

### Lincoln and the Jews: A History

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## Review

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**Sarna, Jonathan D. and Shapell, Benjamin.** *Lincoln and the Jews: A History*. Thomas Dunne Books, \$45.99 ISBN 9781250059536

### Mended Eggs? Lincoln's Jewish Friends

"Broken eggs can not be mended," Lincoln once wrote regarding his inability to rescind the Emancipation Proclamation (127). In the case of religion, though, Lincoln sought to mend the broken eggs between Jews and Christians, according to this entertaining book. Given the coverage and interest in the sixteenth president, it is surprising that *Lincoln and the Jews* is one of the first comprehensive studies on the subject. It combines the critical approach of an accomplished historian, Jonathan D. Sarna, with the passions of a collector of antiquities and material culture, Benjamin Shapell. The book's glossed pages have hundreds of high-quality color photographs of primary sources, ephemera, and portraits of notable figures, along with engaging prose and insightful commentary. Beautifully conceived and constructed, this book belongs on the coffee table of every Lincoln and/or American Civil War aficionado. Indeed, a more accessible book for a popular audience does not exist. Professional historians, conversely, may be disappointed.

*Lincoln and the Jews* resembles the hagiography of pre-1950s amateur historians of Jewish history, whose chief aim was to underscore Jews as "good" Americans. Yet unlike that literature, this book celebrates Lincoln and the United States. In fact, it focuses on Lincoln's life and the democratic ethos that differentiated the United States from aristocratic Europe. Jews, of course, make appearances throughout Lincoln's life, beginning in earnest in the early 1840s. Some Jews joined the Republican ranks with Lincoln "to halt the spread of slavery and promote the spread of freedom" (25). One of Lincoln's Jewish friends was the first to encourage him to run for president. Indeed, those sporadic relationships are illustrative of the authors' main contention: Jews made a significant impact on Lincoln and vice versa. Lincoln referred specifically to

Christianity, for example, in his first inaugural address to underscore the religious bonds that united the nation. But this offended Jews, the authors claim, thus Lincoln gradually altered his language to assuage his Jewish friends. By the time of Lincoln's second inaugural address in 1865, he made no reference to Christianity, but instead invoked "God" fourteen times to underscore the inevitable divine retribution for the nation's sins.

Sarna and Shappell add to the mythology of Lincoln as a "great white man," one who refused to proselytize to Jews when Christians all around him organized societies for that purpose; who befriended Jews at a time when nativism, racism, and bigotry was pervasive; who refused to take seriously those Christians who demanded the admission of Christianity in the text of the U.S. Constitution; who rejected the anti-Semitic animus of his generals, especially U.S. Grant's General Orders No. 11 that expelled "Jews as a class" from regions under his military command (112). Lincoln rescinded Grant's orders, precisely because his friendships with Jews led him to not only defend them but also to treat them as equals. As president, Lincoln tried to appoint Jews to consular appointments, positions held by Jews dating back to the 1780s, but the anti-Semitic Senate rejected them. At a time when anti-Semitism guided the attitudes of statesmen and laymen alike, Lincoln remained above the fray as the champion of the Jews.

Lincoln also befriended Abraham Jonas and Issachar Zacharie. Interestingly, Zacharie doubled as Lincoln's foot doctor and personal spy. Lincoln told Jonas, "You are one of my most valued friends" (52). These friendships form the foundation from which the authors make some rather provocative claims. The evidence supports the argument that Lincoln became a friend and patron of Jews, which transformed Jews from political "outsiders" into "insiders." The authors get into muddy waters, though, when they imply that Jews and Judaism transformed Lincoln. We are told that Lincoln's relationships with Jewish Americans had powerfully awakened him to the reality of Jewish oppression. Judaism therefore was central to his decision to use inclusive religious language as president.

Lincoln used biblical allusions in his oratory and writings—not Christian imagery alone, notably, but also Jewish. From Daniel and Psalms, for example, Lincoln borrowed Old Testament language in his correspondences and speeches. In the Gettysburg Address, too, Lincoln used the phrase, "this nation, under God." The inclusive word, "God," Sarna and Shappell claim, was intentional, for Lincoln was inspired by his Jewish friends to reimagine "America in language

that embraced Jews as equals" (147). Lincoln's use of the word "Christian" to describe all religious persuasions before the Address remained in stark contrast to his rhetorical habits thereafter, the authors tell us. Lincoln softened his religious rhetoric and moved it in a conciliatory direction in response to the Jews around him. The authors even imply that such inclusive language in the Gettysburg Address might have been a symbolic nod to Jews.

That Lincoln, beginning as a relatively young man, held Jews and Judaism in esteem, attended pro-Jewish plays, and sought to treat them equally and to reward them politically is convincing. Yet suggesting that Lincoln was referring specifically to Jews in the Gettysburg Address overlooks the speech's historical context, as much as it distorts the soldiers' historical memories. Lincoln penned the eulogy in honor of all soldiers who fought and died over the future of four million African Americans—not the plight of 150,000 Jewish Americans alone. Lincoln, furthermore, was never a member of a church and used inclusive religious language from an early age. He was an astute politician, after all. If Lincoln was so incredibly influenced by religious inequality, why did he not defend Mormons, or any other persecuted religious minority group, for that matter? His Jewish friend, Jonas, certainly did. The obvious answer is that religious persecution was not quite as central to Lincoln's thinking as the authors would like readers to believe.

Religion ultimately seems to have been less important in Lincoln's thinking than slavery, or reunification of the union after unprecedented carnage and bloodshed, or even politics. It is worth noting that both of Lincoln's closest Jewish friends, Jonas and Zacharie, campaigned vigorously for him and received his patronage as recompense for their efforts. Lincoln, undoubtedly, came to see prominent Jews as a useful coalition within the Republican Party, which surely explains why he met with Jews in Kansas and New York, among other places on the campaign trail. To be sure, the relationships forged between Lincoln and Jews remained almost exclusively political in nature.

Lincoln certainly allied with Jews on numerous issues and sought to reward his Jewish friends with patronage and personal favors. Lincoln appointed rabbis to chaplaincy positions, interpreting broadly a law that restricted these positions to Christians. He also appointed other Jews as quartermasters in the Union Army. It was Jonas, too, who encouraged Lincoln to reach out to religious minority groups, especially Jews, as a political strategy. Oddly, however, Jews did not vote for Lincoln in any great degree, neither in 1860 nor in 1864.

Nevertheless, Lincoln's fascination with the Old Testament led him, ultimately, to a desire to visit Jerusalem—a pilgrimage unfulfilled because of an assassin's bullet.

Despite this celebratory attitude and overzealous argumentation, the authors' greatest achievement is the visualization of the primary sources. To place such emphasis on the tools of our trade educates a culturally deprived populace about the materials with which we attempt to make sense of the past—the very nature of what we do as historians. Most enlightening, it is difficult to dispute Lincoln's clear connection to Jews, unlike any president before him and perhaps since. This is an amazingly neglected topic, and this book will surely inspire derivative works on the subject. For serious Lincoln scholars, though, Eric Foner's *The Fiery Trial* might provide a more balanced assessment of Lincoln as a humanist and political opportunist, as well as his use of religion for political purposes. Readers interested in the subject might find helpful, Gary Phillip Zola's *We Called Him Rabbi Abraham*, a work that focuses on Jews' views of Lincoln.

In the final analysis, Lincoln sought an inclusive American society, and he used religious language to argue the point. How much of it was the result of Jews and Judaism remains arguable. For it seems probable that Lincoln was less concerned about the plight of religious minorities than about slavery, racial justice, and reconstruction. How much of Lincoln's thinking and behavior, indeed his conciliatory posture toward the Confederacy and magnanimity toward its leaders, was influenced by Jews and/or Judaism? Was Lincoln attempting to mend the broken staff with which Moses once wrought miracles, the metaphorical Christian and Jewish eggs? The answers are, decidedly, in the hands of readers. Therefore, this book deserves a careful reading from professional and amateur historians alike.

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