To my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchild

May they contribute in their own unique ways to the history of American Jewish identity

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Acknowledgments for Reprinted Material

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Introduction

In gathering these essays for publication I was confronted with the questions asked about all such volumes. Do the essays have a central leitmotif? What ties them together? My answer is found in the book's title. The history of both the United States and America's Jews has been unique, and this dual uniqueness has been the crucial factor in American Jewish history. While historians of medieval European Jewish history have focused on religious and philosophic thought and historians of modern Israel have concentrated on Jewish sovereignty and state-building, arguably the central theme of American Jewish historiography has been recounting how America's Jews have defined their Jewish identities in this unique land over the past three hundred and seventy years.

Identity has also been a major preoccupation of Americans at least since 1782 when J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, an immigrant from France who had settled in upstate New York, published *Letters from an American Farmer*. Appearing during the midst of the Revolutionary War at a time when Europeans were trying to make sense of what was taking place on the other side of the Atlantic, de Crevecoeur's book sought to answer the question "What is an American?" He emphasized that widespread ownership of property and material abundance, religious and ethnic diversity, liberal political institutions and values, and a flexible social system of America were creating a "new man," one free from the restraints of European rules and way of life. The American, in de Crevecoeur's telling, was ambitious, liberty-loving, individualistic, ingenious, and honest. De Crevecoeur was followed by many European travelers, including Frances Trollope, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Charles Dickens, seeking to understand this new nation, although their conclusions were often not as positive as de Crevecoeur's.

The demographic diversity of America meant that American identity could not be based on any common ancestry, nor could it be based on an ancient history since the United States, when compared to European nations, was relatively young. This led some observers to argue that central to American identity was its newness. Thus the political sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset wrote a book titled *The First New Nation* (1963), and the literary scholar Irving Howe titled his book on New England culture during the mid-nineteenth century *The American Newness* (1986). This emphasis on newness has permeated American culture. Ralph Waldo Emerson advised Americans to leave behind "the sere remains" of Europe and create a culture more in conformity to American conditions. In Henry James's 1877 novel *The American* the central figure is Christopher

Newman (i.e., new man) who, in a reversal of Christopher Columbus's voyages, travels to Europe. American political movements of the twentieth century included the New Freedom, the New Nationalism, the New Deal, the New Frontier, and the New Federalism, while one of the country's most prominent political magazines has been the *New Republic*. Americans have exulted in their newness, in being up-to-date, while they have disparaged the old.

Closely related to this emphasis on newness is a delight in change, movement, and being up to-date, with the real American perceived as a go-getter and not a stick-in-the-mud. American businesses proclaim that they have the most recent models and most modern technology, and during the 1950s and 1960s the General Electric Corporation claimed that "progress is our most important product." In America, politicians run for office while in England they stand for office, and Americans believe that social mobility has been more prevalent here than anywhere else and America is the land of the self-made man.

In America people can choose to be whatever they want, and their choices have often befuddled observers. "Do I contradict myself?" Walt Whitman asked in *Leaves of Grass*. "Very well then I contradict myself,/(I am large, I contain multitudes.)" American Jewish identity, reflecting the national character, has also been fluid, multi-faceted, diverse, mutable, and often contradictory, and this helps explain the name changing prevalent among Jews. Here a Ralph Lifshitz became Ralph Lauren, a Robert Cohon became Peter Coyote, a Bernie Schwartz became Tony Curtis, a Jill Oppenheim became Jill St. John, a Melvin Kaminsky became Mel Brooks, a Jerome Rabinowitz became Jerome Robbins, a Marion Levy became Paulette Goddard, and a Milton Shapiro became Milton Shapp and governor of Pennsylvania.[1]

The same freedom that allowed America's Jews to change their names and reinvent themselves also enabled them to be whatever type of Jew they wished. If America was the land of the self-made man, it was also the land of the self-made Jew. Jews comprise an enormously variegated community of the religiously Orthodox as well as skeptics, of Zionists and anti-Zionists, of political radicals and political conservatives, and of activists and the apathetic.

For Jews, America has certainly been a new nation *par excellence*, one free of the political and economic restrictions pervasive in Europe and elsewhere

1 For name changing among American Jews, see Kirsten Fermaglich, *A Rosenberg by Any Other Name: A History of Jewish Name Changing in America* (New York, 2018). As Fermaglich notes, "the United States offered American Jews extraordinary opportunities to change the names that marked them as Jewish" (22).

where Jews had settled. As Jonathan Sarna has noted, "Discrimination and persecution, the foremost challenges confronting most diaspora Jews through the ages, have in America been far less significant historical factors than democracy, liberty of conscience, church-state separation, and voluntarism."[2]

From the very beginning of their presence in this New World, Jews realized that their condition was unique. As Washington noted in his famous letter of 1790 to the Newport, Rhode Island synagogue, both Jews and Christians will "possess alike liberty of conscience" and equal citizenship. For Jews, the motto on the Great Seal of the United States—"novus ordo seclorum" (a new order of the ages)—was a reality. Here the government did not concern itself with the affairs of Jews, no official rabbinate or communal structure had the power to define Jewish identity, discipline recalcitrant members, and impose financial and social obligations on Jews. Isaac Mayer Wise, the most important American Jewish religious figure of the nineteenth century, understood that American Jews faced a new reality, and he, in turn, advocated for a "Minhag America" (American custom) that would reflect the unique Jewish identity emerging in this new land.[3]

I first became interested in American Jewish identity while an undergraduate in the late 1950s at Georgetown University, a Jesuit institution. A debate was then taking place within the American Roman Catholic Church over its seeming failure to retain and attract major intellectuals. Msgr. John Tracy Ellis, then the leading historian of American Catholicism, published his famous 1955 essay, "American Catholics and the Intellectual life," which emphasized the paucity of serious Roman Catholic intellectuals, especially when compared to the many first-rank intellectuals within the Jewish community. Ellis wondered as to the reason for this disparity, overlooking the fact that there were crucial differences between Jewish and Roman Catholic identity. A Roman Catholic was by definition religious. A lapsed Irish-Catholic remained Irish although he was no longer considered a member of the church. Secular non-believing Jews, by contrast, remained Jews in good standing. Thus Yeshiva University, an Orthodox institu-

2 Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism in Historical Perspective*, David W. Belin Lecture in American Jewish Affairs (Ann Arbor, 2003), 9.

3 For the subsequent diversity of this identity, see Jack Wertheimer, *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America* (Waltham, 1997); Samuel G. Freedman, *Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry* (New York, 2000); Abigail Pogrebin, *Stars of David: Prominent Jews Talk About Being Jewish* (New York, 2005); Michael Marmur and David Ellenson, eds., *American Jewish Thought Since 1934: Writings on Identity, Engagement, and Belief* (Waltham, 2020).

tion, had no problem naming its medical school after Albert Einstein, a religious agnostic.

Few prominent Jewish intellectuals have been religious in the traditional sense of that word, and Judaism has not been the crucial element in the identity of most American Jews. Their Jewishness has been more a matter of ethnicity, culture, fighting antisemitism, and supporting the state of Israel than of accepting Moses Maimonides's Thirteen Articles of Faith, attending religious services, and observing religious rituals. The sources of American Jewish identity, why Jews feel strongly about being Jewish even though they are often fuzzy as to what this involves, is undoubtedly the greatest mystery within American Jewish history. The paradox of American Judaism is that the great majority of its putative members reject its fundamental tenets and practices. Religion is widely respected in America, and one of the reasons that American antisemitism has been a marginal phenomenon is that Jewishness has been equated with Judaism, and Jews are viewed as comprising a religious rather than an ethnic or cultural group. This equating of Jewishness with Judaism is also seen in academia, where courses in Jewish Studies, even when they focus on sociology and history, are often located in departments of religion.

The response of Jews to American newness has been a major theme of America's most important Jewish novelists, including Abraham Cahan and Anzia Yezierska. In Cahan's 1917 novel, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, one of the great novels of immigrant acculturation in America, the eponymous figure related that "The United States lured me not merely as a land of milk and honey, but also, and chiefly, as one of mystery, of fantastic experiences, of marvelous transformations." In her story "Mostly About Myself," written early in the twentieth century, Yezierska declared that "America was a new world in the making. . . . I find that in no other country has the newcomer such a direct chance to come to the front and become a partner in the making of the country. . . . In the old countries things are more or less settled. In America, the soil is young, and the people are young blossoming shoots of a new-grown civilization."[4]

The central theme of Yezierska's fiction, the historian Joyce Antler noted, is "the pain of becoming a real American," of liberating herself from the constraints of traditional Judaism. In her short story "We Can Change Our Moses but Not Our Noses," Yezierska wrote that despite the benefits this liberation had brought her, it had gone too far. "The day I gave up my Jewish name I ceased to be myself.

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4 Anzia Yezierska, *"How I Found America": Collected Stories of Anzia Yezierska* (New York, 1991), 126-27, 142-43.

I ceased to exist. A person who cuts himself off from his people cuts himself off at the roots of his being; he becomes a shell, a cipher, a spiritual suicide."[5] For Yezierska as well as for many other Jews, America was a blank slate upon which they projected sometimes visions of American Jewish identity.

The importance of identity in American Jewish history is attested to by the fact that the three most famous paradigms of immigrant acculturation were written by Jews, each of whom had in mind the massive migration of Jews to America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In her 1883 sonnet "The New Colossus," Emma Lazarus paid tribute to the Statue of Liberty, a gift of the French people that stands in the New York City harbor, the major gateway of immigrants into America. In contrast to the "storied pomp" of "ancient lands," the statue was the "Mother of Exiles" holding a "lamp beside the golden door" welcoming the immigrants flowing into the United States. Here the immigrants, described by Lazarus as "the wretched refuse" of the teeming shores of Europe, would be purged of their foreign dross and transformed into good Americans.[6]

Israel Zangwill's 1908 play *The Melting Pot* by contrast argued that all Americans, natives as well as immigrants, had been tossed into a vast melting pot, and that this amalgam was creating a completely new person embodying the best that both the immigrants and native Americans had to offer. (The possibility that the amalgam might incorporate the worst that the immigrants and natives had to offer was not considered.) In his famous 1915 article "Democracy Versus the Melting Pot," the philosopher Horace M. Kallen rejected both the Americanization process implicit in Lazarus's poem as well as Zangwill's melting pot concept. He argued instead for a "cultural pluralism" which allowed the immigrants to hold on to the customs, institutions, and languages that they brought with them from Europe. In America each ethnic group "would have its emotional and involuntary life, its own peculiar dialect or speech, its own individual and inevitable esthetic and intellectual forms." Attempts to transform the immigrant, Kallen said, were inherently anti-democratic and hence anti-American.[7]

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5 Joyce Antler, *The Journey Home: How Jewish Women Shaped Modern* America (New York, 1997), 26-35.

6 For Lazarus, see Esther Schor, *Emma Lazarus* (New York, 2017).

7 For Zangwill and Kallen, see Edna Nashon, ed., *From the Ghetto to the Melting Pot: Israel Zangwill's Jewish Plays* (Detroit, 2005); Matthew Kaufman, *Horace Kallen Confronts America: Jewish Identity, Science and Secularism* (Syracuse, 2019).

Because of the freedom allowed Jews in America, America's Jews have been less a chosen people than a choosing people who prioritize newness and novelty. This is particularly true with respect to religion. A variety of new expressions of Judaism have appeared in America, including Reconstructionism, Conservative Judaism, Modern Orthodoxy, Jewish Renewal, the havurah and Kabbalah movements, Jewish feminism, and Jewish Science.[8] The range of Jewish religious identity has spanned the spectrum from insular Hassidic sects to messianic Jews, while for most American Jews Judaism has been relegated from an all-encompassing regimen to simply a religious "persuasion." Just as patrons at a Chinese restaurant choose items from columns A and B, so Jews became adept at selecting those aspects of Jewishness and Judaism which harmonized with their identity as modern Americans.

Secular Jews who have little affinity for Judaism can identity Jewishly in a variety of cultural, social, and political ways. Echoing Whitman, the Jewish community contains a multitude of often contradictory institutions. The slogan of the United Jewish Appeal was once "We Are One," but this hardly been true of American Jewry. The major question facing the Jews in America is whether the freedom, opportunities, diversity, and newness of America portends assimilation and acculturation or a flowering of Jewish life. Perhaps it portends both.

* * *

This volume would not have appeared without the forbearance of my wife, Daryl, who has tolerated me for over half a century during the writing and publication of these essays. She has carefully read them and made countless cogent recommendations for improving them. I am daily thankful for the joy she has brought into my life. My eldest son Marc, who holds the Weinberg Chair in Judaic Studies at the University of Scranton, was instrumental in editing the essays and securing the publisher. I also take pleasure in acknowledging the assistance of the librarians at the various libraries I have used, particularly those at Seton Hall University, who have patiently answered my queries and facilitated my research. I also thank the various scholars who have assisted me along the way. Of these, the most important has been Steve Whitfield of Brandeis University, with whom I have had a long and lengthy correspondence covering many fields,

8 This diversity has also characterized American Christianity. There are, for example, several Lutheran and Baptist churches, organized along ethnic, regional, and ideological lines. The division of Baptists dating from the Civil War has continued to the present day.

especially politics over which we have managed to disagree without being disagreeable. Finally, I am grateful to the editors of the journals and books in which the essays originally appeared for granting permission to republish them. Only the essay "The Impact of War: America's Jews and World War II" has not been previously published.

Part One

IDENTITY

Chapter 1

The Mystery of American Jewish Identity

Of all the European ethnic groups that immigrated to the United States, the Jews were the most idiosyncratic. Not only were they culturally and socially different from the dominant white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) native population, but, in contrast, say, to Polish, Irish, German, and Italian immigrants, they were not Christians. Thus added to the normally difficult acculturative process which all immigrant groups experienced, the Jews had an additional problem of adapting to a culture which was overwhelmingly Christian. The Jewish situation in America was even more problematic because the Jews were not always clear themselves as to what it meant to be a Jew. The question of "Who is a Jew?", which has vexed contemporary politics in Israel, was also a question which Jews in Europe and the United States continually asked themselves during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1950, the Jewish sociologist Nathan Glazer declared that America's Jews were "a social group with clearly marked boundaries," but "the source of the energies that hold [it] separate, and of the ties that bind it together, has become completely mysterious."

Defining Jewish identity is one of the great themes of modern Jewish history. Prior to the nineteenth century, Jews considered themselves to be members of a distinctive religion. But during the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, the nature of Jewishness expanded to encompass an ethnic group, a nationality, and a people with a common history and similar cultural, social, and political values. There were multiple causes for this. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment led many Jews to reject much of traditional Judaism and to develop new religious forms more compatible with modern thinking. In Europe during the nineteenth century the growth of nationalism, Jewish economic and social mobility and acculturation, and the emergence of new political ideologies such as socialism, anarchism, communism, and Zionism led to new definitions of Jewish identity, and in America this process was enormously accelerated. "No group in twentieth century America," wrote the historian Moses Rischin, "has been so

consistently and clinically concerned with the problems of human identity, its relation to group morale, psychology, personal fulfillment, inter-group relations, and inevitably to group survival as have America's Jews."

The historian and Conservative Rabbi Abraham J. Karp agreed. The Jew, he noted, "more than anyone else, has struggled with the challenge of how to live creatively in such a society, how to partake most fully of the political, social and cultural life of America while at the same time fashioning a creative communal, cultural, and religious life of its own. To do so the American Jew had to work out a conception of America and his own identity within it." But Karp was mistaken in using the word "a." There were many such conceptions, and these were often in conflict. Tracing the history of these conceptions and this conflict has been one of the great tasks of historians of American Jewry.

The American stress on individualism has, in the words of the sociologist Paul Hollander, encouraged individuals "to reinvent themselves in order to achieve a sense of self that will be most gratifying." In his "American Scholar" address of 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson urged his fellow Americans to free themselves from "the sere remains of foreign harvests," to cease listening "to the courtly muses of Europe," and to "walk on our feet," "speak our own minds," and to reinvent themselves. The American Jew especially took to heart Emerson's advice to leave behind "ancient prejudices and manners" and to receive "new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new ranks he holds." America's Jews were particularly eager to immerse themselves in this American newness, and they have never been more American than when pondering the nature of American and Jewish American identity.

In this "novus ordo seclorum," religious and ethnic groups have reshaped themselves. It was inevitable then that in this land of the self-made man, new forms of Jewish identity would be invented and old ones discarded. Here all Jews were less a chosen than a choosing people when it came to defining themselves. Judaism had become a "religious persuasion" to be accepted or rejected as one might decide, and Jewish identity a matter of prescription rather than ascription. "Never had a Jewish community been to such an extent voluntary and so divided," the historian Robert Seltzer noted. The choices they made were generally those that were the least demanding and which did not challenge their status as modern and affluent Americans.

American freedom and the absence of ghetto walls meant that Jews could choose not only whether to remain Jews but also to select the content of their Jewish identity. In the late twentieth century a United States senator named Cohen chose not to identify as a Jew, while a Black intellectual named Julius Lester

did. The most extreme case was the phenomenon of "Jews for Jesus" who saw nothing incongruous being Jews by ethnicity and Christian by religion. (They ignored Heinrich Heine's witticism that Jews could not be good Christians because no Jew could believe in the divinity of another Jew.) This willingness to reinvent Jewishness, this combining of "the immediate and the transcendent, the quirky and the hallowed," the historian Jenna Weissman Joselit noted, "was virtually without parallel in modern Jewish history."

From the very beginning of American Jewish history, Jews have sought to reconcile Judaism with American values and middle-class norms, and they were encouraged to do so by the fluidity of American life and its openness to religious diversity. At the dedication of the building of Beth Elohim synagogue in Charleston, South Carolina in 1841, Rabbi Gustavus Poznanski declared, "This synagogue is our temple, this city our Jerusalem, this happy land our Palestine." This reconciling of Jewish and American identities was the life work of Isaac Mayer Wise, the greatest figure in the history of American Judaism during the nineteenth century.

Wise preferred to use the term "American Judaism" rather than "Reform Judaism" when referring to the form of Judaism he hoped would spread throughout the land. He even believed that an Americanized Judaism could become the majority American religion. He titled his 1857 prayer book *Minhag America* (American custom); he named his organization of synagogues the Union of American Hebrew Congregations; and he called his organization of rabbis the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Other American Reform rabbis of the nineteenth century besides Wise also sought to Americanize Judaism.

In 1885 a group of Reform rabbis enunciated what came to be known as the Pittsburgh Platform. This statement of religious principles stressed the complete compatibility of Judaism with American values and rejected those elements of Judaism that distinguished Jews from other Americans. These included the dietary laws and the wearing of skullcaps in the synagogue. (Reformers, it was quipped, were willing to throw over the tenets of traditional Judaism "at the drop of a hat.") The Reformers revised synagogue services to correspond more closely to the dignified and solemn religious rites of upper-class Protestantism. References to Zion and the Temple sacrifices were eliminated since these implied that Jews were not at home in America and hankered to restore the Jewish commonwealth. The use of the word "Temple" by Reform congregations made clear that the temples of America's Jews were not in Jerusalem, but in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Chicago. "We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community," the platform proclaimed, "and therefore expect

neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state." One of the rabbis present in Pittsburgh declared that Jews were at least free from "the yoke of Mosaico-Talmudical Judaism."

This effort to make Judaism conform to American patterns of behavior extended beyond the Reform movement. A new form of Orthodoxy called Modern Orthodoxy or Centrist Orthodoxy emerged in the early twentieth century. Its advocates were convinced that European-style Orthodoxy had no future in the United States, and that only an Orthodoxy attuned to middle-class norms, such as sermons in English and decorous behavior within the sanctuary, would appeal to native-born and upwardly mobile Jews. The same process of adaptation was also occurring within what would come to be known as Conservative Judaism.

Initially Conservative Judaism did not begin as a separate movement. Its central institution, the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City, was established at the turn of the century in order to train Americanized rabbis who would then return to immigrant neighborhoods and minister to congregants who disdained Reform Judaism as inauthentic and who looked askance at European-style Orthodoxy. The immigrants, it was feared, would be lost to Judaism if not presented with a more enlightened version of Orthodoxy. Within a decade or so, and certainly before 1920, it was clear that the JTS was shaping a new form of Judaism, one distinct from both Reform and Orthodoxy. Mordecai Kaplan was the most important figure within what would come to be known as Conservative Judaism.

Kaplan's 1934 book, *Judaism as a Civilization*, provided a blueprint for a new Jewish denomination called Reconstructionism. This volume, arguably the most important theological volume by an American Jewish theologian, claimed that a belief in a personal God was simply incompatible with modernity, and that a non-theistic form of Judaism was required. He proposed to ground American Judaism on a Jewishness that transcended traditional religion. Jews were Jewish because they were part of a civilization, and the synagogue should immerse its congregants in a host of educational, cultural, and artistic activities. While the gurus of the Conservative movement at the JTS rejected Kaplan's theology, many synagogues welcomed his program. It became popular for Conservative synagogues to call themselves "centers" and to have gymnasiums, game rooms, and catering halls, to employ youth directors, and to sponsor a full range of activities for adults and children, including game nights, trips to resorts, and Boy Scout chapters.

If Reconstructionism can be viewed as a heresy of Conservative Judaism, Reform Judaism had its own heresy. In 1963, Sherwin Wine, an atheist, founded the Society of Humanistic Judaism (SHJ), and by the early twenty-first century the society encompassed about thirty congregations. Non-believers had for centuries been a prominent part of Jewish history, but only in America did they feel compelled to manifest their ties to Jewishness within a quasi-religious setting of rabbis, congregations, statements of faith, canonical texts, and celebrations. This showed the centrality of religion in American life and the need even for non-believers to dress their activities in religious clothing. The context for the creation and growth of the SHJ was the vacuum created by the decline of secular components of Jewish identity such as Yiddish culture and socialist politics, the post-World War II religious revival, and the movement of Jews to suburbia where Jewishness was increasingly defined in religious terms.

Scholars have frequently defined America's Jews as an ethnic group. If so, they have comprised a most peculiar one. They did not have a common language. Jews from Central Europe spoke German, those from Eastern Europe spoke Yiddish, those from North Africa spoke Arabic, and those from the Balkans often spoke Ladino, a language derived from medieval Spanish. Relations between these immigrant groups were hardly harmonious. Jews from Lithuania (Litvaks), for example, viewed the Jews from Galicia (Galitzianers) as country bumpkins.

The Germans, in turn, looked down on all the East Europeans as uncouth and ill-mannered, and did not welcome them to their clubs and organizations. The unofficial motto of the Harmonie Club of New York City, a bastion of the city's German Jewish elite, was "more polish and less Polish." In order to differentiate themselves from their uncivilized co-religionists, German Jews frequently described themselves as "Hebrews" and not "Jews." The organization of Reform congregations in America was the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, to emphasize that its members traced their lineage back not to the Jews of Europe but to the ancient Hebrews of the Bible.

And yet no matter from where in Europe they originated, Jewish immigrants were notable for the speed by which they learned English and for their rapid upward social and economic mobility. It is not by chance that the classic picture of Americanization has been Leo Rosten's *The Education of H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N*, which was based on the author's experience teaching English to Jews living in the Lawndale neighborhood of Chicago, the center of the city's Jewish population. One of the characters in his book believed that the sixteenth President must have been Jewish since his name was Lincohen. These