

Perils and Prospects: Jewish Integration in New Amsterdam and New York, 1654–1865

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Since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, the question of integration and assimilation has been a central theme in Jewish history. In Europe, where legal discrimination remained well into the nineteenth and in some places the twentieth centuries, the difficulties encountered by Jews who sought to enter the mainstream of political, economic, and social life resulted in large-scale conversions as well as lasting personal anguish. We need only think of the father of Karl Marx, who converted to pursue a legal career, or the poet Heinrich Heine, whose conversion resulted in lifetime personal anguish, or the religious philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, some of whose children and all of whose grandchildren were or became Christians. In America, especially in New York, which was the center of American Jewish life after the Revolution, these dilemmas were far less present. British mercantile thought and the rise of republicanism created opportunity not found in Europe. Conversion was not necessary for integration into the mainstream of American life.

In order to understand how integration and assimilation play out in any given culture, we must define these terms. As used in this study, the term “integration” refers to the successful entry of a group—in this case, New York Jewry—into the economic, social, and political life of the city. The success with which New York Jews were able to participate in the urban marketplace, join organizations such as the Mechanics or Silversmiths Society, or vote and run for office are indicators of integration. “Assimilation” involves a further step; it is “a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons and groups and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common

cultural life.” In other words, the extent to which integration results in the transformation of the group is the extent of assimilation.¹

Assimilation allows for several possibilities. Minority populations may remain distinct communities, in which case they become part of a multicultural society that contains several minority groups each retaining its separate and distinct identity. A population may fully adopt the identity of the host country and cease existing as a distinct group, or it may partially assimilate, retaining a limited ethnic, racial, or religious identity. Finally, a minority population may become part of a melting pot, a process of homogenization in which differing cultures form a new, separate culture. Part of the process of assimilation may be triggered by a common class and/or racial identity that connects different sectors of society.²

American Jewish historians have long discussed the processes of integration and assimilation, analyzing changes between generations as well as the Jewish institutions and neighborhoods that have been at the forefront of American Jewish identity. They describe the process in which American Jews adopted American history as their history and American culture as their culture, testing whether the ties that for generations bound the Jewish community would diminish and whether the group would experience total assimilation or maintain its identity by adjusting to the new world. Would the process of Americanization be one of limited integration with restricted contact outside the community; partial assimilation, which would involve adopting American history and values while maintaining a distinct Jewish identity; or the disappearance of the Jewish community?³

1 Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1921, 1961), 735. The definition is Park's.

2 Russel A. Kazal, "Revisiting Assimilation: The Rise, Fall, and Reappraisal of a Concept in American Ethnic History," *American Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (1995): 427–471.

3 Jonathan Frankel, "Assimilation and the Jews in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Towards a New Historiography?" in *Assimilation and Community: The Jews in Nineteenth Century Europe*, ed. Jonathan Frankel and Steven J. Zipperstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Cecile Kuznitz, "At Home in the City: Jewish Urban History between the New and Old Worlds," *American Jewish History* 100 (2016): 221–232. Three significant books that address assimilation in America and Europe are Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home in*

Most studies of Jewish assimilation cover the era of mass immigration of Eastern European Jewry that began in the 1880s. They are commonly multigenerational and rely on an abundance of historical documentation, both written and visual. For the period before the Civil War, evidence is largely limited to synagogue minutes and newspapers; it is difficult to quantify changes. Within these limitations, this article seeks to describe the trends in integration and assimilation during the Dutch and British colonial eras, the early national era, and the antebellum era. Focusing on the relationship of the Jewish community to the host community, it describes the efforts of New York's Jewish communities to maintain their presence and ultimately become a significant factor in urban society.

A Synagogue Community: Colonial New Amsterdam and New York

American Jewish history begins in 1654 with the arrival of twenty-three Dutch Jews in New Amsterdam, refugees from Brazil, where they had been colonists until the Portuguese retook their settlement. These Jews, together with two Jewish Dutch merchants already in New Amsterdam, sought to reside in this remote outpost of the Dutch West India Company. They were not welcomed by Dutch merchants or the governor of New Netherland, Peter Stuyvesant, who asked the directors of the West India Company to expel them as members of a “deceitful race,—such hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ.” Amsterdam's leaders saw these Jewish newcomers, known for “customary usury and deceitful trading with Christians,” as unwelcome immigrants. They were a potential fifth column. In early modern Europe, Jews were believed to constitute a separate nation, a reason for ghettoization and restriction beyond the Christian contempt for the fact that they did not recognize Jesus as their savior.⁴

America: Second Generation New York Jews (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981) and Stephen J. Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa: A Cultural History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); and David Sorkin, *The Transformation of German Jewry, 1780–1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁴ Peter Stuyvesant to Amsterdam Chamber of the West India Company, 22 September

On the other hand, the Jews seeking to live in this young colony saw themselves not as foreign immigrants but as Dutch colonists moving from one settlement to another. The Dutch had fought the Spanish for eighty years for the right to live as they chose, and Dutch Jews shared this legacy. In the process, Holland's Jews achieved admittance into the body politic. Their leaders became prosperous, erecting a magnificent synagogue and helping fund the Dutch West India Company. When the Jewish Dutch merchants in New Amsterdam sought the rights of Dutch citizenship, asking that "the Jewish nation be allowed, like other inhabitants, to travel, live and traffic there, and...enjoy liberty on condition of contributing like others," their standing in Amsterdam prompted the company to grant their petition. Noting that members of the Jewish community of Amsterdam had invested "a large amount of capital...in the shares of the Company," it ordered that Jews be permitted to "travel and trade to and in New Netherland and live and remain there." Later petitions won the right to stand guard, conduct private religious services, and achieve burgher standing.⁵ Unfortunately, while the patronage of the Amsterdam Jewish community enabled the twenty-three to attain many of the same rights as Jews living in Amsterdam, they could not create a cohesive community amidst the antisemitism and hostility they encountered, and they left the colony within a decade. In such an atmosphere there was no possibility of integration, much less assimilation.

1654; approval of the Burgomasters on 1 March 1655 in Samuel Oppenheim, "The Early History of the Jews in New York, 1654–1664: Some New Matters on the Subject," *Proceedings of the American Jewish Historical Society* 18 (1909): 4–5.

5 Peter Stuyvesant to Amsterdam Chamber of the West India Company, 22 September 1654; approval of the Burgomasters on 1 March 1655; Petition of Jacob Barsimon and Asser Levy regarding guard duty, 5 November 1655; Letter from directors of the West India Company, 13 March 1656; Letter from directors of the West India Company, 13 March 1656 in Oppenheim, "Early History," 8, 21, 24–25. West India Company to Peter Stuyvesant, 26 April 1655 in Morris Schappes, ed., *A Documentary History of the Jews of the United States, 1654–1875* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 4–5. For a valuable overview, see Paul Finkelman, "'A Land that Needs People for its Increase': How the Jews Won the Right to Remain in New Netherland," in *New Essays in American Jewish History*, ed. Pamela S. Nadell, Jonathan D. Sarna, and Lance J. Sussman (Cincinnati: Ktav and the American Jewish Archives, 2010), 19–50.

The colony of New York, which commenced with the peaceful takeover of New Amsterdam in 1664, saw New York City grow into a prosperous port with a heterogeneous population. The British government's mercantilist outlook held that the economic needs of the state were more important than the needs of the church. Consequently, unlike the Dutch, the city's Jews posed no problem for local British leadership. In 1674, Governor Edmund Andros issued an order to "permit all persons of what Religion so ever, quietly to inhabit within ye precincts of your jurisdiction without giving ym any disturbance or disquiet whatsoever, for or by reason of their differing opinion in matters of Religion." Discriminatory regulations against Jewish retailers were allowed to lapse. In 1740, when Parliament bestowed citizenship on all residents who had lived in New York for seven years, their grant did not include the clause "upon the true faith of the Christian" in the oath required of voters and holders of government office. New York became one of the most hospitable places for Jewish inhabitants in the Atlantic world.⁶

The Jewish population of New York City grew slowly. By 1700, there were about twenty families (or one hundred Jews) living in the city, about 2.5 percent of the population; by 1750 there were three hundred Jews in the city of 13,000, or 2.3 percent. Many of the first Jewish residents were Sephardic, from families that originated in Spain, Portugal, or France. They were joined by English Jews and a few Central and Eastern European Ashkenazi Jews seeking economic opportunity.

The community was led by its wealthy Jewish merchants, largely Sephardic in the 1600s but Ashkenazi in the eighteenth century. Colonial New York's Jewish elite integrated into the colony's highest circles, both economically and socially. Colonial partnerships of Jewish and Christian merchants imported and exported goods from Europe and the West Indies. One jointly funded slave ship brought 119 enslaved Africans to the city after a horrific crossing. Wealthy Jewish merchants

6 Simon W. Rosendale, "An Act Allowing Naturalization of Jews in the Colonies," *Proceedings of the American Jewish Historical Society* 1 (1893): 93–98; Leo Hershkowitz, "Some Aspects of the New York Merchant Jewish Community, 1654–1820," *American Jewish Historical Society Quarterly* 66 (1976–1977): 13–18; Eli Faber, *A Time for Planting: The First Migration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 101.

dressed as finely as their gentile counterparts, a few developing close ties to government officials. Governor Richard Coote, First Earl of Bellomont, said that he “would have been undone” had he not relied on Jewish merchants in 1700, while Governor Robert Hunter turned to merchant Nathan Simpson for funds during Queen Anne’s War. Jacob Franks, the wealthiest Jewish merchant in the mid-eighteenth century, and his wife visited regularly with Governor William Cosby in the 1730s, discussing news of Britain’s wars with France and Spain. The Franks were ardent British patriots, enthusiastic supporters of the growing empire. Like the Dutch refugees, Jewish merchants saw themselves as fellow colonists rather than immigrants. Unlike the Dutch years, there was little resistance, and the city’s prominent Jewish merchants integrated into the community of elite New York. Their British patriotism indicates a significant degree of political and social assimilation.⁷

The world of the Jewish lower ranks was significantly different from that of elite merchants. The lives of the families of these small shopkeepers and craftsmen centered around their synagogue, Shearith Israel, erected in 1730 with the financial help of Jews throughout the Americas. They lived close to the small, inconspicuous sanctuary on Mill Street. Governed in the fashion of western European synagogues by a board of elders, Shearith Israel considered itself the protector of the community. The elders stated in their minutes that they were “faithful Shepherds [who] call into the fold wandring sheep.” Traditional Judaism required strict observance of the Sabbath on Saturdays. Dietary laws (kashrut) stipulated that Jewish communal and family life be separate; Jews could not eat at the homes of non-Jews. Meat had to be slaughtered according

7 James T. Gilchrist, ed., *The Growth of the Seaport Cities, 1790–1825* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1967), 28; Hyman B. Grinstein, *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York, 1654–1860* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1947), 469; Howard B. Rock, *Haven of Liberty: New York Jews in the New World, 1654–1865* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 28–35; David De Sola Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone: Early Jewish Settlers, 1682–1831* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 461; Michael Ben-Jacob, “Nathan Simson: A Biographical Sketch of a Colonial Jewish Merchant,” *American Jewish Archives Journal* 51 (1990): 16–17; Leo Hershkowitz, “Some Aspects,” 13–18; “Anatomy of a Slave Voyage, New York, 1721,” *de Halve Maen* 76 (2003): 45–51.

to Jewish law; the synagogue paid the *shochet* (butcher) and inspected his work and imported beef. While New York's Jewish community interacted within society in the marketplace, they led a separate existence once they left their store or workshop. In this sector of the community there was limited economic integration and little assimilation.⁸

Descriptions of the synagogue by eighteenth century visitors are helpful. Physician Alexander Hamilton (1744) saw a medieval service. During prayers he observed "fifty of the seed of Abraham chanting and singing their doleful hymns around the sanctuary...in robes of white silk." He compared the women's gallery to a hen coop. Visitor Peter Kalm (1747) described a contemporary service with men and women dressed in fashionably English clothing reading prayers. Hamilton saw New York Jewry as living in a world far remote from the modernity of New York, while Kalm saw a service with a congregation that identified as British and was cognizant of contemporary English customs. It is not necessary to choose between the two. New York's colonial Jewish community followed a prayer service that was rooted in medieval life and kept to themselves for the most part, but its leaders, the elders of the synagogue who were members of the merchant elite, lived both in their synagogue community and in eighteenth-century British society. A visitor would see both aspects of the Jewish community in its synagogue and choose which to emphasize.⁹

Intermarriage was rare within the insular synagogue community. One study of colonial Jewish society in Atlantic settlements concluded that 45 percent of Jewish men and 41 percent of Jewish women did not marry, likely because of a paucity of eligible mates in these small communities. It is likely that many young Jewish men and women either refused or did not (or could not) consider marriage to a non-Jew.¹⁰

8 Rock, *Haven*, 45–59, 79–80 (28 March 1758); "The Earliest Extant Minutes of the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation Shearith Israel in New York, 1728–1786," *Proceedings of the American Jewish Historical Society* 21 (1913): 70–72 (13 September 1752), 9 (10 April 1752), and 68–70.

9 Peter Kalm, *Travels in North America: The English Version of 1790*, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1964), 1:130; Lee M. Friedman, "Dr. Hamilton Visits Shearith Israel," *American Jewish Historical Society Quarterly* 40 (1950): 183–184.

10 Robert Cohen, "Jewish Demography in the Eighteenth Century: A Study of London,

Opportunities for intermarriage were more common among families of wealthy Jewish merchants who mixed socially with the Christian elite. They were, however, a cause of upheaval. The reaction of the city's most prominent Jewish woman, Abigaill Franks, to her daughter Phila's elopement with Oliver Delancey, the brother of one of the city's political leaders, is instructive. Abigaill, who was knowledgeable about colonial politics and well connected with the city's gentry, took the marriage as an earthquake. She retreated to her summer home on Long Island and refused to leave, "my house has bin my prisson." Neither she nor her husband spoke to their daughter again. Her son David had been a virtuoso Jewish boy, adept at reading the Torah. But when he followed the example of his sister and married Margaret Evans, the daughter of the recorder of Pennsylvania, Abigaill broke off all contact with him.¹¹

The way in which Abigaill Franks responded to the intermarriages of her children reveals the intensity of concern in colonial New York Jewish society with maintaining their small community. The eighteenth century was an era of religious skepticism, an age of reason. Well-educated Jewish elite lived and dressed like their Christian neighbors; their social world extended well beyond the boundaries of the synagogue community. Yet Jacob and Abigaill Franks were also leaders of the synagogue and saw intermarriage as a threat to the survival of their Jewish community. Integration had strict limits. Assimilation into the world of British imperialism and the increasingly secular atmosphere of eighteenth-century ideas was both acceptable and desirable, but no further.¹²

The West Indies and Early America," (PhD diss., Brandeis University, 1976), chs. 5–6.

11 Leo Hershkowitz and Isidore Myer, eds., *The Lee Max Friedman Collection of American Jewish Correspondence: The Letters of the Franks Family* (Waltham: American Jewish Historical Society, 1968), 116–122 (7 June 1743), 129–131 (letter of Jacob Franks), (22 November 1743).

12 Edith Gelles, ed., *The Letters of Abigaill Levy Franks, 1733–1748* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), xl. N. Taylor Philips, "The Levy and Seixas Families of Newport and New York," *Proceedings of the American Jewish Historical Society* 4 (1896): 197 comments that David Franks, "being so constantly in the society of Christians, was never particularly faithful in the discharge his religious duties, and such cares rested lightly on him." The same, Philips states, applied to sister Phila.

It is noteworthy that, while the the Franks' other children remained Jewish, all their grandchildren were born or became Christian. If men and women such as Jacob and Abigaill Franks could navigate between two worlds, their well-educated progeny, exposed to the attractions of enlightenment society, either could not do so or found no reason to make such an effort. Their education and upbringing opened doors to the wondrous universe of eighteenth-century society. But where were fellow Jews in the coffee houses with whom they might discuss the merits of the Whig Party, the novels of Henry Fielding, the plays of Richard Sheridan or the ideas of Adam Smith? Unless they held strong religious convictions, allegiance to the world of the traditional Jew was less appealing. So they, like the children and grandchildren of Mendelssohn, chose the cosmopolitan world, even if that meant rejecting their Jewish identity, customs, and family. Consequently, social integration was problematic at both the elite and common levels of this small Jewish community. For the craftsman and shopkeeper, there was no entry; for the children of the elite, assimilation beyond the synagogue world could mean the rejection of Jewish identity.

It is important to note that antisemitism was not the major factor limiting the integration of colonial New York Jewry. Open antisemitism was rare, although it is important to note the consequences of the 1737 electoral contest between Cornelis Van Horne and Adolph Phillipse, representing two bitter political factions struggling for control of the assembly. Van Horne lost a close race in which several wealthy Jewish merchants took part. Faction leader William Smith, Sr. denounced these voters as debasing the "honor of Christianity and the preservation of the Constitution," declaring that only if "the Unfortunate Israelites were content to lose their votes, could they escape with their lives." The assembly proceeded to disenfranchise Jews in assembly elections despite British law to the contrary. Antisemitism, while largely quiescent, could emerge at times of stress, particularly in politics. It was always a potentially limiting factor in both social and political integration and assimilation. For the most part, however, the life of colonial New York Jewry, an enclosed community, remained largely free of open bigotry.¹³

13 William Pencak, *Jews and Gentiles in Early America, 1654–1800* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 41–44.

The Promise of Revolution: Assimilation in Republican New York

If politics was of little importance to most of the synagogue community of New York, the coming of the American Revolution ended that isolation. From 1765 to 1776, as crisis after crisis from the Stamp Act to the Boston Tea Party worsened relations between the colonists and parliament, and as Americans responded with boycotts, embargoes, and other forms of protest, every New Yorker had to declare his or her loyalty. The entire city was politicized; there was no way to avoid it.

The moment of truth came in August 1776, when a large British expeditionary force landed on Staten Island. Once it was apparent that Britain would capture the city, each Jewish resident had to decide whether to leave or remain. The community's spiritual leader, Hazan Gershom Seixas, decided to abandon Shearith Israel and flee to Philadelphia. Before he left, Seixas compared George III to Pharaoh, praying that the British would turn away "their fierce wrath from our North America." Most Jewish merchants, shopkeepers and tradesmen followed his example, although a minority remained. Why did so many leave after a hundred years of largely benevolent British rule? From mixing in the marketplace they likely shared with fellow colonists a sense of disappointment, betrayal, and fear toward king and Parliament; economic integration was critical in the decision-making process of the city's Jews.¹⁴

Following British withdrawal from New York in November 1783, Shearith Israel resumed services under New York's new constitution, a charter that granted Jews "full political equality." Shearith Israel welcomed Governor George Clinton's return to the city, asserting that no other congregation had "Manifested a more Zealous Attachment to the Sacred Cause of America." Both the teachings of our "Divine Legislator to Obey our Rulers" and the "dictates of our own reason" would lead its members to discharge "the duties of Good Citizens."

14 During the seven-year war several of New York's Jews served in the patriot military, while merchants provided financial support from Philadelphia. See De Sola Pool, *Portraits*, 349–351; Rock, *Haven*, 71–84.

These are remarkable words for a synagogue that had until then dealt only with internal affairs such as enforcing dietary laws and the discipline of unruly members.¹⁵

The American Revolution signaled the beginning of a transformation of New York's Jewish community. As noted, prior to 1763 it would not have been difficult to compare colonial New York Jewry to that of many European towns and villages, where Jews were seldom part of the political scene. But after a long, difficult struggle, New York's Jewish community held a shared sense of common national destiny with fellow New Yorkers. The American Revolution was their revolution. Republican politics was their politics. This had potentially problematic implications, and a degree of foreboding is present in the first post-Revolutionary decision by Shearith Israel's governing board to deny a request by Benjamin I. Jacobs to marry "a woman not belonging to our society with intent to make her a Proselyt." This seems to reflect a concern that the level of integration that came with the Revolution might become a threat to the community.¹⁶

With the ratification of the United States Constitution in 1788 and the election of George Washington as president, Republican ideology permeated the body politic. During the 1790s conservative republicanism, which stressed deference to and admiration for the British form of government, yielded to Jeffersonian ideals of egalitarianism and civil liberties. The city's Jewish population adopted this creed. Nowhere was Jewish republicanism more evident than in the remarkable constitution that Shearith Israel drafted in 1790. The charter included a bill of rights that opened with a ringing statement: "Whereas in free states all power originates and is derived from the people who always retain every right necessary for their well-being individually... Therefore, we the profession [professors] of the divine laws... conceive it our duty to make this declaration of our rights and privileges." The first right entitled "every free person professing the Jewish religion, and who lives according to its

15 David De Sola Pool, *An Old Faith in a New World: Portrait of Shearith Israel, 1654–1954* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), 250.

16 "From the 2nd Volume of Minute Books of Congn. Shearith Israel in New York," *Proceedings of the American Jewish Historical Society* 21 (1913): 45.

holy precepts” to a seat in the synagogue “as a brother.” The preamble of the by-laws, echoing the Declaration of Independence, stated that the congregation, “in the presence of the Almighty” within a “state happily constituted upon the principles of equal liberty civil and religious,” has the authority and duty to formulate a “compact.” In this spirit, the congregation wrote President Washington that the Jews of New York would “yield to no class of their fellow-citizens...in affection” for the nation’s leader. Washington responded that the affection of America’s Jews was a “treasure beyond the reach of calculation.”¹⁷

While the leaders of Shearith Israel envisioned that the synagogue, with its new republican footing, would remain the center of the Jewish community, it was not to be. As the pervasive republicanism of the early Republic led to the integration of the entire Jewish community into all aspects of metropolitan life, the city itself became the center of New York’s Jewish community. Economically, the American Revolution brought a surge of capitalist enterprise to a nation no longer tied to mercantilist regulation, offering new horizons in which the Jewish community thrived. The city’s wealthiest Jew, importer and exporter Harmon Hendricks, broadened his ties with manufacturers, including Paul Revere. Four Jewish businessmen joined twenty Christian entrepreneurs to form the New York Stock Exchange in 1793. Jewish merchants traded throughout the world, including with China. Simon Nathan was one of the builders of the new Park Theater. Sampson Simpson, son of wealthy merchant Solomon Simpson, studied law under Aaron Burr, something that would have been impossible in many European countries. Six Jewish physicians were listed in the *New York City Directory* or the records of Shearith Israel.¹⁸

Entrepreneurial horizons expanded for Jewish shopkeepers and craftsmen. Jewish artisans joined the city’s social and fraternal organizations. Silversmith Meyer Myers was president of the New York Gold and Silver

17 Jacob Rader Marcus, *American Jewry: Documents, Eighteenth Century* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1959), 150–156; Lewis Abraham, “Correspondence between Washington and Jewish Citizens,” *Proceedings of the American Jewish Historical Society* (1895): 93–95.

18 Rock, *Haven*, 94–98.

Smith Society, while Joel Hart was a founder of the New York Medical Society. Jews attained notable offices. Hazan Seixas was a trustee of Columbia College. Ephraim Hart was consul to Scotland. Dr. Jacob LaMotta was surgeon of the Third Brigade of the New York State Militia.

The experience of living through a revolution politicized the Jewish community, leading to a level of participation no colonial Jewish citizen could have imagined. Solomon Simpson became the vice president of the controversial Democratic Society, an organization founded to support the French Revolution. Hazan Seixas gave a sermon critical of the Alien and Sedition Acts, putting him in danger of arrest. In the pivotal election of 1800 between the followers of Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, Mordechai Myers worked as a ward spokesman involved in the nitty-gritty of getting votes and increasing turnout. Politics was polarized and intense; every vote might determine the legacy of the Revolution. New York's Jews gravitated to the Jeffersonian persuasion.¹⁹

The city's most noted Jewish citizen, Mordecai M. Noah—playwright, newspaper editor, and American Consul at Tunis—exemplified how well Jews had become part of republican life. Both the Mechanics Society, the fraternal home of the city's artisans, and the Tammany Society, a growing political association, invited him to be their patriotic speaker. Describing the sacrifices of soldiers in 1776 and the treasure of “rational liberty,” he declared that, in America, merit was “the only passport to power.” Hailing the gifts of Judaism to Western civilization, Noah asserted that America was “the bright example of universal tolerance of liberty, true religion in good faith,” the only nation where Jews found acceptance.²⁰

19 Gershom Seixas, *A Discourse Delivered in the Synagogue In New-York, On The Ninth of May, 1798* (New York, 1798), 6, 14–15; Jacob Rader Marcus, *United States Jewry, 1776–1985*, 4 vols. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 1:95–97, 579; Marcus, *American Jewry*, 309; Pencak, *Jews and Gentiles*, 77; Marcus, *Memoirs of American Jews 1775–1865* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1955), 52–61.

20 Jonathan D. Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1981), 1–13, 35–44; Mordecai M. Noah, *Oration Delivered by Appointment Before Tammany Society of Columbian Order... United to Celebrate the 41st Anniversary of American Independence* (New York, 1817); Mordecai M. Noah, *Address Delivered Before the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen* (New York, 1822).

What of the former centerpiece of Jewish identity and society, Shearith Israel? Its efforts to maintain its place within a republican framework were unsuccessful. Attendance at daily minyan and Sabbath services fell sharply; in 1825 a visitor observed that only “three heads of families” were present at a service. The synagogue could not pay its bills and considered hiring a debt collector. Internal strife made things worse as scarce financial resources and personality clashes led to multiple resignations. Finally, most Jews had moved uptown, out of easy walking distance. The refurbishing of the sanctuary in 1817 failed to stem the decline as its leaders, unwilling to abandon their cherished location, chose not to relocate near the residences of most Jews.²¹

Equally important, New York’s Jewish community failed to keep pace with the growth of the metropolis. By 1825, the city’s Jewish population was five hundred, 0.3 percent of the city’s residents. As the community dwindled into a very small minority, only three out of every one thousand New Yorkers, its survival became a serious issue. Could a coherent Jewish community survive an age of religious skepticism? Could it hold together despite the breakdown of its inner-directed synagogue community? Undergoing an unprecedented level of assimilation, the persistence of a self-conscious Jewish community was in doubt.

The rate of intermarriage rose to about 30 percent in this era. This can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, Jews who entered the metropolitan world could now find other Jews at all levels within the new egalitarian society. There were Jewish marital alternatives that were not available to the children of Jacob and Abigail Franks. On the other hand, the open society, as well as the decline of religiosity in general and the synagogue in particular, diminished the importance of Jewish identity. That is likely the primary reason for the failure of the Jewish community to grow at the same rate as the general population. Young men and women born during the Revolutionary era did not possess the same Jewish identity as their parents, who had grown up within a synagogue community. Diminished religious identity in an age of enlightenment lessened the sense of betrayal that conversion had long

21 Marcus, *United States Jewry*, 1:256, 598; Rock, *Haven*, 116–117.

represented. Assimilation out of that community was an alternative for a significant minority.²²

Still, 30 percent is not 80 percent. There were factors that limited total assimilation. Shearith Israel, even in decline, remained a visible symbol of the Jewish community, especially on high holidays when Jews from throughout the widening metropolis attended. Its presence enhanced the legacy of childhood identity. Immigration, although only a trickle in the years of the Napoleonic Wars, replaced some of the Jews who left the community. Also, while there was less stigma attached to marriage between a Christian and a Jew than in the colonial era, parental opposition to intermarriage, ingrained in mothers and fathers who grew up in the eighteenth century, remained a factor, as did Christian opposition to intermarriage.

Mordecai Noah sought to limit assimilation by making America the new Jerusalem. Declaring that Jews would never return to Palestine, he formulated a plan to establish the community of Ararat near Buffalo. Jews would immigrate to this American haven from throughout the world. There they would establish a new Jewish republican community, a state within a state. After a dramatic opening ceremony, the plan went nowhere. Noah sought to combine integration in a republican society with a vibrant Jewish identity. The quick failure of Ararat is a testament to the difficulty of the challenge.²³

The entry of prominent Jews into the venerable Masonic orders of New York is another example of the perils and promises of assimilation and integration in the republican era. The Masonic movement, which emphasized enlightenment ideals of fraternity and progress within a society replete with arcane symbols and rituals and had the potential to be a competing secular religion, was popular among the Jewish elite.

22 Malcolm M. Stern, "Jewish Marriage and Intermarriage in the Federal Period (1776–1840)," *American Jewish Archives Journal* 19 (1967): 142–144.

23 Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew*, 62–65, 138; Mordecai M. Noah, *A Discourse Delivered at the Consecration of the Synagogue K. K. Shearith Israel* (New York, 1818), 19, 27; Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States, 1790–1840: A Documentary History*, 3 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 3:894–900; Schappes, *Documentary History*, 157–160.

Over fifty Jews joined. Joel Hart rose to Deputy Grand High Priest of the Grand Chapter Royal Arch Masons. Sampson Simpson was a Lieutenant Grand Commander. The Jewish members of this historic society established a Jerusalem chapter. At an event honoring the dead from the *Jersey*, a notorious British prison ship, the chapter's members crafted a Masonic prayer that beseeched the Lord, "excellent thou art the truth" to "Enlighten us...in the true knowledge of Masonry." The Jewish Masons pleaded not to be "among those that know not thy statutes, nor the divine mysteries of the sacred Cabala," and prayed that the "ruler of this Lodge may be endowed with knowledge and wisdom" to explain secret mysteries as Moses did "in his Lodge to Aaron to *Eliezer* and *Ithamar* [the sons of Aaron] and the several elders of Israel." Like Ararat, this was an attempt at limited assimilation, absorbing the wider community's history and values while maintaining Jewish identity and culture. It was perhaps a difficult task within such an established society, and the success of the lodge is unknown.²⁴

Antisemitism in early national New York was present largely in the Federalist Party whom Jews had deserted for the Jeffersonians. As David Hackett Fischer notes, "a wide and fetid stream of anti-Semitism" ran through "Federalist thought." Printer James Rivington, for example, mocked Solomon Simpson as a man of a race that "will easily be known by their physiognomy; they all seem to be...of the tribe of Shylock; they have that leering underlook and malicious grin that seem to say to the honest man—*approach me not.*" At the height of political tension in 1798, Alexander Hamilton, New York's most prominent Federalist, compared his political enemies to "Shylock the Jew." (*The Merchant of Venice* played to large audiences in 1812–1814, a production in which Shylock was portrayed as "diabolic, enraged and vengeful.") As the Federalists declined as a political force, open antisemitism was less common, with one exception: politics. When Noah ran for sheriff in

24 "Miscellaneous Items Relating to Jews in New York," *Proceedings of the American Jewish Historical Society* 27 (1920): 396–400; Gustavus Hart, "A Biographical Account of Ephraim Hart and his Son, Dr. Joel Hart, of New York," *Proceedings of the American Jewish Historical Society* 4 (1896): 215–219; Rock, *Haven*, 98–100; Edmund R. Sadowski, "A Jewish Masonic Prayer," *Proceedings of the American Jewish Historical Society* 48 (1958–1959): 134–135.

1821, an important position, newspapers declared that his opponent was “an old member of the church,” and that a recent outbreak of yellow fever was God’s “judgment” for prominent citizens “publicly abetting the election of an infidel in preference to a Christian.” It is telling that Noah lost the election, while the other candidates on the Democratic ticket won handily. Despite their political allegiance, enough voters in New York harbored antisemitic fears to prevent Noah’s election. While such incidents were uncommon and remained a lingering presence, they did not prevent the widespread Jewish integration and assimilation into New York society that characterized the republican era.²⁵

Multicultural Success: The German Immigration

Given the years of virtually no population growth, the lack of a Jewish neighborhood and a vibrant synagogue, and the welcoming spirit of republicanism, we will never know whether New York’s small Jewish community would have avoided total assimilation, although it is difficult to imagine a community of only 0.33 percent maintaining its identity within a large American metropolis. This dilemma, however, remains theoretical because a wave of immigration beginning in the 1830s, largely from Germany and Ireland, changed the nature of New York City’s Jewish community forever. By 1855 half the city’s residents were immigrants, as the population of the city increased from 200,018 in 1832 to 814,000 in 1860. Among the immigrants arriving in America were 150,000 Jews from Germany and Central Europe and some from Poland and Eastern Europe. Many remained in the city as New York’s Jewish population rose from 500 in 1825 (0.3 percent) to 16,000 in 1850 (3.1 percent) and near 40,000 (5 percent) a decade later.²⁶

25 David Hackett Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 164; Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew*, 45–46; Frederic Jaher, *A Scapegoat in the New Wilderness: The Origins and Rise of Anti-Semitism in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 137; Morris J. Schappes, “Anti-Semitism and Reaction, 1795–1800,” *Proceedings of the American Jewish Historical Society* 38 (1948–1949): 119. Pencak, *Jews and Gentiles*, 73–79; Marcus, *United States Jewry*, 1:495, 525, 539, 556.

26 Grinstein, *Rise*, 469.

It is difficult to exaggerate the change that took place over the next thirty years. In 1825 there was but a single synagogue in New York. By 1860 there were twenty-seven. While many were small, converted buildings, it was the ornate synagogues in fashionable neighborhoods that marked the new Jewish place in antebellum New York. In 1850, Anshe Chesed, a large German congregation, constructed a neo-Gothic sanctuary seating over 1200 with enclosed pews, stucco walls, stained glass windows, and a controversial rendering of the Ten Commandments in glass. Shearith Israel moved to West 19th Street and Fifth Avenue, constructing a seventeenth-century Baroque-style synagogue with an octagonal dome supported by Corinthian columns. At the time of its consecration, it was the tallest building above Fourteenth Street. In 1862, Temple Emanu-El erected a towering Moorish revival structure on Fifth Avenue and 43rd Street at a staggering cost of \$650,000. These lavish synagogues were in the fashionable neighborhoods on Union Square and northward on Fifth Avenue. Each synagogue had its own identity, usually based on ethnicity, with many German but also Dutch and English speaking houses of worship along with a reform synagogue.²⁷

The erection of the ornate synagogues reveals the rapid advancement of the city's Jewish community in the antebellum era. The city's Jews forswore the modesty of an inconspicuous sanctuary, announcing their presence by building synagogues more costly than most of the city's churches. If integration in the early national era meant that New York society was open to Jews as individuals joining the Mechanics Society, the Masons, Tammany Hall, and the New York Stock Exchange, antebellum integration provided a different definition, that of a highly visible and separate community. The elegant sanctuaries were symbols of a Jewish society led by men of immense wealth, well beyond that of the early republic. The three proprietors of the clothing manufacturer

27 Rachel Wischnitzer, *Synagogue Architecture in the United States: History and Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1955), 33–37, 48–50, 72–76; De Sola Pool, *Old Faith*, 53–57; Myer Stern, *The Rise and Progress of Reform Judaism: Temple Emanu-El of New York* (New York, 1895), 13–38; *The Asmonean*, 7 April 1854; 27 May 1857; 9 April 1858; 24 May 1850; 21 April 1851.

Laisch, Stubblefield & Barnett, for example, possessed a firm that employed 1500 workers.²⁸

While Gotham's elite Jewry still joined Tammany and other notable societies, they also founded distinctly Jewish societies, where prominent Jewish clergy and men of professional and mercantile standing could receive recognition. The elegant annual dinners of the two largest Jewish philanthropic organizations, the Hebrew Benevolent Society and the German Hebrew Benevolent Society, signified this new communal integration. They were forums for the city's prominent Jews to celebrate their charitable concern along with their standing. The presence of guests such as the mayor and the lieutenant governor signified the Jewish community's civic and political importance. It was important for the Jewish community to ensure that the new, distinctively Jewish pattern of integration allowed only limited assimilation. The city's Jewry underwent a transformation in which they incorporated American values such as patriotism, free enterprise, public schools, and equality, while building and reinforcing a strong religious/ethnic identity with religious and benevolent societies and common neighborhoods.

The toasts and speeches at the gathering of the benevolent societies refuted any accusation of dual loyalty, announcing that this generation of New York Jewry was no less patriotic than the Irish, the English, or any other minority. Declaring that he had never seen true religious equality before he came to America, Rabbi Morris Raphall, the county's most prestigious rabbi, lauded America as "the only Christian nation not stained by spoliation, cruelty or any wrong of any kind committed against the Jew." He urged the city's Jewish merchants in "this land of liberty" to generously provide charity for immigrants fleeing the "stringent laws against the Hebrew." Spokesmen for the German Hebrew Benevolent Society described both the "distress and suffering" of Jewish immigrants and the grandeur of America, where "nobility was not a social class," and where the "noble and liberal constitution," accompanied by "free schools" held sway. These patriotic words asserted that the city's

28 *The New York City Directory, 1856–57* (New York, 1857), available on ancestry.com; Rock, *Haven*, 157. For an overall view of the economic and housing conditions of the Jewish community see Rock, *Haven*, 154–157.

Jews, while proudly displaying their Jewish distinctiveness, had at the same time assimilated and developed a strong American identity. The two were in harmony. Their traumatic pasts only made American Jews more attached to their community and their country.²⁹

The most notable Jewish philanthropic achievement of this antebellum era was the establishment of Jews Hospital in 1855. Built of brick and accommodating up to 150 patients, it rose four stories with wings on each side and a garden courtyard in the center. An institution for Jewish patients who sought kosher food and freedom from Christian missionaries, it was another visible symbol of the Jewish presence in New York. At the consecration ceremony, Rabbi Raphall portrayed New York City as a community in which Jews work “in fellowship to Catholic and Protestant, because we feel that we are the children of one father in service of one God who has created us.” Raphall’s words describe the level of integration and assimilation that the members and founders of Jews Hospital, the benevolent societies, and ornate synagogues felt as they sought full equality within a separate identity as a community of fellow citizens.³⁰

Jewish fraternal societies were popular among the Jewish working and middle classes, now largely immigrant, who did not affiliate with synagogues (likely three-fourths of the population). B’nai B’rith, organized in 1843, combined the traditions of Judaism and Freemasonry, replacing the synagogue with a “lodge room.” Echoing the patriotic spirit of the leaders of the benevolent societies, its officers, besides toasting their own lodges, praised “the glorious West and the Impulsive South,” and “the United States,” their “adopted country,” the “Palestine of the modern Hebrews.” The minutes of the lodges reveal the deep concern with proper English needed for ethical integration and leadership and the degree to which each member must see himself as a “priest in the service of the order of the promotion of intelligence, morality and purity of character.” B’nai B’rith proudly established its own library and held debates on such questions as “Religious education,” “Ideas on a Universal

29 *The Asmonean*, 1, 15 November 1850, 5 December 1851, 19, 26 November 1852.

30 The hospital, originally intended to serve only Jewish clientele, took in all patients during the Civil War, a sign of confident integration. *New York Times*, 9, 18 May 1855; Rock, *Haven*, 167–173.

Religion,” “a solution to the slavery question,” and “The Condition of Political Parties in America.”³¹

Along with B'nai B'rith, literary societies hosted prominent speakers such as Isaac Mayer Wise. Spokesman Moses Lyon declared that Jews were “peers of any wise men of the Gentile,” and that “kings of Intellect” had always marked the Jewish people. In the “mighty Republic of WASHINGTON,” Israelites witnessed the “victory of reason, love and knowledge over the cantering remains of prejudice, hatred and superstition.” Like the benevolent societies, these organizations reflected distinct Jewish communal identity within an atmosphere of social and patriotic integration, now combined with the ideals of the German Enlightenment.³²

While fraternal societies served hundreds of Jews who did not belong to a synagogue, most of the Jewish population had no formal ties to a Jewish organization. What was the level of their integration into antebellum New York City? Those who worked for Gentile proprietors often had to work on Saturday. Moreover, if the complaints of the city's religious leaders are accurate, many neglected Jewish dietary laws. Even so, Jewish cohesion during the antebellum era was strong. The rise of Jewish neighborhoods was central to the assimilation and integration of Jews who either belonged to the working class or were small proprietors.

In the early national era, when only one out of every three thousand residents were Jewish, it was impossible for Jews to form a unique residential area. By 1860, when five out of every hundred residents were Jewish, New York was a city of immigrants and immigrant wards. The new Jewish immigrant population in antebellum New York, which outnumbered the non-German Jewish population, lived within German-speaking neighborhoods in Kleindeutschland, today's Lower East Side. They lived next to other Jewish and non-Jewish German immigrants in crowded housing. Maintaining identity was no longer an issue; assimilation for first-generation immigrants had little appeal. Their comfort was

31 *Asmonean*, 11, 14 June 1851; 9 December 1852; Grinstein, *Rise*, 197–205; Julius Bien, “History of the Independent Order of B'nai B'rith,” *Menorah* (1886): 123–125.

32 *Asmonean*, 19 January 1854, 3 February 1854; 3 and 23 February 1855; 2 March 1855; 20 April 1855; 1 June 1855; 26 May 1856.

in living and mixing with fellow Jews and Germans as they had in the old country. To the extent that they lived in the wider urban environment, they were in harmony with the communal integration established and celebrated by the city's Jewish religious and communal leaders. They may not have shared the same degree of patriotism or social and status concerns, but their participation in public schools and politics moved them in that direction.³³

Schooling was a vital issue for the families of all levels of the city's Jewish population, critical for both integration and assimilation. Responding to the massive influx of German and Irish immigrants, government and civic leaders sought to teach immigrant children American values and provide the skills needed to be productive members of society. The New York Public School Society, founded in 1805 and funded by the state and by private donations, established branches throughout the city. In 1853 it became a municipal responsibility under a board of education.³⁴

Eight synagogues, concerned that public education would lessen Jewish identity, sought to counter this movement by establishing their own schools. B'nai Jeshurun opened its own building in 1854 with one floor for the primary school and older boys and another for young ladies and advanced classes. At its dedication, Rabbi Raphall proclaimed that, with proper education, a Jew might someday "occupy the presidential chair of the United States." This venture and other attempts to form Jewish schools failed quickly. Both the wealthy and the working classes chose not to send their children. Unlike the parents of many Irish Catholic immigrants, Jewish parents considered public schools as the best place for their children.³⁵

33 Naomi W. Cohen, *Encounter with Emancipation: The German Jews in the United States, 1830–1914* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1984), 39–63; Stanley Nadel, "Jewish Race and German Soul in Nineteenth Century America," *American Jewish History* 77 (1987): 6–26.

34 Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), chs. 1–5; Carl Kaestle, *The Evolution of an Urban School System: New York City, 1750–1850* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973); Rock, *Haven*, 191–195.

35 *Asmonean*, 2 December 1852, 7 January 1853, 6, 13 January 1854, 31 March 1855.

Jewish parents were cognizant that one of the goals of public schools was to Americanize children. That was their goal as well, to the extent that they wished to provide their children the tools necessary to succeed in their new land. Consequently, they were strong supporters of public education. But they also demanded that these schools allow their children to retain their Jewish identity and fought efforts to infuse its curriculum with the Protestantism of the Public School Society. They complained to the trustees of the Fourth Ward, where many lived, that several textbooks were either anti-Jewish or promoted Christianity. A popular speller, for example, declared that a Jew would not “give a shekel to a starving Shepherd.” The society rejected the complaint on the grounds that “Jews have not...cannot have the same privileges as those who embrace the Christian religion.” As Jews grew in number, these complaints had effect; in the 1850s the Board of Education moved toward “tolerance of local option.” If the Bible was read, no commentary was permitted. This was acceptable to Jewish parents. Their continuing effort to make the schools compatible with the concerns of Jewish parents reveals the antebellum sense of communal integration.³⁶

Politics was another arena in which antebellum New York Jewry achieved successful integration with limited assimilation. Given the strong increase in numbers, Jews became an important voting bloc tied to the Democratic Party. In alliance with Tammany Hall, the center of Democratic politics, Jews attained many offices, including, in 1850, the election of the first Jew to the House of Representatives, Emmanuel Hart, who worked his way up from local ward offices to national representative.

The Democratic Party in the 1850s was both pro-immigrant and pro-South. While it might be thought that Passover, a holiday that celebrated liberation from slavery and was central to the lives of the city’s Jewish community, might make the community sympathetic to the plight of the four million black slaves in the South, this was not the case. New York’s Jews, many of whom worked in textile trades that were dependent on the South, refused to compare their ancestors to American slaves.

36 *New York Times*, 28 December 1853.

In fact, they did quite the opposite. Leading Jews such as Noah, the editor of the *New York Evening Star*, published racist articles attempting to prove that Blacks were a dangerous race. Robert Lyon, editor of the weekly *Asmonean*, also a staunch Democrat, strongly supported the fugitive slave law while excoriating abolitionists. Raphall, the city's leading rabbi, wrote a widely distributed pamphlet arguing that slavery was condoned by the Bible, so it was wrong to criticize the South for their practice. Perhaps the most telling comment was that of Jewish intellectual Sigismund Waterman, who argued that Jews owed their renewed sense of "manhood" and comfortable position to America; thus, they must "stand by the Constitution now and forever." The Republican Party threatened to destroy American Jews' successful integration into American life and society, a priceless achievement.³⁷

Race was likely another factor alienating Jews from the Republican Party. Rabbi Raphall in his talk stated that "much has been said respecting the inferiority of his [the Black man's] intellectual powers, and that no man of his race had ever inscribed his name on the Pantheon of human excellence, either mental or moral." The strong racism among non-Blacks in American society of the North is well documented. Living within this highly prejudicial world, many Jews would come to share this view, and it became a factor in Jewish assimilation with the White population.³⁸

It is therefore not surprising that Jews, along with the rest of the city's German population, voted heavily against Abraham Lincoln and the Republican Party, a political movement that they feared would destroy the Constitution and their cherished security and standing. Even in

37 This is covered in detail in Rock, *Haven*, ch. 11 and Howard B. Rock, "Upheaval, Innovation and Transformation: New York City Jews and the Civil War," *American Jewish Archives Journal* 64 nos. 1–2 (2012): 1–26, reprinted in Jeffrey Edelstein, ed., *Passages Through the Fire: Jews and the Civil War* (American Jewish Historical Society, Yeshiva University Museum, 2013), 90–135.

38 Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790–1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Howard B. Rock, "Noah's Curse: On the Eve of the Civil War, a Rabbi Declares Black Slavery Biblical," *TheTorah.com* (2022).

1864, when it was clear that the Union would prevail, New York Jewry voted more than two to one against Lincoln. The strongest dissenters to this allegiance were the leaders and followers of the Reform movement. Many of them became Republicans, and the rabbi of Temple Emanuel, Samuel Adler, was a devoted supporter of Lincoln. Only after the assassination of Lincoln did the political allegiance of New York's Jewish community shift away from the Democratic Party.³⁹

It was, of course, not just in politics that the Reform and Orthodox found themselves on opposing sides. They held fundamentally opposite views of the future of Judaism in New York and beyond, and they waged a heated contest for the allegiance of the city's Jews. The question of integration and assimilation was central to the contest. If antebellum integration was noted for a strong Jewish identity as an ethnic/religious group, the growth of Temple Emanuel introduced an important challenge to that identity. The growth of the city's first Reform synagogue was extraordinary. In its first twenty years, the congregation moved from a rented room in 1840, to a Baptist church transformed into a Gothic sanctuary, to a towering Moorish revival structure on Fifth Avenue. It became the religious home of many of the city's most prominent Jewish merchants. Following their German Reform forebears, Emanuel eliminated many of the rituals of the Orthodox synagogues, wrote its own prayer book, and demanded strict decorum. Tallit and yarmulkes were first optional and then prohibited. Unlike the Orthodox majority of New York Jewry, its members encouraged movements such as prison reform, publicly opposed slavery, and supported the Republican Party.⁴⁰

Leaders of the Orthodox synagogues castigated both Emanuel and the Reform movement as the first step onto an inexorable path from integration to total assimilation. Reform was nothing but another form of Protestantism. If it succeeded, it would destroy Judaism. As "Lara"

39 Election results for 1864 can be found in the *New York Times* (9 November 1864). See also the analysis in *New York Times* (20 November 1864); Lawrence M. Fuchs, *The Political Behavior of American Jews* (Glencoe, IN: Free Press, 1956), 42, 49–50.

40 Grinstein, *Rise*, 353–371; Stern, *Rise and Progress*, 13–24, 30–31, 38–40; Benny Kraut, *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of Felix Adler* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1979), 5; Wischnitzer, *Synagogue Architecture*, 48–50, 72–76.

wrote in the weekly *Jewish Messenger*, reformers adopted practices such as mixed seating to make them superior to the “mass of Jews.” It said to Christian neighbors, “do not despise me as a Jew, I am not one of them. I am a reformed Jew, I wish to come as near to you as I can. I will, therefore, eat with you.... I will marry your daughter” and attend “a church in imitation of your church and a service as near as I can like yours.” Integration of this sort, the Orthodox declared, would lead to total assimilation, the end of Judaism.⁴¹

For the members of Emanu-El, the transformation of Judaism was the final step toward full integration into American society, integration that retained a religious identity suitable to a modern age. If the Reform service reflected in part the formality and decorum of services in Grace Church, it did not mean that the city’s most prominent families were leaving the faith. Rather, the conduct of Emanu-El was an unmistakable statement that they were part of mainstream culture in Gotham. They had risen to the heights of New York society, building a sanctuary with the grandeur and decorum equal to its Christian counterparts while maintaining Jewish identity. Rather than imitating Christianity they were finding a path for Judaism that befit the nineteenth century.

The members of Emanu-El saw themselves as being at the forefront of antebellum integration and assimilation. They integrated by fully entering all aspects of American life—economic, social, and cultural. They assimilated by making American history and American culture their own. They believed that their Jewish identity, which involved adopting modern ways of religious expression, would avoid total assimilation and allow Jews to successfully navigate the perils and promises of nineteenth-century American society.

The rate of intermarriage is unknown for this era. Congregations wrestled with controversies such as whether a man who held a seat in the synagogue and intermarried could retain his standing as an elector. Could his children be buried in the synagogue’s cemetery? Given the hostility to proselytes, should wives be permitted to convert to Judaism?

41 *The Jewish Messenger*, 5 and 19 June 1857, 6 November 1857; 10 and 24 September 1858; 11 November 1859; 11, 18 and 25 May, 20 July 1860; 20 October 1863; *Asmonean*, 22 December 1855; 4 and 11 January 1856; Rock, *Haven*, 220–225.

Historian Hyman Grinstein finds that men who intermarried tended to retain their ties to Judaism while women did not. Male Jews were more prone to intermarry than females. That there was no major outcry over this critical issue suggests that it was not considered a major threat at this moment.⁴²

What role did antisemitism play in antebellum integration? Jews were now a highly visible presence in New York. Areas such as Chatham Street were known for their Jewish shops and bearded proprietors. Jews had become a significant political bloc. With this greater visibility came more open antisemitism. James Gordon Bennett, Sr., the owner of the *New York Herald*, repeatedly pilloried Mordecai Noah. Jews were described as petty merchants who would do anything to earn a dollar. Even such prominent figures as Walt Whitman and Herman Melville made anti-semitic slurs. During the stress of the Civil War, it reached dangerous levels as Jews, “hook-nosed wretches who speculate on disasters,” were depicted as putting their greed above their loyalty.⁴³

It is unsurprising that resistance based on centuries of prejudice would emerge as Jews became a consequential minority. Even so, Jews remained visible and continued to find standing in the economic and social life of the nation’s foremost city. As in the early national era, anti-semitism likely prevented greater intermarriage. It was, however, unable to stem the self-conscious rise of the Jewish community. Overall, the title of Hyman Grinstein’s classic book, *The Rise of the Jewish Community, 1654–1860*, remains valid: by 1860 New York’s Jews had created a vibrant self-aware community.

Assimilation Beyond New York

How does the Americanization experience of the Jews of New York City compare with other Jewish communities during this period? During

42 Grinstein, *Rise*, 372–390; Rock, *Haven*, 190.

43 Jaher, *Scapegoat*, 140–150, 170, 186, 222, 237–238; Arnon Gutfeld, “Demonic Images of the Jew in the Nineteenth Century United States,” *American Jewish History* 89 (2001): 355–373; Gary J. Bunker and John J. Appel, “Shoddy Anti-Semitism in the Civil War,” in *Jews and the Civil War: A Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sarna and Adam Mendelsohn (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 314; Rock, *Haven*, 198–202, 245–248.

the colonial era, Shearith Israel was nearly the only community with a synagogue. Other small communities built sanctuaries only just prior to the Revolution, using Shearith Israel as a role model. Synagogues that appeared in Newport and Philadelphia were led by congregants that had been in and were thoroughly familiar with Shearith Israel. North American Jews were closely connected with each other in trading and marriage networks. Consequently, there were very few differences in the structure of the different Jewish communities.

This common experience continued during the American Revolution as New York's leadership moved to Philadelphia. Jews in the South, although not as closely tied to New York, displayed similar allegiances, and gave similar support with military service and financial assistance. Because New York was the only state without civic disabilities that limited the franchise and right to hold office to Protestants, the quest for political equality that followed the Revolution was led by Jewish communities in Charleston, Philadelphia, and elsewhere. But New York was again the role model. Similarly, the opportunities for social and economic integration afforded by republicanism in New York in the era of the new republic could be seen in Philadelphia, Savannah, and Charleston. Political integration came more slowly, but it did follow.

The issues that troubled the Jewish community of New York, especially antisemitism, intermarriage, and ritual observance also troubled Jews in Philadelphia, Charleston, and Newport. Each situation had to be dealt with by its own synagogue in its own manner, as there was no American Jewish authority and there were few learned Jewish scholars. Consequently, there were variations in Jewish practice. Perhaps the most notable was the difference in southern communities. Savannah's synagogue dedication included the playing of an organ and Masonic ritual, while Charleston built its synagogue in 1792 like "a typical Georgian church." It even included a spire. The synagogues in Charleston and Savannah were the first to introduce Reform rituals, a generation before New York. The presence of slavery in the South after it disappeared in the North would become a divide. This likely led Charleston's synagogue to limit the republicanization of congregational governance. Despite local differences, Jews in all these Jewish communities integrated into

the overall community far more easily than any in Europe.⁴⁴

Integration after the wave of German immigration enlarged the Jewish population in other American cities and similar patterns followed there, too. Benevolent societies and ornate synagogues blossomed, and B'nai B'rith became an outlet for those who did not belong to synagogues. Prominent Jews continued to be welcomed into various political and professional societies; interfaith commercial bonds grew at the same time as Jews became more visible. As in New York, antisemitism remained a problem, but it did not prevent Jewish advancement, while the increased Jewish population and residential environment established a distinct, identifiable community whose continuation and growth were no longer in doubt. Whatever the differences, what is striking is the common successes of upward mobility in American society, the similar structure and concerns of Jewish society, and the common quest to maintain Jewish identity in the process.⁴⁵

Conclusion

In the two centuries between the arrival of the Dutch settlers in 1654 and the end of the Civil War, New York's Jewish community underwent three stages of integration and assimilation, each of which remains alive in the twenty-first century. During the British colonial era, both integration and assimilation were limited, as the small Jewish community of twenty to thirty families lived in an insular community centered on their synagogue. Cognizant of the persecution, restrictions, and violence that faced their grandparents and great-grandparents, most of New York's Jews integrated into the marketplace but largely kept to themselves otherwise. They did not adopt British history and culture as their own. The Jewish colonial elite, while they remained leaders of the synagogue

44 Faber, *Time*, ch. 4; Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 31–41; Hasia Diner, *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 41–53; Edwin Wolf and Maxwell Whiteman, *The History of the Jews of Philadelphia: From Colonial Times to the Age of Jackson* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1975), chs. 5–6.

45 Faber, *Time*, chs. 5–6; Sarna, *American Judaism*, 42–61; Diner, *Jews of the United States*, 54–67; Wolf and Whiteman, *History*, chs. 7–14.

community, did integrate into the social and political circles of colonial gentry. Comfortable with the culture of eighteenth-century Britain, they assimilated to a limited extent, taking on an identity as patriotic British men of consequence while retaining their traditional Jewish way of life at home. They may have been capable of this duality, but some of their children were not, and they intermarried and abandoned the Jewish community.

The second era, emerging rather suddenly in the 1760s, triggered a remarkable change in integration and assimilation. During the coming of the Revolution, the entire Jewish community was politicized and ultimately adopted American republican ideology. The Jewish community moved from a synagogue-centered society to embrace the open world of republican New York. They entered nearly every aspect of urban society and took on the revolutionary spirit as their own. While it opened many doors, republican thought and promise also offered a degree of assimilation that threatened the cohesion of Jewish communal life. The city's Jewry barely held together as a coherent and identifiable community.

During the third distinct period, the antebellum years, the city's Jewish population grew from a fraction of a percent to over 5 percent and achieved a distinct identity based on neighborhoods, language, increased wealth, and prominence. It became, in today's language, one community in a multicultural setting. Leading Jews of this era constructed many synagogues, including several remarkably ornate sanctuaries, and led the development of a proud public consciousness. Integration into the life of the city remained strong, as did assimilation. New York's Jews took on the same sense of growing patriotism that other immigrants did, making American history their own history and American politics their own politics. Yet, while they assimilated as Americans, they also fashioned a unique identity as American Jews, distinctly visible in all aspects of the city's economic, political, and cultural life.

If we look at New York today, we see the legacy of the colonial city's limited integration and assimilation in several Hasidic sects. While Jews in these communities participate in the marketplace, they otherwise keep to themselves, choosing not to mix with the rest of the population. The spirit of egalitarian republicanism is found among liberal Jews, who share in the progressive outlook of American urban society. The choice

of total assimilation remains a significant option within this community, with up to 70 percent of the non-Orthodox intermarrying. Yet, although challenged and torn by the crosscurrents of modern America and the nature of allegiance to Israel, Jewish identity remains supported by like-minded and longstanding institutions. Multiculturalism, the third form of assimilation, is readily apparent within the modern Orthodox community. Jews in these communities have taken on an American identity while forming a highly distinct subculture whose bedrock is religious faith, American patriotism, and unconditional support of Israel. The legacy of the Jewry of early American Gotham remains visible among the 1.3 million Jews living in contemporary New York.⁴⁶

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⁴⁶ For an important survey and analysis of modern American Jewry that includes insight into integration and assimilation today, see Noah Feldman, *To Be a Jew Today: A New Guide to God, Israel and the Jewish People* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024).