

THE 350TH ANNIVERSARY OF AMERICAN JEWISH LIFE

Jonathan D. Sarna

Historical markers like the 350th anniversary of American Jewish life can serve as “teachable moments”—all-too-rare opportunities to reach beyond the academy and excite a larger public about what it is that we do. Most importantly, they help us to advance our fields by stimulating scholarship and making possible a wide range of conferences that (at their best) promote creative ideas and lively academic interactions.

Of course, anniversaries can also make us queasy. As “pride of heritage” and “love of country” become the dominant tropes, accuracy, objectivity, and dispassion (not to speak of the hermeneutics of suspicion) seem inevitably to give way to filiopietism, boosterism, and even embarrassing anachronisms.

This year marks the third time that the American Jewish community is celebrating its anniversary on American soil. The first time, back in 1905, the lawyers who headed the community insisted on observing not the arrival of the Jews, but the right granted them to “travel,” “trade,” “live,” and “remain.” Tempered by news of vicious pogroms that had devastated Jewish communities in Tsarist Russia, the 250th served, in the end, as an occasion for Jews to express their gratitude to America and as a platform from which they advocated for continued free immigration from eastern Europe.

Forty-nine years later, at the tercentenary of Jewish settlement, in 1954, the central theme, “Man’s Opportunities and Responsibilities Under Freedom,” was a product of the pre-feminist cold war era. Coming as it did just a year after Julius and Ethel

Rosenberg had been executed as spies, the tercentenary linked Jews with America’s highest value—freedom—and downplayed Jewish radicalism and dissension in the Jewish ranks. The goal, as American Jews moved out to suburbia and battled for equality, was to underscore their similarity to “all Americans.” Much of what was produced was thoroughly apologetic.

collaboration of four major research institutions—the American Jewish Historical Society, the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, the Library of Congress, and the National Archives and Records Administration—promises “to honor the past, celebrate the present and anticipate the future of Jewish communal life in North America.”

One point nevertheless stands out. In an era when most people view Jewish history in lachrymose terms, as a history of persecution, expulsion, tragedy, mass-murder, and now terror, American Jewry as portrayed in the 350th anniversary stands as the great



Bootblack stand in New York City, busy on Jewish New Year, September, 1905. Photo by Bain News Service, N.Y.C. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Celebrate 350 (www.celebrate350.org), the national coordinating organization for the commemoration, “provides resources, stimulates ideas, and links the many projects, programs, and enterprises marking the event,” but it maintains no firm agenda of its own. It is as diverse, pluralistic, and multifocused as the American Jewish community itself. The Commission for Commemorating 350 Years of American Jewish History (www.350th.org), a pioneering



Jews praying on the Brooklyn Bridge in New York City on the Jewish New Year, c. 1905-1915. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

exception. Indeed, the anniversary provides an opportunity to explore how Jews have fared under freedom within a pluralistic society where church and state are separated and religion is entirely voluntary. The central questions posed by scholars of the American Jewish experience reflect these themes, and serve as a challenge to much of contemporary Jewish historiography.

From the perspective of those who teach American Jewish history, the 350th commemoration has provided a pedagogical windfall. The two major Web sites created for the 350th—www.celebrate350.org and www.350th.org—provide a wide range of instructional resources, including time lines, reading lists, scholarly articles, primary sources, and more. Other invaluable resources, as well as links, may be found on the Web sites of the American Jewish Historical Society (www.ajhs.org), the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives (www.americanjewisharchives.org), the Jewish Women’s Archive (www.jwa.org), and Jewish-American History on the Web (www.Jewish-history.com).

Numerous exhibitions are being planned for the 350th, some of which will live on through the Internet. By far the most important exhibition, sponsored by the Commission for Commemorating 350 Years of American Jewish History, is entitled “From Haven to Home” and opened in the Great Hall of the Library of Congress on September 8, later traveling to Cincinnati, New York, Los Angeles, and possibly other venues. This mammoth exhibition displays the wide-ranging American Jewish history treasures of the Library of Congress as well as selected items from other commission institutions. It features not only rare books, documents, and photographs, but also unusual sound and film clips. The entire exhibition will be posted at the Library of

Congress’s Web site (www.loc.gov/exhibits) and most items may be downloaded for instructional purposes. A well-illustrated catalogue, with essays by many of the foremost scholars in the field, accompanies the exhibition. The Jewish Theological Seminary’s exhibition for the 350th anniversary, entitled “People of Faith, Land of Promise,” also makes available wonderful primary materials in



“The Modern Moses of War-Stricken Europe - Herbert Hoover. He led Israel out of the slavery of starvation and despair.” Courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

American Jewish history. The exhibition catalogue was published by the Seminary Library and an online version of the exhibition is available at www.jtsa.edu/library/exhib/pof. In addition, the highly acclaimed exhibition on the Jews of South Carolina entitled “A Portion of the People,” sponsored by the Jewish Historical Society of South Carolina, the College of Charleston, and the McKissick Museum, will become available on the Web during the 350th anniversary year. The New York Public Library, too, has announced an exhibition, to be mounted by its Dorot Jewish Division. Entitled “Jews in America: Conquistadors, Knickerbockers, Pilgrims and the Hope of Israel,” it will focus mainly on seventeenth-century developments. The year will also see ground broken for the new National Museum of

American Jewish History in Philadelphia, to be built on the mall, opposite the Liberty Bell and the new Constitution Center; see www.nmajh.org.

A great many cultural programs are being planned for the 350th anniversary. The 92nd Street Y in New York has commissioned lectures, concerts, and a special dance performance; see www.92y.org for details. Some of these programs will be broadcast live via satellite, with prior arrangements. The National Foundation for Jewish Culture likewise lists a variety of sponsored events, including a new listing of plays of Jewish interest and a tribute to the American Jewish experience by the renowned choreographer, Paul Taylor (see www.jewishculture.org/programs/350). National Public Radio will broadcast a series of special radio programs dealing with American Jewish history; subsequently, they, too, will be available on the Web. In addition, the Jewish Theological Seminary, in conjunction with Diva Communications, has produced a television show entitled “Legacy of Our Ancestors: 350th Anniversary Celebration of Early Jewish America,” which was broadcast on ABC and is now available on video.

Finally, marking the 350th anniversary promises to advance scholarship through a bountiful number of conferences. The Seventh Annual Scholars’ Conference in American Jewish History, held in June at American University and the Library of Congress, brought together more than one hundred scholars for a diverse and lively program; for a description of the conference and a list of the sessions see www.350th.org/history/sc.html. The Jewish Theological Seminary hosted two conferences: a pathbreaking conference on American Jewish Music in November 2003 entitled “Only in America” that marked the opening of the Milken Archive of American Jewish Music (www.milkenarchive.org), and an

academic conference entitled “Imagining the American Jewish Community” in March 2004 (www.jtsa.edu/350/imagining.shtml). Conferences dealing with such neglected subjects as American Jews in

history (Brandeis University and the American Jewish Committee), are slated to take place during 2004–2005, along with other conferences at Boston University, Northeastern University, and elsewhere.

Web sites, lies the hope that in the wake of this year’s “teachable moment,” the study of American Jewish history itself will gain heightened significance, sparking new interest in the field among scholars and non-scholars alike.

THE COMBINATION OF SCHOLARLY EXERTION, EDUCATIONAL IMMERSION, AND POPULAR PROMOTION THAT CHARACTERIZES THE 350TH ANNIVERSARY COMMEMORATION PROMISES TO LEAVE A LASTING LEGACY.

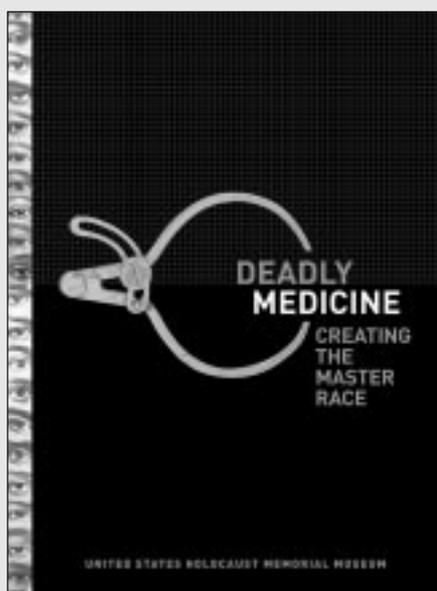
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business (Temple University), American Jewish foodways (George Washington University), American Jewish popular culture (Creighton University), and the meaning of the American Jewish experience for American and Jewish

The combination of scholarly exertion, educational immersion, and popular promotion that characterizes the 350th anniversary commemoration promises to leave a lasting legacy. Beyond the tangible products created, which include books, articles, exhibitions, and

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