the United States. Meanwhile, Monty Penkower analyzes anti-Jewish references in a newly discovered diary kept by President Harry Truman; he is careful to trace the appearance of these coarse references in Truman’s diary without losing sight of their relative insignificance in the President’s personal life and public decision making. By contextualizing the statements, Penkower avoids the extremes of apologia, on one hand, and paranoia, on the other, that are often found in assessments of anti-Semitism in the United States.

Pamela Nadell offers a curious and novel perspective on an earlier commemoration of American Jewish life, the tercentenary celebration of 1954. She excavates a musical review written for the occasion and pre-

sented by the Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women's Club in Brooklyn. The review's author was Gerda Lerner, later to earn recognition as one of the founders of women's history in the American historical profession. Nadell suggests that Lerner used the opportunity of the tercentenary, well in advance of her more notable scholarly labors, to insert Jewish women's experience into the male-dominated narrative of American Jewish life.

The attempt by Lerner—and Nadell—to expand the narrative contours of American Jewish history is joined by David Ruderman. Rereading his father's diary from the 1960s, Ruderman uses the sojourns of a northern rabbi in Mississippi to examine the clash between progressive Jewish ideals and deep-seated racial and social norms in the South. This discussion, accompanied by the text of his father's diary, provides an intriguing American variation on an old theme: namely, that Jews, like others, are to be found in all venues, social classes, and political camps.

The Notes section also includes assessments of the contributions made by two important figures who died in 2003, each an innovator in a distinct area of American Jewish culture: Leon Uris, author of the popular novel *Exodus*, and Charles Liebman, the Israeli-American scholar of contemporary Jewish society and politics.

This pairing reflects our appreciation of the wide range of American Jewish culture, ranging from the popular to the more esoteric scholarly domain. Likewise, we have expanded the scope of culture in the Notes section by moving from the textual to the visual through the work of photographer Albert Winn. His photographs of abandoned Jewish summer camps, interwoven with commentary and refracted through the prism of his own "AIDS experience," evoke a wide range of sensibilities: humor, nostalgia, sorrow. Winn's pictures call to mind the rapid and gleeful embourgeoisement of Jews in America, while abruptly transporting us in the next instant to a Nazi concentration camp. This jarring juxtaposition stakes out the competing narrative poles, lachrymose and triumphalist, that frame the Jewish historical experience. In this regard, Winn's photographic essay pushes to the surface yet again, but in new guise, the old question of exceptionalism: to what extent is the American experiment part of—or a departure from—the tortuous historical path of the Jews?

Rounding out this issue is a pair of meditations whose main themes are, fittingly, America and Jewish culture. Laurence Roth and Michael Kramer make fine use of the review essay form to shed light on relatively neglected features of the American Jewish experience: Roth analyzes recent work on Jewish comedy and Jewish "zines" to open up a larger

discussion about Jewish popular culture; Kramer, for his part, pushes to the surface a trend in recent Jewish literary studies toward “cultural narcissism,” a somewhat obsessive overidentification by the literary critic with the (Jewish) identity of the literary protagonist.

Through forums and essays like this, we hope to continue to probe the boundaries of Jewish culture. With this in mind, we invite our readers to help identify significant new areas of research or important themes that lend themselves to such treatment. At the end of the day, we do not expect to find fixed borders or definitive answers. Somewhat more modestly, we insist only on asking challenging questions.

David N. Myers