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## Reflecting on American Jewish History

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## Reflecting on American Jewish History

### Abstract

I must confess that, in some thirty years of writing and teaching Jewish history, I have not thought seriously about the American Jewish experience, with the notable exception of some basic reading to prepare me to introduce the subject in my broad survey courses on modern Jewish history and thought. I was trained as a Jewish historian at Columbia University and the Hebrew University at a time when a clear bias existed, perpetuating the primary status of European Jewish history over American because of its grounding in Hebraic and rabbinic texts. Moreover, I was acutely aware of the relative indifference of my Israeli teachers to American culture, all of them students of Baer, Dinur, and Scholem, card-carrying members of the so-called "Jerusalem school."<sup>1</sup>

### Disciplines

History | History of Religion | Jewish Studies | United States History

## Reflecting on American Jewish History

DAVID B. RUDERMAN

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I must confess that, in some thirty years of writing and teaching Jewish history, I have not thought seriously about the American Jewish experience, with the notable exception of some basic reading to prepare me to introduce the subject in my broad survey courses on modern Jewish history and thought. I was trained as a Jewish historian at Columbia University and the Hebrew University at a time when a clear bias existed, perpetuating the primary status of European Jewish history over American because of its grounding in Hebraic and rabbinic texts. Moreover, I was acutely aware of the relative indifference of my Israeli teachers to American culture, all of them students of Baer, Dinur, and Scholem, card-carrying members of the so-called “Jerusalem school.”<sup>1</sup>

Our academic world has changed in these thirty years in North America, in Israel, and now in Europe. American Jewish history is taken seriously in Israel because American Jewish historians are more numerous and more prominent in the field, better trained both in American and Jewish history, and because the more traditional and ideologically driven historiography to which I was still exposed has given way to more nuanced and variegated approaches to the study of the Jewish past throughout the world. With the amazingly steady and sustained growth of Jewish Studies on American campuses, American Jewish history is gradually finding its place of prominence among the vast range of Jewish Studies courses. Particularly in history departments in this country which give priority to American history, American Jewish history represents an accessible and desirable link between Judaic studies and history as larger numbers of students in the mainstream of the humanities naturally discover the place of Jews in American and global culture.

My own entry points into American Jewish history are of recent origin. When my father, a rabbi who served several small congregations, died several years ago, he left me a diary and a box of sermons spanning a period of over sixty years. I have recently attempted to reconstruct four years of his career in the deep South and his unsuccessful struggle for civil rights.<sup>2</sup> Reading widely on American Jewish culture in small towns

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1. See, for example, David Myers, *Re-Inventing the Jewish Past: European Jewish Intellectuals and the Zionist Return to History* (New York, 1995).

2. David Ruderman, “Greenville Diary: A Northern Rabbi Confronts the Deep South, 1966–70,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 94, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 643–65.

in the South of the 1960s in order to contextualize my father's experiences has proven to be as energizing and as serious as any of my previous research projects on the Jews in Renaissance Italy or early modern Europe. If any residues of my previously ingrained biases remained from my graduate education, they were quickly brushed aside in this personal quest to make sense of part of my own historical origins. I have finally come to realize that the Jewish experience in Greenville, Mississippi is no less significant a historical subject than one in Troyes, Worms, or Padua.

Even more substantial in pointing me in the direction of American Jewish history was my work on a recent book on Anglo-Jewry during the period of the Enlightenment.<sup>3</sup> It is this encounter with England which leads me directly to try and answer the question at hand: What is the ultimate meaning of 350 years of American Jewish life in the context of the *longue durée* of the Jewish historical experience?

One of the main arguments of my book is that the process of translation into the English language uniquely marks the intellectual life of Anglo-Jewry in the modern era. Anglo-Jews, like their American counterparts, enjoyed a relatively higher degree of social integration than anywhere else in Europe. Many professional, educational, and social barriers had practically disappeared by the end of the eighteenth century, despite the failure of the Jew Bill of 1753 and despite a residue of public hostility to both the Jewish upper and lower classes. In this relatively open society, English Jews, increasingly native-born, felt the acute need to approach the literary sources of their culture in the only language the overwhelming majority of them could understand, English. With the relatively rapid decline of Hebrew, Yiddish, Spanish, and Portuguese as languages spoken and written by Jews, to a degree unprecedented anywhere else in Europe, they became almost exclusively monolingual.<sup>4</sup>

The handful of Jewish educators attempting to offer their students an essential textual knowledge of Judaism eventually succumbed for the most part to the weight of this pervasive diminution of Hebraic literacy. Their only recourse was to undertake a massive project of translating the primary sources of their tradition into the language Anglo-Jews could comprehend. Young Jewish students educated in the home, in the synagogue, and in Jewish schools were ultimately mastering their prayers, their Bible stories, their normative rules of Jewish conduct, and their smattering of rabbinic wisdom through English translations. By the

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3. David Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key: Anglo-Jewry's Construction of Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton and Oxford, 2000).

4. For this summary of the place of English translations in Anglo-Jewish culture, I borrow heavily from my aforementioned book, especially 6–8, 215–68 (chap. 6, “Translation and Transformation: The Englishing of Jewish Culture”), and 269–73.

end of the eighteenth century, most English Jews thought about their identity almost exclusively in non-Hebraic, English terms. And through the medium of English translation, their religious attitudes and behavior patterns resembled to an unparalleled degree those of their English Protestant neighbors. Judaism, as translated, modified, and glossed in English, came to signify something quite different from that experienced by other Western and Eastern European Jews.

As Anglo-Jews sought to define their religious and cultural identity within a linguistic frame of reference, a kind of English playing field, so to speak, common to both Christians and Jews, the ultimate issues that concerned them, the way they reflected on themselves in relation to the other, and their social and religious aspirations, were all thoroughly affected by their choice of language. In a society where the English Bible was central in defining the character of the nation as a whole, English Jews became indistinguishable from their Christian neighbors in mastering and appreciating sacred Scriptures through their reading of the official King James Version. Even when Jewish editions of the biblical text were published with learned footnotes indicating the proper Jewish interpretation of certain theologically-charged passages, Jewish readers were still reading Torah through the mediation of a standard Christian translation. Both the substantive and the aesthetic impact of this reading process was profound.

Roughly between the years 1770 and 1830, several Jewish publishers and educators, especially a remarkable polymath named David Levi, flooded the market with their biblical translations partially correcting Christian “mistranslations,” extensive translations of the prayer book, new English catechisms and summaries of the essence of Jewish faith, new practical manuals for the observance of Jewish ritual, and new anthologies of rabbinic Judaism. They rendered into English a radical reformulation and distillation of Judaism fully removed from the original sources upon which their translations were based.

In my book, I utilized the stimulating essay of Jan Assman on the notion of cultural translation in the ancient world to speculate on this English setting.<sup>5</sup> Assman had posited three types of possible translation: assimilatory translation of a distinct minority into a dominating language or culture; mutual translation where the majority restrains from imposing its hegemony over its minority cultures; and syncretism, or translation into a third language. Assman contended that Hellenism embodied the third kind of translation, providing a common language

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5. Jan Assman, “Translating Gods: Religion as a Factor of Cultural (Un)Translatability,” in Sanford Budick and William Iser, eds., *The Translatability of Cultures: Figurations of the Space Between* (Stanford, 1996), 25–36; Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment*, 216–18.

for local traditions and religions to express themselves in a voice more eloquent, articulate, and flexible than their own. Hellenism not only provided a common semiotic field but helped to create a cosmopolitan consciousness. For Assman, this form of syncretism offers the only realistic and desirable translatability for our own day.

One might ask, as I did, whether Assman's notion of syncretism faithfully captures the process of the Englishing of Jewish culture. Did the new English culture of Anglo-Jewry ultimately function as the Hellenistic culture of late antiquity? Did the new English medium now enhance the universal message of Judaism in the modern world? Could English translations now provide a neutral ambiance to assimilated Jews, through which they would gain access to the essential meaning of their tradition in jeopardy of cultural extinction? To the translators themselves, English was meant only to diminish Jewish cultural alienation and to enhance the universal message of the Jewish faith for all humankind. However lofty these aspirations of maintaining a double membership in English and Jewish cultures, was this ideal ever realizable? Had the new medium created a new message instead? In reality, wasn't the English case one of assimilatory translation and not of syncretism, whereby the distinct identity of the Jewish minority ultimately surrendered to the overwhelming pressure of the hegemonic Protestant culture, notwithstanding the best intentions of the translators?

This exploration about the meaning of Anglo-Jewish culture at the end of the eighteenth century ultimately leads to the wider question of the cultural uniqueness of American Jewish culture and the legacy it inherited from its immediate Anglo-Jewish ancestors. It is certainly not difficult to show how Anglo-Jewish translation projects actually reached the American shores very soon after their publication in the British Isles. I have attempted to offer a brief excursus of the publishing trails of some of the key Jewish texts of Anglo-Jewish provenance.<sup>6</sup> The significance, for example, of David Levi's masterful liturgical translations of American Jewish prayerbooks is well documented. Isaac Leeser's six-volume edition of the Hebrew prayers, published in Philadelphia in 1837–1838, was based for the most part on Levi's work. Leeser acknowledged in the preface to his work his indebtedness to Levi, which is worth citing: "I may be asked, why I did not then make it [the translation] better? To this I would reply, that our people, particularly those not conversant with the Holy Tongue, have been familiar from their infancy with the translation issued by David Levi: I therefore do not think myself at liberty to alter it

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6. Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment*, 269–73.

so much as to break up all connexion between the books in common use and those now offered.”<sup>7</sup>

By the time Leiser was publishing his prayerbooks, a tradition of translation was very well entrenched among American Jews. Rather than innovate by creating a new American liturgical translation, it was better to follow common usage, that is, to follow the translations created by Anglo-Jews. One additional example of Leiser’s indebtedness to the materials prepared by Anglo-Jewish educators was his republication of the first rabbinic anthology in the English language by Professor Hyman Hurwitz, called *Hebrew Tales*, first issued in Philadelphia in 1845 and subsequently republished in Boston and New York.<sup>8</sup> In the case of Lesser’s monumental translation of the Bible in 1853, this work, in contrast, was highly original, because of the fact that Levi and his colleagues were never able to carry out the task Leiser ultimately accomplished of creating a fresh Jewish translation of Scripture.<sup>9</sup>

Undoubtedly, many other examples could be offered to demonstrate that the Jewish cultural ambiance shaped on English soil at the end of the eighteenth and in the early nineteenth centuries left a significant mark on that of North American Jews as well. Despite the attempt of some rabbis and communal leaders such as David Einhorn and Bernard Felsenthal to assert a German linguistic hegemony over nineteenth-century American Jewish culture, their efforts were doomed to failure as their congregants insisted on English usage in Jewish schools and synagogues. In communities where rabbis played a relatively diminished role in directing collective decision making, where the textual study and theological reflection of the European Jewish legacy was hardly relevant for most Jews, and where the Jewish laity was asserting its right to adapt the tradition as it saw fit, the American Jewish community looked more and more like its English counterpart than its German one. Hasia Diner’s observation about nineteenth-century American Jews applies equally to their English-speaking coreligionists across the ocean: “From Europe’s linguistic crossroads, where multiple languages existed side by side, Jewish immigrants came to a nation committed to a single language. In their everyday lives, Jews picked up English, broken though it may have been, out of necessity.”<sup>10</sup>

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7. Isaac Leiser, *Sidur Sifte Tzadikim: The Form of Prayers According to the Custom of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews*, 6 vols. (Philadelphia, 1837–1838), 1: preface, vi.

8. On this, see Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment*, 261–68.

9. See Lance J. Sussman, “Another Look at Isaac Leiser and the First Jewish Translation of the Bible in the United States,” *Modern Judaism* 5 (1985): 159–90.

10. Hasia R. Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration, 1820–1880* (Baltimore and London, 1992), 219.

This common linguistic predicament, in which both English and American Jews found themselves, ultimately strengthened the intimacy and kinship between their two cultures. But there is an even greater significance in examining the common condition both cultures shared. The Anglo-Jewish paradigm, of being Jewish in an English key, is also a critical component in understanding the fashioning of American Jewish culture throughout its long history. American Jewish educators constantly struggled with the same dilemma of a community linguistically challenged in accessing its cultural legacy through its original texts. The process of translations of Jewish classical texts into the English language not only continued on American soil, it flourished in a way unimaginable to the first compilers of Jewish works in English. No doubt translation was a staple of Jewish diasporic life from Alexandria to the present. But on the European continent, Hebrew, Yiddish, and Ladino continued to hold their place, at least among cultural elites who published books, journals, poetry, and prose in these classical mediums of Jewish civilization, allowing Jewish languages to co-exist with the *lingua franca* of their host societies. Jewish bilingualism or trilingualism remained the norm for the majority of Jews living in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Eastern Europe.

In the American context, the languages of Jewish immigrants rapidly eroded under the extreme pressure of American linguistic homogenization. In our day and age, Yiddish is an oddity studied in a few university programs. Hebrew attracts small communities of traditionalists and Zionists. Jewish culture at its very core and essence is only comprehensible in English. And given the international status of the English language everywhere, the Jewish experience in an English field is only a minor expression of a pervasive universal phenomenon. When most American Jews think about their Jewish identity, they think in English. They pray in English, they read the Torah in English translation along with their modern English commentaries, and they listen to the lessons and sermons of American rabbis and educators in English. In recent years, there has been a revolution in Jewish learning within the university community: more books are published, more courses are offered, and more teachers hold distinguished positions throughout the American academy than ever before. But this, too, is a cultural renaissance restricted primarily to translations. Students of Jewish history usually read English books, even in Europe and in Israel. Students study classics translated into English; even professors, more often than they care to admit, prefer to read and discuss their source material in English translations. If only Hurwitz and Leiser could have imagined how their tentative efforts to create new translated anthologies would bear fruit



two hundred years later! At a recent rabbinical conference I attended, I watched 150 rabbis reciting a large part of their prayers in mellifluous English translations. I pointed out to my colleagues that I fully understood the need to pray in English if a person lacked Hebraic skills. But why were Jewish educators, who were supposedly proficient in the Hebrew language, electing to pray in English? Were they ultimately more comfortable in the English language; and was their aesthetic sense more fulfilled by reciting prayers in their own native tongue?

To me, the scene of American rabbinic prayer in English epitomizes, for good or for bad, the nature of the Anglo-American experience for modern Jewry. It is a commonplace to underscore the unique conditions of security and adjustment of American Jewry, living in open social and political surroundings, less defensive and socially repressed than any other diasporic Jewish community in history. But what is less discussed is its monolithic linguistic field, other than to lament the loss of Hebraic literacy in an American context. What needs to be stressed, however, is the emergence of a certain level of Jewish literacy, at least among a vocal and conspicuous minority of the Jewish community who read Jewish books, perform Jewish rituals, and think Jewish thoughts, all in the English language. What has emerged after three hundred and fifty years of American Jewish life is a culture that shows certain signs of vibrancy and vitality, but that expresses itself, for the most part, in an English recasting of its traditional texts and utterances, often far removed from their original language. Given the preponderance of Jewish books in English on almost any subject, along with the steady stream of translations of rabbinics, kabbala, philosophy, and Jewish literature in all ages and periods,<sup>11</sup> there is little need to master the original texts in the first place, unless one professes to be a scholar. Like David Levi and his contemporaries, rabbis and educators accept the inevitable: English resources do suffice to educate and enhance Jewish identity. And with the new resources of the internet for Jewish education, the privileged place of English translation is more secure than ever before. The internet is ultimately an even more radical extension of the Englishing of Jewish culture, a small but conspicuous example of the Englishing of global culture.

Ultimately, the creation of an Anglo-American Jewish civilization in an English key has significant ramifications for understanding the bifurcation of modern and contemporary Jewries and Judaisms. It is not

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11. The projected multi-volume Posner anthology of Jewish literature in English translations to be published by Yale University Press, encompassing Jewish civilization from antiquity to the present, exemplifies this powerful trend as well as anything else.

only the conventional divide between Israel and the Diaspora or between a relatively insulated European Jewish culture (at least prior to 1939) and a relatively open and integrated North American Jewish culture which marks the modern Jewish experience in the last two hundred years. It is also the divergent linguistic paths of European/Israeli and Anglo/American Jewish societies that ultimately shape two distinct communities with noticeably disparate self-images and self-perceptions. A Jewish culture in English translation, especially one that is hardly cognizant of the remarkable distance from its linguistic roots, is unquestionably a critical dimension of the American Jewish experience. A Jewish culture in English translation was meant by its earlier creators to preserve and invigorate Judaism by making it more accessible, more understandable, less alien, and more appreciated to and by an increasingly uneducated Jewish (and non-Jewish) public. Although it was “only” a translation of the original, it was meant to convey as accurately as possible the authentic character of the latter. In the end, translated Jewish culture became synonymous with Jewish culture itself. The re-created tradition of translation was so formidable and so pervasive that it was soon mistaken for the original. Ultimately, a Jewish culture almost exclusively expressed in the ubiquitous English language is a unique cultural phenomenon in its own right, radically different from other Jewish cultural experiences either in the historical past or the present. To my way of thinking, this prominent factor helps to explain much about the cultural legacy of American Jews in relation to that of other Jewish communities, and it weighs heavily on its still uncertain future.<sup>12</sup>

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12. I am well aware of the danger of lumping all English-speaking Jews into one category. I would assume there are also important cultural differences between the two communities I have considered in this essay, as well as in others such as in South Africa, Australia, or Canada. I have stressed here only the common condition of English Jewish cultures without exploring any possible differences among them, an exploration beyond the scope of this brief essay. My thanks to Arthur Kiron for raising this point and for reading the essay.