

Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America

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Review

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Rabin, Shari. *Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York University Press, \$40.00 ISBN 9781479830473

Jews on the Frontier is a compelling account of the cultural and spiritual changes experienced by American Jews outside the main coastal cities and their large congregations before the large East-European emigration waves of the late Nineteenth-Century. As is often the case in historical works, it begins with what at a first glance seems like a modest lacuna, in this instance the apparent relative lack of research into pre-1880 American Jewish History, and aims to leverage the newfound materials and insights into a broad and culturally significant observation.

The 19th-century mobile, wandering Jews, looking for economic opportunities in the American South and West in areas often devoid of kosher food or Minyan (a quorum of ten men required for traditional Jewish public worship), could not simply observe Jewish traditions, they had to adapt. As the title of the book gently suggests, Rabin explores the possibility of a Turner-like influence of the American Frontier on Jewish cultural and religious practices during the nineteenth-century that carried forward into the twentieth-century and present-day modern Judaism. In the wider sphere of the development of American religious views, the author propounds the idea that the combination of a practical and spiritual mindset exhibited by religious Jews of the period who display a brand of flexible yet incontestable faith, could be seen as a precursor to modern-day Americans that declare no formal religious affiliation while “admitting some form of religiosity”.

Rabin draws the landscape of nineteenth-century American Judaism through the accounts of quite well known religious figures such as Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise and Isaac Leeser, as well as through the personal stories and correspondences of ordinary Jews, Sunday School teachers, telegraph operators, peddlers and more. Large and small historical events receive a similarly equitable treatment by the author: General Ulysses S. Grant’s infamous General Order No. 11, expelling all Jews from his military district, gets a similarly short, precise and clear narration as the exclusion of a single Jewish banker from a hotel in Saratoga Springs, or the pork eating lapses of Jews passing through rural America. The result is a down to earth historical account which helps to support Rabin’s modest-sounding yet far-reaching hypothesis that: “Beginning with Jews instead of Protestants and turning to the unexpected and unauthorized religious formations of the road, we can see that the United States is not primarily Protestant or pluralist; rather, it is mobile...”.

Jews on the Frontier is a well-written book, containing a well-argued thesis. Even without fully accepting the implication of the centrality of nineteenth-century Frontier-Judaism to contemporary trends in American culture this book makes a clear contribution toward our understanding of the development of American Judaism. It is a prime example of how an ethnographic approach and the weaving together of the life histories of ordinary man and women can be turned into a coherent and comprehensive account of a changing culture, or a society on the move if you will.

Zeev Shulman is a Ph.D. student with a master's degree at the University of Haifa and specializes in intellectual and economic history of the Early Republic and the antebellum United States.