Coming to America: The Reception of Sepharad and Ashkenaz in America

David N. Myers

Jewish Quarterly Review, Volume 105, Number 2, Spring 2015, pp. 141-144 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/jqr.2015.0009

The Jewish Quarterly Review, Vol. 105, No. 2 (Spring 2015) 141–144

Coming to America: The Reception of Sepharad and Ashkenaz in America

Whether exceptional or not, American Jewish history is full of extraordinary moments, personalities, and motifs. The relatively late arrival of European Jewish historians to this realization, Salo Baron excepting, cannot and should not obscure the richness of the Jewish experience in the United States. It is to the credit of the towering figure of twentieth-century American Jewish historiography, Jacob Rader Marcus, that a vast array of source materials has been available to generations of researchers, who have drawn on them to convey that richness with ever-expanding nuance and sophistication.

One of the characteristic features of Marcus's worldview, his four-part periodization of American Jewish history, has not necessarily stood the test of time. In 1958, Marcus delivered his presidential address to the American Jewish Historical Society in which he identified the following periods of American Jewish life: (1) the Sephardic Age (1654–1840); (2) the German Age (1841–1920); (3) the (concurrent) Eastern European Age (1852–1920); and (4) the American Age (1920–). It was the last that spawned "a *homo novus*, the American Jew"—fully at home in his country and assimilated into its cultural norms.

There is an upward, teleological arc to this narrative that rises from the travails of immigration to the security of America, as well as from the varieties of cultural difference to the prospect of social compatibility with the American world. Marcus's scheme implies a unidirectional process of cultural reformation in two regards: in temporal terms, each phase effectively superseded the preceding one; and spatially, arrival in America, especially by the final phase, meant that lingering native cultures would soon wane.

Recent scholarship has agitated for a more dynamic understanding of the social field in which Jews in the United States have operated. This scholarship has expanded and rethought the borders of Jewish cultural

activity, arguing that the vectors move in multiple directions—not only from Europe or the Middle East to America but in the other direction as well. In recognition of the vitality of research in the field, this issue of *JQR* is devoted to differing facets of the American Jewish experience. The essays collected here, some from recognized experts in American Jewish history and others from those better known in other areas of scholarship, demonstrate that the creation of an American *homo novus* was not simply—or at all—a matter of leaving behind old cultural traces but rather a case of the often uneasy coexistence of competing cultural sensibilities into the twentieth century.

The first essay, Aviva Ben-Ur's "Kabbalistic Pharmacopoeia," does the service of expanding our angle of historical vision from the United States per se to the Atlantic at large. Ben-Ur follows the career of a fascinating book held in the Katz Center library, *Ta'alumot ḥokhmah*. Composed over the course of 150 years in multiple languages and countries, the text is a repository of medical, folk, and culinary practices, with a persistent kabbalistic theme overall. It contains remedies, receipts, and transport documents revealing a journey that crisscrossed the Americas (and Europe) and reminds us that the commonly denominated "America"—that is, the United States—was part of a much larger cultural ecosystem.

The next essay, Ber Kotlerman's "Going through the Seven Circles of Hell," shifts our focus back to U.S. shores and to one of the most prominent forms of American culture: film. The allure of film for American Jews, and recent immigrants among them in the early twentieth century, is well known. Far less well known is the allure of film for the great Yiddish author Sholem Aleichem, who was, an earlier biographer noted, "a big admirer and trembling worshiper of the cinema." This passion even prompted Sholem Aleichem to try his hand at writing a script in 1915 in Yiddish, which he brought with him to America in the hope of having it produced. Kotlerman offers a careful analysis of the script *Little Motl*, noting the intriguing filmic influences that Aleichem drew on and the artistic choices he made.

The next pair of essays pivots away from the encounter between Yiddish and American culture to explore the presence of Sephardim and Sephardic culture in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Devin Naar offers novel insight into the concentration of Sephardic immigrants from Ottoman Turkey who made their way to New York at the turn of the century. Naar excavates the meaning of the immigrants' self-identification as "Turkinos," both prior to moving to the United States and after. Whereas in the Ottoman Turkish realm, the term was applied to Jews and non-Jews, in the United States, it was

used to connote only Turkish Jews, who lived in their own "colony" and remained beholden to the ideal of a grand Ottoman Empire. In fact, these Turkinos may have been the last unreconstructed believers in Ottomanism, forging a mythic image of the empire as they simultaneously sought to integrate into American society.

Arthur Kiron offers another slice of turn-of-the-century Jewish life by studying Sabato Morais, the Italian-born rabbi who was the founder of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in New York City. One of Kiron's main tasks is to challenge the conventional account of the provenance of JTS as the continuation of the German-based Positive-Historical Judaism whose first institutional home was in Breslau. Kiron notes that before there was a Jewish Theological Seminary *of America*, there was a Jewish Theological Seminary of Morais's design—that is, an institution that bore the imprint of his Italian Sephardic vision of a dignified, unchanging, humble, and biblically-grounded Judaism. Among other salutary effects, Naar's and Kiron's essays remind us of key, though oft-forgotten, chapters of Sephardic history in America—long after the end of the "Sephardic Age" in Jacob Rader Marcus's scheme.

The final essay in this issue, Adam Ferziger's "Hungarian Separatist Orthodoxy and the Migration of Its Legacy to America," reports on the complex relationship between two foreign-born rabbis who made careers in the United States in the early twentieth century, Yekutiel Yehudah Greenwald and Hayyim Hirschenson. Both were reared on the distinctive religious culture of Hungarian Judaism (Greenwald in Hungary itself and Hirschenson in Palestine), although their respective interpretations of that culture took on new forms when they arrived in America. In fact, in 1928 Greenwald excoriated Hirschenson in an American Hebrew journal for criticizing the sectarian tendencies of traditionalist Hungarian Judaism. Ferziger uses the ensuing exchange between Greenwald and Hirschenson as a prism to gauge the way in which the two rabbis drew upon and turned away from the Hungarian Jewish legacy in fashioning an Orthodox Judaism in America. To wit, Greenwald thundered against violations of rabbinic law from his pulpit in Columbus, Ohio, but agreed at one point to remove the *meḥitsah* (divider between men and women) from his synagogue.

The combined effect of these diverse essays is to reveal the many faces of the "*homo novus*—the American Jew." The portrait that emerges from them is not the conventional image of a settled and assimilated second-generation Jew of Eastern Europe origin. Rather, it is a more dynamic, even turbulent, image, one that calls to mind Kafka's famous line about Jews of his day in a letter to Max Brod: "Their hind legs were still mired

in their father's Jewishness and their thrashing fore legs found no new ground." Ultimately the Turkinos and Hungarians did find new ground in America, though not without a fair bit of thrashing that reflected a potent mix of cultural tensions well into the twentieth century.

David N. Myers