

Book Reviews

Mirrors of Identity: The Shared Mythologies and Entangled Alliance of America and Israel

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“Every chance to return to this great country where the ancient roots of the Jewish people date back to biblical times is a blessing,” declared President Joe Biden in July 2022, standing on the tarmac at Tel Aviv’s Ben-Gurion International Airport, “because the connection between the Israeli people and the American people is bone-deep, bone-deep.”¹ This reflexive invocation of a bond that transcends mere strategic calculation exemplifies what diplomats and politicians have long termed the “special relationship” between the United States and Israel. For over a century, this bond has been a central, and often contentious, feature of American foreign policy and a cornerstone of Israeli national identity. Yet the nature of this specialness remains a subject of intense debate, a Gordian knot of sentiment and strategy that scholars have long struggled to untangle. Is it a pragmatic alliance rooted in the cold calculus of geo-strategic interests, a moral compact born of shared democratic values, or a theological imperative driven by religious conviction? The historiography has often been split between two camps: the “realists,” who emphasize national interests, and the “idealists,” who point to values, beliefs, and domestic politics.

Together, five recently published groundbreaking studies—Oz Frankel’s *Coca-Cola, Black Panthers, and Phantom Jets: Israel in the American Orbit, 1967–1973* (2024), Jaclyn Granick’s *International Jewish Humanitarianism in the Age of the Great War* (2021), Shaul Mitelpunkt’s *Israel in the American Mind: The Cultural Politics of US-Israel Relations, 1958–1988* (2019), Matthew M. Silver’s *Zionism and the Melting Pot:*

1 Peter Baker, Patrick Kingsley, and Isabel Kershner, “Biden, Battered at Home, Basks in Unvarnished Praise in Israel,” *New York Times*, 14 July 2022, A10.

Preachers, Pioneers, and Modern Jewish Politics (2020), and David Tal's *The Making of an Alliance: The Origins and Development of the US-Israel Relationship* (2022)—shatter the tired binary of realism versus idealism, revealing instead a relationship woven from threads of mutual mythology, pragmatic statecraft, and cultural exchange. What emerges is not simply an alliance but an ideological entanglement of remarkable complexity and durability. Unlike the “special relationship” between the United States and Britain, which grew from shared language and imperial succession, or the transactional alliances America formed during the Cold War, the bond between the United States and Israel represents a unique form of national interconnection, one in which each nation's self-conception became partially dependent on its relationship with the other. The story they collectively tell is one of organic evolution from shared dreams of national rebirth, to concrete humanitarian partnerships, to formal diplomatic bonds, and finally to a profound cultural dialogue marked as much by tension as by harmony. The alliance flourished not because idealism triumphed over realism, or vice versa, but because the soil of shared values nourished the roots of strategic cooperation.

Building on this idea of a relationship woven from diverse threads, the present essay traces the tapestry of ideological entanglement as it appears in scholarly works exploring the development of American, Zionist, and Israeli narratives, affinities, and structures from the late nineteenth to late twentieth centuries. It focuses on specific strands that reveal how mythologies are woven across borders. A fuller treatment, one that incorporates the question of Palestinian and Arab perspectives, remains an urgent project for future scholarship. For the limited purposes of this examination, the US-Israel relationship will be explored as it unfolds across the aforementioned five works. Each thread represents a distinct mode of engagement—intellectual, organizational, diplomatic, and cultural—and together they form the intricate pattern of US-Israel entanglement.

Silver's *Zionism and the Melting Pot* uncovers the shared intellectual DNA of American and Zionist thought, revealing how both movements emerged from the same crucible of Jewish modernity. Granick's *International Jewish Humanitarianism* shows how abstract ideological kinship crystallized into organizational power during World War I,

as American Jews pioneered new forms of transnational agency. Tal's *The Making of an Alliance* charts the diplomatic dance from tentative friendship to strategic partnership. Finally, the cultural dimension is analyzed in Mitelpunkt's *Israel in the American Mind*, which deconstructs America's mythic projections onto Israel, and Frankel's *Coca-Cola, Black Panthers, and Phantom Jets*, which captures the profound Americanization of Israeli society. Together they reveal not merely an alliance but a continuous conversation between two nations constantly reimagining themselves through the mirror of the other.

Twin Ideologies: The Shared Roots of Zionism and Americanism

Before the "special relationship" became a matter of statecraft, its foundations were laid by a powerful confluence of religious belief, shared political values, and a new form of international agency forged by American Jews. The intellectual and ideological groundwork for this future affinity is the subject of Silver's penetrating study, *Zionism and the Melting Pot*. He argues that the two great "mega-ideologies" of modern Jewish life—Zionism and American integration—were not opposing forces but were in fact twins, born in response to the crisis of "Jewish modernization in the Russian empire" in the late nineteenth century.² Faced with the "indeterminacy" of gentile attitudes, which ranged from "new forms of antisemitism" to the equally confusing "public promise and inner tension of philosemitism," Jews were forced to develop their own ideologies of self-transformation.³

Silver traces how itinerant preachers, *matifim* in Hebrew, like Zvi Hirsch Masliansky, traveled between the shtetls of Eastern Europe and the tenements of New York's Lower East Side, adapting traditional Jewish discourse for modern nationalist ends. They preached a gospel of self-reliance and national rebirth that resonated on both sides of the Atlantic, blending American ideals of progress with Zionist aspirations. The most powerful example of this ideological entanglement is Silver's deconstruction of Emma Lazarus's famous 1883 sonnet, "The

2 Matthew M. Silver, *Zionism and the Melting Pot: Preachers, Pioneers, and Modern Jewish Politics* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press 2020), 1.

3 Silver, *Zionism*, 14.

New Colossus.” Lazarus, a passionate advocate for a Jewish national revival, consciously transposed the philosemitic novelist George Eliot’s “‘torch’ image in tribute to the future of Jewish national settlement in Eretz Israel” to a “pathway for Jewish assimilation in America.”⁴ As Silver meticulously demonstrates, Lazarus’s vision of America’s “golden door” was directly inspired by the Zionist idea of a national home that would serve as a beacon to the oppressed. In this act of literary alchemy, she transformed the Statue of Liberty into a symbol of immigrant assimilation and created a shared symbolic language that linked the American and Zionist projects long before a political alliance existed.

What Silver’s analysis reveals—and what conventional diplomatic histories often miss—is that Zionism and Americanism were not separate ideologies that later found common cause but interconnected responses to the same historical pressures. This insight challenges the standard narrative that sees American support for Israel as either a later strategic calculation or the result of effective lobbying. Instead, it suggests a deeper cultural affinity and ideological symmetry that predates the State of Israel itself, a compatibility that would later make the diplomatic alliance seem natural and inevitable to many Americans.

While Silver’s analysis of ideological convergence illuminates the intellectual foundations of the relationship, his focus on the *matifim* and other elites sometimes leaves the reader wondering how these lofty ideas resonated among ordinary Jews. The tenement dwellers of the Lower East Side lived far from the rarefied air of Lazarus’s literary circles—so too did the varied Jewish immigrant communities that dotted the American landscape. How did Yiddish-speaking garment workers in New York City and Ladino-speaking peddlers in Los Angeles reconcile Zionist longings with American realities? Surely, the tensions between universalist American ideals and particularist Jewish nationalism played out differently across the braided social, economic, and cultural landscape of the country’s Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jewish immigrant subcommunities, including variables of class, religious practice, and cultural sensibilities rooted in divergent Russian, German, Austro-Hungarian,

4 Silver, *Zionism*, 25.

and Ottoman imperial origins. These dimensions percolate beneath the surface of Silver's compelling and pathfinding intellectual history but remain somewhat underexplored.

This ideological ferment was translated into organizational power during the "calamity of stupendous proportions" that was World War I.⁵ As Granick's *International Jewish Humanitarianism in the Age of the Great War* details, the crisis on the eastern front, which left millions of Jews displaced and starving in the "shatterzone of empires," forced a fragmented American Jewish community to unite.⁶ In 1914, establishment American Jewish leaders of Central European ancestry like Jacob Schiff and Louis Marshall joined forces with Eastern European immigrant organizations to create the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). This "fortuitous organization" became the vehicle for a massive aid effort that was more than charity; it was a form of diaspora building that ran parallel to the Zionist project of state-building.⁷

Granick argues that the JDC pioneered a new form of "socioeconomic welfare diplomacy," effectively creating a "private, non-territorial, diaspora social welfare state."⁸ This was not an abstract concept. It involved concrete and unprecedented engagement with American state power. The JDC, with the assistance of elite figures like Marshall, Schiff, Felix Warburg, and Ambassador Henry Morgenthau Sr., successfully negotiated directly with the Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels and State Department officials to move aid into war zones. This unprecedented intervention included "shipping space" on naval vessels like the USS *Vulcan* to transport supplies, including "900 tons of food and medicine," to the impoverished Jewish community of Palestine.⁹ The sheer scale of the operation, which raised and distributed tens of millions of dollars (billions in today's currency), gave American Jews their first taste of large-scale engagement with American foreign policy.

5 Jaclyn Granick, *International Jewish Humanitarianism in the Age of the Great War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 2.

6 Granick, *International Jewish Humanitarianism*, 3.

7 Granick, *International Jewish Humanitarianism*, 26.

8 Granick, *International Jewish Humanitarianism*, 22, 74.

9 Granick, *International Jewish Humanitarianism*, 52.

Granick's work is particularly valuable for recovering the agency of diaspora Jews in this story. Where traditional Zionist historiography often portrays American Jews as mere financial supporters of the state-building project in Palestine, Granick shows them as active creators of a new form of transnational power, one that would later serve as an organizational foundation for the political alliance between the United States and Israel. A 1919 letter written to the Chicago Rabbinical Association by Warburg, uncovered in Granick's archival research, captures the emerging sense of American Jewish diplomatic agency. "I could write and speak about the duties and opportunities of American Jewry in Israel's present crisis without end," Warburg states. "The amazing thing is how people can find the self-complacency to enjoy a life of ease and extravagance and not be haunted."¹⁰ The "plight of Jews outside America," Granick observes, weighed heavily on Warburg and others, who championed American Jewish political involvement in world affairs and believed "international Jewish humanitarianism" to be a duty.¹¹

Granick's recovery of diaspora agency represents a significant historiographical intervention, although her narrative of organizational effectiveness occasionally smooths over the fractious reality of American Jewish politics. The JDC's impressive achievements sometimes obscure the persistent tensions between the so-called "German Jews" and "Russian Jews," between Zionists and non-Zionists, between religious and secular factions. These internal conflicts were not merely organizational squabbles but fundamental disagreements about Jewish identity and purpose that shaped how American Jews engaged with both Palestine and American foreign policy. The aforementioned "fortuitous organization" was also perhaps less cohesive than Granick's account suggests, raising questions about how these internal divisions influenced the emerging relationship with Palestine and later Israel.

By 1948, the groundwork for the "special relationship" was firmly laid: a deep ideological affinity, as described by Silver, was now supported by a newly powerful and internationally experienced American

10 Granick, *International Jewish Humanitarianism*, 287.

11 Granick, *International Jewish Humanitarianism*, 287.

Jewish community, as shown by Granick. This foundation would prove crucial when the abstract question of Jewish statehood became the concrete reality of Israeli independence.

Diplomatic Evolution: From “Friendly Impartiality” to Strategic Alliance

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 thrust the theoretical kinship into the rough and tumble of geopolitics and hard diplomacy, where lofty ideals frequently collided with the gritty realities of the Cold War era. Tal’s *The Making of an Alliance* charts this delicate dance between sentiment and strategy, revealing how the relationship evolved from what he aptly terms “friendly impartiality” to full strategic partnership.¹²

Harry S. Truman, a man whose political instincts were shaped by “intimate knowledge of the Bible” and genuine sympathy for Jewish aspirations, recognized the newborn state just eleven minutes after its declaration, a decision made against the fierce objections of his own State Department.¹³ Yet this dramatic gesture belied a more cautious approach. Truman’s administration provided crucial economic lifelines but steadfastly refused to become Israel’s arms supplier, wary of alienating oil-rich Arab states. This strategic ambivalence hardened under Dwight D. Eisenhower, whose Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was determined to prove to the Arab world that “we shall not be prisoners of Israel any longer.”¹⁴

The 1958 Middle East crisis marked the first significant pivot. As pro-Nasserite forces toppled Iraq’s monarchy and threatened Lebanon and Jordan, the Eisenhower administration began to see Israel through a different lens, not as a liability but as a “stalwart ally in a volatile region.”¹⁵ This perceptual shift cracked open the door to military cooperation, leading to the first direct sale of American “firing weapon[s]” to Israel.¹⁶

12 David Tal, *The Making of an Alliance: The Origins and Development of the US-Israel Relationship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 57.

13 Tal, *Making*, 44.

14 Tal, *Making*, 57.

15 Tal, *Making*, 1.

16 Tal, *Making*, 99.

Under John F. Kennedy, this crack widened into a genuine opening. The 1962 Hawk missile deal represented more than a weapons transfer; it was a symbolic crossing of the Rubicon. “This is the first time,” declared Golda Meir in an Israeli government cabinet meeting, “America is ready to sell us something like this...[t]he Arabs should know that Israel has a great friend in the White House, and his policy is to help Israel in any possible way.”¹⁷ In due course, the United States supplied Israel with 215 Hawk missiles, sustained by a ten-year credit arrangement for \$25 million and \$2 million for early warning and communications technology.

The relationship again transformed dramatically after Israel’s lightning victory in the 1967 Six-Day War, which convinced Richard M. Nixon’s strategists that Israel could serve as a valuable Cold War asset. This strategic calculus culminated in the massive American airlift during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, a logistical marvel that not only saved Israel from potential defeat but also sent an unmistakable message to Moscow about American resolve to “maintain Israel’s military superiority.”¹⁸

Tal’s diplomatic history is remarkable for its archival depth and analytic precision. His narrative underscores how the ideological foundations documented by Silver and the organizational networks described by Granick created the conditions for diplomatic cooperation. When, for example, Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, hardly a sentimentalist, authorized the 1973 airlift, he was operating within a political context in which support for Israel had already been normalized through decades of cultural and ideological entanglement. Interestingly, Tal notes, Nixon, who had “no illusions” about winning Jewish votes and had a “complex relationship with American Jews,” declared the relations between the United States and Israel to “go far beyond any written piece of paper” and “accepted Israel’s terms for peace [between Israel and its Arab neighbors] almost in full.”¹⁹ Thereafter, born-again Christians Gerald R. Ford, who “conflated values and religion in his attitude to Israel,” and Jimmy Carter, who viewed Israel as “a strategic asset” and

17 Tal, *Making*, 110.

18 Tal, *Making*, 169–170, 190.

19 Tal, *Making*, 170, 172, 178.

initially confessed no “strong feelings” about the Arab nations, displayed “more continuity than change” in presidential leadership.²⁰

For all its archival richness, Tal’s diplomatic history sometimes underplays the messy intrusion of domestic politics into foreign policy calculations. Presidential decisions regarding Israel were almost never made in the rarefied air of grand strategy alone. Lyndon B. Johnson’s intensified support for Israel, for example, unfolded against the backdrop of his 1964 election campaign and his need to shore up Jewish support for his Great Society programs. Similarly, the decisions of Nixon, Ford, and Carter were colored by complex relationships with the American Jewish community and its leadership. The interplay between electoral politics and diplomatic strategy, particularly the growing importance of the “Jewish vote” in key swing states, deserves more attention than Tal’s otherwise masterful analysis concedes. This is not merely a question of lobbying power but of how democratic politics shapes foreign policy in ways that purely diplomatic histories sometimes obscure.

What Tal’s work makes clear is that American foreign policy and diplomatic ties did not develop in isolation from the ideological and cultural dimensions of the US-Israel relationship but were constantly shaped by them. The “special relationship” was not imposed by a powerful lobby or dictated solely by strategic imperatives; rather, it evolved organically as elected officials and diplomats worked within the parameters demarcated by deeper cultural and ideological affinities.

Cultural Reflections: Projections and Absorptions

While presidents, prime ministers, diplomats, and generals were forging formal ties, an equally complex and intimate relationship was unfolding in the realm of culture. Here, the alliance took on dimensions that transcended strategic calculations, as each nation became a canvas for the other’s dreams and anxieties.

Mitelpunkt’s *Israel in the American Mind* probes and dissects America’s mythic constructions of Israel. The process began in earnest, Mitelpunkt asserts, with Leon Uris’s 1958 novel *Exodus* and the blockbuster film it

²⁰ Tal, *Making*, 198, 215–216, 222.

spawned. These cultural artifacts, he argues, reimagined Israel's founding as an American-style revolution; they "fictionalized and popularized Israel's independence narrative in ways that directly appealed to American sensitivities."²¹ By casting the British as oppressors, *Exodus* transformed Israel's birth into "a familiar American tale of fighting for freedom against a tyrannical old-world empire."²²

This cultural alignment reached its zenith after the 1967 Six-Day War, which cemented in American consciousness the intoxicating image of Israel as a "citizen-soldier" utopia. As America sank deeper into the quagmire of Vietnam, Israel's swift victory offered a seductive alternative: a society that seemed to have perfected the balance between military necessity and democratic values. The embodiment of this fantasy was "Yossi Israeli," a young tank commander profiled in a 1973 *Life* magazine special. "Glowering from the bowels of his Patton tank," the article marveled, "Yossi Israeli (his actual name) is at 21 the picture of the raffish, resourceful soldier of Israel."²³ Here was the ideal that eluded America: a warrior who could seamlessly transition from battlefield to university seminar, from military duty to personal fulfillment.

The Yom Kippur War of October 1973 shattered this comforting mirage. The surprise attack by Egypt and Syria, and Israel's initial struggles, transformed American perceptions. The citizen-soldier paradise gave way to the image of a "Spartan" society—traumatized, dependent, and in need of American guidance. This shift mirrored America's own post-Vietnam desire to rebrand itself as a diplomatic rather than a singularly military superpower, a process with respect to Israel and Egypt that culminated in the 1978 Camp David Accords and the ensuing landmark Israel-Egypt peace treaty. By the 1980s, however, the American consensus on Israel had fractured along partisan lines, with the 1982 Lebanon War and the 1987 Palestinian Intifada creating a chasm between liberals mourning Israel's lost "unique splendor" and neoconservatives

21 Shaul Mitelpunkt, *Israel in the American Mind: The Cultural Politics of US-Israel Relations, 1958–1988* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 33–34.

22 Mitelpunkt, *Israel*, 35.

23 Mitelpunkt, *Israel*, 119.

embracing “Israel’s military robustness and Americans’ willingness to maintain it” as proof of Western resolve.²⁴

Mitelpunkt’s cultural analysis insightfully captures mainstream American projections onto Israel, although his focus on dominant media narratives sometimes leaves alternative perspectives in the shadows. The America that engaged with Israel was never monolithic, and different communities viewed the Jewish state through distinct lenses. African Americans, for instance, developed a complex relationship with Israel that defies easy categorization. While many Black leaders initially embraced Israel as a fellow underdog fighting against oppression, this solidarity became increasingly strained as Israel developed closer ties with apartheid South Africa and as the Palestinian struggle gained visibility. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s controversial 1967 newsletter criticizing Israel marked an early rupture that would grow more pronounced in subsequent decades.²⁵ These countercurrents in American culture—the perspectives that challenged dominant narratives about Israel—remain somewhat peripheral in Mitelpunkt’s account, raising questions about how different American communities constructed their own relationships with Israel outside the mainstream consensus.

What Mitelpunkt’s analysis reveals is how American perceptions of Israel often had more to do with America’s own identity crises than with Israeli realities. This projection helps explain why the relationship has been so emotionally charged and why criticism of Israeli policies often triggers such visceral reactions in American political discourse. When Americans debate Israel, they are often really debating America itself.

Even as Americans projected their fantasies onto Israel, Israeli society itself, as Frankel’s *Coca-Cola, Black Panthers, and Phantom Jets* demonstrates, was deeply influenced and reshaped in the image of American culture. The post-1967 period witnessed an unprecedented influx of American products, ideas, and technologies that challenged Israel’s austere socialist pioneering ethos. The arrival of Coca-Cola in 1968, after

24 Mitelpunkt, *Israel*, 281, 284.

25 “Third World Round Up—The Palestine Problem: Test Your Knowledge,” *SNCC Newsletter* I:4, June–July 1967, 4–5, https://www.crmvet.org/docs/sv/6707_sncc_news-r.pdf.

years of the company honoring the Arab boycott of Israel, symbolized Israel's entry into global consumer culture. The ensuing "cold war" between Coke and its local competitor, Tempo, was not merely commercial but profoundly cultural, a battle between cosmopolitan modernity and nationalist authenticity.²⁶ The iconic red-and-white logo became a visible marker of Israel's orbit around American consumer culture, celebrated by some as progress and mourned by others as cultural capitulation.

Even social protest in Israel acquired an American accent. The Israeli Black Panthers, a movement of Mizrahi Jews challenging Ashkenazi dominance, deliberately borrowed the name, rhetoric, and imagery of their American counterparts, including "the clenched fist and the image of the panther."²⁷ This transnational borrowing reveals how even uniquely Israeli social conflicts were articulated through American cultural frameworks, complicating the narrative of harmonious alliance by showing how American social fractures were being mirrored and reinterpreted in Israeli society.

Perhaps the most profound Americanization occurred within Israel's military, the very institution that embodied national identity. The arrival of American Phantom jets, whose acquisition Tal details diplomatically, triggered what Frankel describes as a cultural revolution. These aircraft were not merely weapons but complex technological systems that induced the Israeli Air Force's "American turn."²⁸ Pilots and ground crews had to master English, adopt American operational procedures, and embrace a technocratic mindset that valued systems analysis over improvisation. The jets embedded American methods at the heart of Israel's most sacred military institution. "With the new hardware and exposure to American managerial culture," argues Frankel, "new types of authority, knowledge, and ethos infiltrated" the Israeli Air Force, stoking "the IAF's Americanization" and creating a deep organizational alignment that transcended political calculations.²⁹ Frankel's work thus

26 Oz Frankel, *Coca-Cola, Black Panthers, and Phantom Jets: Israel in the American Orbit, 1967–1973* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2024), 45.

27 Frankel, *Coca-Cola*, 141.

28 Frankel, *Coca-Cola*, 113.

29 Frankel, *Coca-Cola*, 113.

reveals a striking irony: while Americans were romanticizing the Israeli soldier, the actual Israeli military was increasingly speaking American English, following American protocols, and drinking American soda.

Beyond the emblematic cases of Coca-Cola, the Black Panthers, and Phantom jets, Frankel's study illuminates the broader tapestry of American influence across Israeli society. Chapter 3 ("Electioneering and the Feedback Loop") documents how American campaign methods—opinion polling, image crafting, and the 1973 Tel Aviv mayoral victory of General Shlomo Lahat—transformed Israeli electoral politics and imported a technocratic, data-driven approach to governance that marked a profound shift from earlier Zionist idealism. Chapter 4 ("Keeping Up with the Cohens") explores how consumerism reshaped middle-class aspirations through American patterns of consumption and suburban living. Chapter 6 ("American Gangster in the Promised Land") extends Frankel's investigation in the country to the darker side of American influence, illustrating how Meyer Lansky's attempted immigration and Rabbi Meir Kahane's later *aliyah* ("ascent") to Israel laid bare Israeli anxieties about American Jewish criminality and the importation of American-style racial politics to the Arab-Jewish divide.

The cultural dimension receives sophisticated treatment in chapters exploring identity construction and artistic expression. Chapter 7 ("Emissaries of Liberalism in Crisis") traces how American social sciences, feminism, therapeutic approaches, and even recreational developments—from basketball teams recruiting American players to Black Hebrew Israelites settling in Dimona—contributed to a complex process of negotiation, adaptation, and resistance that defined Israel's multifaceted entry into the American orbit. Chapter 8 ("Back to Anatevka") analyzes how Broadway's *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964), "the first staging" of which "outside of the United States took place in Jaffa in late spring 1965" triggered an Ashkenazi folk revival that ironically helped Israelis reconnect with their roots while challenging the traditional Zionist doctrine of *shlilat ha'galut* ("negation of the diaspora").³⁰ Finally, chapters 9 ("America on Stage") and 10 ("The American Figure in the Israeli Mind")

30 Frankel, *Coca-Cola*, 224.

examine how Israeli theater and popular culture adapted American forms and constructed archetypal American figures as mirrors for self-reflection.

In sum, Frankel's examination of Americanization provides crucial insights into the phenomenon of cultural transfer. Yet his tight chronological focus (1967–1973) raises questions about the longer arc of this transformation. The seeds of American cultural influence were planted earlier, in the experiences of Holocaust survivors who encountered American occupation forces in Europe before immigrating to Israel, in the Hollywood films that played in Tel Aviv theaters in the 1950s, and in the educational exchanges that brought Israeli students to American universities. Similarly, the cultural processes Frankel documents continued to unfold long after 1973, as Israel's economy liberalized in the 1980s and embraced American-style capitalism in the 1990s. The brief but intense period Frankel examines represents the acceleration of a longer process whose full contours remain to be mapped. How did these cultural transfers reshape Israeli identity over the longer term, and how did they influence Israel's regional relationships? These questions suggest fruitful directions for future research.

Together, *Mitelpunkt* and Frankel expose the cultural paradoxes at the heart of the US-Israel relationship. The very myths that made Israel "special" in American eyes eventually became sources of disillusionment when they collided with reality. Similarly, the Americanization that modernized Israeli society also provoked profound anxieties about cultural authenticity and national identity. These cultural tensions also underscore a blind spot in the five books under review, namely, the relative absence of Palestinian and Arab perspectives on this entanglement. How did this deepening US-Israel bond appear from Gaza, the West Bank, or Cairo? This omission points to a broader limitation in the historiography, one that future scholars will need to address in order to fully understand the regional consequences of this bilateral relationship.

Enduring Entanglement

The five works under consideration here collectively reframe our understanding of the US-Israel relationship, moving beyond simplistic narratives of lobbying power or strategic interest to reveal a bond forged through layers of shared mythology, pragmatic cooperation, and cultural

exchange. The relationship's evolution follows a clear progression from shared ideas (Silver), to joint action (Granick), to formal policy (Tal), and finally to a complex cultural dialogue of projection (Mitelpunkt) and absorption (Frankel).

The early ideological kinship of Zionism and Americanism—the shared sense of providential purpose and national rebirth that Silver uncovers—provided the emotional and intellectual foundation for the concrete actions that followed. This bedrock of shared values made the later strategic alliance seem not merely expedient but natural and necessary. Yet the cultural dimension, as Mitelpunkt and Frankel demonstrate, reveals the paradoxes inherent in this entanglement. The myths that elevated Israel's status in American eyes eventually invited scrutiny and prompted disappointment when they collided with reality. Similarly, the Americanization that modernized Israeli society also provoked profound anxieties about cultural authenticity and national identity.

The framework of ideological entanglement offers a powerful analytical tool for understanding other international relationships as well. It suggests that the most durable alliances are not merely those based on shared interests or values in the abstract, but those in which each nation's self-conception becomes partially dependent on its relationship with the other. The US-Israel bond has proven remarkably resilient precisely because it operates at multiple levels simultaneously—strategic, cultural, and ideological—creating a web of connections that no single crisis can sever.

As a scholarly contribution, these works represent a significant historiographical intervention. They shift the study of US-Israel relations away from narrow diplomatic history and toward a richer transnational perspective that connects political developments to deeper currents of ideological formation, diaspora politics, and cultural exchange. The methodological diversity on display—from Tal's meticulous archival research to Silver's intellectual history, Granick's organizational analysis, and the cultural studies of Mitelpunkt and Frankel—offers a model for approaching diplomatic history in a more holistic way, attentive to the interplay between ideas, institutions, and identities.

Each author makes a distinctive and generative contribution to this new synthesis. Silver demolishes the long-standing assumption that Zionism and Americanism were competing ideologies, revealing instead

their common intellectual heritage. Granick recovers the agency of the diaspora, showing how American Jews were not passive supporters of Zionism but active creators of a new form of transnational power. Tal provides the essential diplomatic narrative, with penetrating archival depth and analytical clarity. Mitelpunkt and Frankel complete the picture by exploring the cultural dimensions of the relationship, Mitelpunkt dissecting America's mythic constructions of Israel and Frankel documenting how American culture transformed Israeli society from within.

Despite their collective strengths, these five works reveal certain lacunae that future scholars might productively address. The absence of other "mirrors" in the present essay does not diminish their importance but clarifies the contours of the reflection under consideration. Most glaring, as noted previously, is the relative absence of Palestinian and Arab perspectives, a silence that speaks volumes about the historiographical challenges of writing about the US-Israel relationship. How did Palestinians interpret the deepening American embrace of Israel? How did they develop their own transnational networks in response? Starting in the early 1970s, the Palestinian Liberation Organization's diplomatic efforts at the United Nations and its complex relationships with various American constituencies, from Black Power activists to church groups, represent a parallel story of transnational engagement that deserves integration into this narrative. Similarly, the gendered dimensions of the US-Israel relationship remain underexplored. The citizen-soldier ideal that so captivated American imaginations was profoundly masculine, as was the diplomatic world in which the alliance was formalized. How did conceptions of masculinity shape military cooperation? How did American and Israeli feminists engage with each other across national boundaries? The religious dimension—particularly the evolving relationship between American evangelicals and Israel—also warrants deeper investigation. The rise of the Christian right as a pro-Israel force in American politics represents a significant shift, the origins of which lie partly in the period these books examine. Finally, the economic foundations of the relationship, from trade agreements to private sector investments, deserve more systematic analysis. These gaps suggest rich possibilities for future scholarship that might complement the diplomatic, cultural, and ideological dimensions so thoroughly documented in these works.

What does this complex history suggest about the future of this “special relationship” in our current moment of geopolitical flux? These works indicate that, while political circumstances may shift, the foundations of the alliance run deeper than strategic calculations. The relationship has weathered the end of the Cold War, dramatic regional transformations, and changing domestic politics precisely because it was never merely a product of geopolitical convenience. Yet the current moment, with its growing partisan divisions over Israel in American politics and increasing challenges to liberal democracy in both societies, may test the relationship’s resilience in unprecedented ways.

The October 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel and the subsequent Israel-Hamas war have exposed both the durability and the strains of this ideological entanglement. President Biden’s immediate and forceful support for Israel echoed Truman’s swift recognition seventy-five years earlier, yet the widespread protests on American college campuses suggest a generational shift in how younger Americans perceive the relationship. This tension between official policy and changing public sentiment mirrors the cultural fractures that *Mitelpunkt* documents in the 1980s but with potentially greater consequences in our more polarized era.

What remains constant, arguably, is the way the relationship continues to function as a mirror for both societies’ self-conceptions. When Americans debate Israel today, they are still, in many ways, debating America itself—its values, its role in the world, its relationship to power and vulnerability. And when Israelis negotiate their relationship with America, they are still wrestling with fundamental questions of national identity that have shaped their society since its inception. The bond between the United States and Israel is, in the final analysis, a relationship between two nations that have, for nearly a century, defined themselves partly through their reflection in each other’s eyes, an entanglement so profound that it has become an indelible feature of both their national stories. Understanding this reality and the cultural-political narrative which animates it in all its complexity is not merely an academic exercise but an essential prerequisite for navigating the relationship’s future in an increasingly turbulent world.

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Lawrence Grossman, *Living in Both Worlds: Modern Orthodox Judaism in the United States, 1945–2025* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2025), vii + 405 pp.

The United States is by far the most religious country of the major modern industrial nations. The two most important characteristics of American religion have been its diversity and its newness. This diversity began with the founding of the British and Dutch colonies in North America during the seventeenth century and has continued to the present day with the recent arrival of large numbers of Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists from the Middle East and Asia. There are over four thousand distinctive American religions, and they range from the serious to the frivolous. A good example of the latter is the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, which was founded in 2005. This diversity is one factor in the shrinkage of Americans who identify themselves as Christians to under two-thirds of the population.

America has also been the birthplace of more new religions than any other nation. The sense of American newness, reflected in the names of American regions, states, and cities—New England, New York, New Jersey, New Rochelle, New Bern, New Haven, Newport—has also extended to its religions. Americans took to heart Ralph Waldo Emerson’s advice to free themselves from “the courtly muses of Europe” and to leave behind “ancient prejudices and manners” and establish new religions.¹ Thousands have been founded in this “novus ordo seclorum,” including Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), Shakers, Unitarianism, Universalism, Christian Science, Seventh-Day Adventist Church,

1 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The American Scholar, Self-Reliance, Compensation* (New York: American Book Co., 1911), 42–46.

Scientology, Jehovah's Witnesses, Ethical Culture, Nation of Islam, Ghost Dance, Black Hebrew Israelites, Jews for Jesus, and the African Methodist Episcopal Church. And when traditional religions relocated to the new world, they frequently underwent drastic changes. In 1899, Pope Leo XIII wrote a letter, *Testem benevolentiae nostrae* ("Witness to Our Benevolence"), to Archbishop Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore, which claimed that American Catholicism was threatened by an infection of various heretical "Americanist" liberal ideas, particularly the separation of church and state, participation of the laity in ecclesiastical decision-making, cooperation with Protestants, and an emphasis on individual autonomy within the laity.

It is thus to be expected that more new forms of Judaism would appear in America than anywhere else. At the conclusion of the American Revolution, Mordecai Sheftall of Georgia wrote to his son predicting that the future of America's Jews was bright since "we have the whole world to begin again."² While his words referred to America's Jews, they are equally applicable to the many efforts to remake American Judaism over the past two centuries with new forms of Jewish worship and doctrine. These have included Jewish Science, Reconstructionism, the Havurah movement, the Society for Humanistic Judaism, Jewish Renewal, Conservative Judaism, Black Judaism, Open Orthodoxy, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, Chabad, Edah, Young Israel, and Modern Orthodoxy. If America was the land of the self-made man, it was also the land of the self-made Jew. In America, the historian Jenna Weissman Joselit wrote, Jewishness and Judaism became "a malleable and protean social construct," stemming "as much from American notions of consumerism, gender, privacy, and personal happiness as from Jewish notions of tradition, ritual, memory and continuity." This combining of "the immediate and transcendent, the quirky and the hallowed" was "virtually without parallel in modern Jewish history."³

Lawrence Grossman's deeply researched, engrossing, and intellectually exciting *Living in Both Worlds* is an exceedingly important addition

2 Sheftall quoted in Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 36.

3 Joselit quoted in Edward S. Shapiro, *A Unique People in a Unique Land: Essays on American Jewish History* (Brookline, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2022), 125.

to the literature of American Judaism's diversity and newness. It claims to be "the first book-length attempt to trace the course of Modern Orthodoxy since the mid-twentieth century" (3). There is a plethora of books by sociologists on American Orthodoxy that deal with birth rates, occupational and residential patterns, education, marriage, and other such subjects. Grossman's focus is elsewhere. He is an historian and his book is history from the top down, in which prominence is accorded to the pronouncements of those involved in the debate over Modern Orthodoxy. He takes seriously the issues debated in the major magazines of American Orthodoxy during this era, including *Tradition* of the Rabbinical Council of America, *Jewish Life* and *Jewish Action* of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, and the *Jewish Observer* of Agudath Israel of America, Modern Orthodoxy's most prominent opponent. Grossman is also familiar with the lives and major books of Modern Orthodoxy's defenders and opponents, and his book is replete with short and interesting biographies of many of them.

Grossman defines Modern Orthodoxy as "a stance or orientation that entails living simultaneously in two worlds of meaning, that of the present and that of Jewish tradition.... Each new issue that arose evoked debate over whether to affirm Orthodox openness by accommodating change, or to signal Orthodox steadfastness by resisting it" (9). The movement emerged in America shortly after World War II as a defense of Orthodoxy against its detractors, particularly within the Conservative movement on its left, and of modernity against more stringent and insular forms of Orthodoxy on its right.

Grossman is well-equipped to write such a book, having personally experienced the tensions of living within the world of Orthodoxy as well as within the world of modernity. His father was a traditional Orthodox rabbi and mohel, while his mother was a college professor, and he himself graduated from Yeshiva College and then went on to receive a PhD in history from the City University of New York. For nearly forty years, he worked at the American Jewish Committee as director of publications and editor of its *American Jewish Year Book*.

Calls for the modernization of Orthodoxy had emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries during the massive immigration to America of Jews from Central and Eastern Europe. A majority

of these immigrants equated Judaism with Orthodoxy, and this resulted in a host of assumptions regarding Orthodoxy's future in the United States. The most important of these was that an Orthodoxy closely identified with the narrow world of European Orthodoxy would have scant appeal to the children and grandchildren of the immigrants, and that an entire generation would be lost to Orthodoxy in particular and to Judaism in general unless changes were made. The earliest Orthodox reformers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries believed that Orthodoxy must be purged of its archaic practices and beliefs and become more attuned to middle-class religious norms if it was to have any future in America. These reforms included sermons in English rather than Yiddish, decorous behavior within the synagogue, a greater role for women both within and outside the synagogue, and a rejection of practices that hindered upward social and economic mobility.

By the mid-twentieth century, most scholarly observers believed the future of American Orthodoxy to be bleak. The sociologist Marshall Sklare wrote in his 1955 volume, *Conservative Judaism: An American Religious Movement*, that "Orthodox adherents have succeeded in achieving the goal of institutional perpetuation to only a limited extent; the history of their movement in this country can be written in terms of a case study in institutional decay."⁴ Nathan Glazer, another sociologist, agreed. "Traditional Jewish piety as expressed in the observance of ritual is dead or close to dead in America," he said in 1956.⁵ The future of traditional Judaism in America, it was widely assumed by most observers, rested in the hands of the Conservative movement and its Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City.

Orthodox leaders in America tended to agree. In 1943, the Orthodox Union, the voice of Orthodoxy in America, stated that, while "many have been the written and oral suggestions which would inject new blood into the lifestream of Orthodoxy," the crisis of Orthodoxy "is mute evidence of either the ineffectiveness of all suggestions or the inability to carry them

4 Marshall Sklare, *Conservative Judaism: An American Religious Movement* (New York: Free Press, 1955), 43.

5 Nathan Glazer, "The Jewish Revival in America II," *Commentary* 21 (January 1956): 18.

out.” The next year, Leo Jung, the rabbi of the Jewish Center synagogue in Manhattan, noted that “the conscious, loyal Jews, those who sincerely endeavor to follow the laws of the Torah, are a minority in American Israel, and that our numbers are decreasing from day to day” (17–18).

In his 1957 book, *American Judaism*, Glazer asserted that Orthodoxy’s future lay with those whom he described as a “particularly backward and archaic group of Jews.” For Glazer, Orthodoxy was restricted to declining neighborhoods in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and the Lower East Side in Manhattan, and he completely ignored the possibility that acculturated and prosperous Orthodox communities could be established elsewhere. This was true even when a second edition of *American Judaism* appeared in 1972.⁶ But, by 1972, a Modern Orthodox resurgence could be found in Brookline and Newton in Massachusetts, Teaneck and West Orange in New Jersey, Scarsdale and New Rochelle in New York, Woodmere and Lawrence on Long Island, Silver Spring outside of Washington, DC, Skokie near Chicago, and elsewhere. These demonstrated that there was no inherent incompatibility between Orthodox Judaism and upward social and economic mobility and between living in encapsulated religious communities and being successful in the non-Jewish world.

American Orthodoxy refused to roll over and die and instead was experiencing an amazing rebirth beginning in the 1950s. When a second edition of his book on Conservative Judaism appeared in 1972, Sklare was pessimistic about the future not of Orthodoxy but of Conservative Judaism. “Unaccountably, Orthodoxy has refused to assume the role of invalid,” he said. “Rather, it has transformed itself into a growing force in American Jewish life. It has reasserted its claim of being the authentic interpretation of Judaism.” Other observers, including Jack Wertheimer, Samuel C. Heilman, Steven M. Cohen, Chaim I. Waxman, and Herbert Danziger also drew attention to this Orthodox renaissance. The historian Jonathan D. Sarna noted that the revival of Orthodox Judaism in America has been “one of the great stories of postwar Judaism.”⁷

6 Edward S. Shapiro, “The Missing Element: Nathan Glazer and Modern Orthodoxy,” *American Jewish History* 77 (December 1987): 152–165.

7 Sarna quoted in Shapiro, *Unique People in a Unique Land*, 104.

The most important task Grossman faced was delineating the principles and values that have animated Modern Orthodoxy and separated it from the right-wing Orthodoxy of the yeshiva world. Just as Leo XIII condemned various “modernist” errors, so Modern Orthodoxy has earned the ire of right-wing Orthodox spokesmen (and they have been virtually all men) who have claimed that being both modern and Orthodox was oxymoronic. This conflict has been central to the history of post-1945 American Orthodoxy. The Eastern European Orthodox heartland was destroyed during World War II, and the Orthodox population of Palestine was relatively small during the 1940s and 1950s. This meant that, for a brief period, American Orthodoxy assumed a heightened importance, and it explains why Grossman’s book begins in 1945 and not in 1912 when the Young Israel movement was founded, or 1928 when Yeshiva University established its undergraduate college for men, or 1932 when Joseph B. Soloveitchik settled in Boston.

The most important point of contention between the Modern Orthodox and their right-wing rivals, Grossman notes, has not concerned Zionism, the higher criticism of the Bible, divorce, kashrut, social dancing, or women’s place in the synagogue. Rather, it has been how far traditional Jews should be involved in modernity. This has been most clearly indicated by their differing stances regarding higher education. The right wing views higher education as solely a vocational activity that prepares one for economic mobility and rejects the idea that familiarity with Aristotle, Shakespeare, and Lincoln has any intrinsic value. In fact, studying Western culture is undesirable since it takes time away from studying the Talmud.

By contrast, some of the leaders of Modern Orthodoxy have argued that it was beneficial for the Orthodox to be familiar with the literature, fine arts, history, and political thought of western culture, and Modern Orthodox figures such as Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Jonathan Sacks, and Meir Soloveitchik have been extremely well read and intellectually articulate. It is not surprising that one of the major controversies at Yeshiva University, the flagship institution of Modern Orthodoxy in America, has been the extent to which its undergraduate colleges should debase their academic character by offering more vocationally focused courses. Nor is it surprising that the traditionalists on the right do not fret over

whether their children will be accepted by Yale or Princeton, whereas Modern Orthodox day schools enthusiastically advertise the fact that their graduates have been accepted by the most elite American colleges since their students' parents deem this to be important.

Grossman is optimistic regarding the future of American Orthodoxy because of its high birth rate, a low intermarriage rate, and the tendency of those raised Orthodox to remain within the fold. He suggests there is a chance that, by the end of the twenty-first century, over half of America's Jews could be Orthodox. The future of Modern Orthodoxy, however, is not so bright. "Modern Orthodoxy's fragmentation and increasingly vague ideology," he argues, "raises doubts about its continuing relevance, indeed, about the very meaning of such concepts as modernity and Orthodoxy" (361).

Grossman dates these doubts to the 1970s, when there commenced a major turn toward the right within Modern Orthodoxy accompanied by a growing pessimism regarding its future. Supplementing this was a dispute over the movement's name. Some within Modern Orthodoxy objected to "modern" and preferred "centrist," "traditional," "classical," or "Torah-true." The growing dispute involving the use of "Modern" was symptomatic of the debate within Modern Orthodoxy as to how far it could go in modernizing Judaism before it would no longer be considered Orthodox. Symptomatic of this move to the right was the refusal of Yeshiva University's board to appoint Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, an eloquent proponent of Modern Orthodoxy and the university's provost for half a decade, as its president following the resignation of Samuel Belkin for health reasons in 1975. Instead, the board selected Norman Lamm. Lamm, Grossman notes, "had steered clear of religious controversy and any taint of heterodoxy" (164). His silence on matters animating the proponents of Modern Orthodoxy earned him the sobriquet "silence of the Lamm." This controversy, however, did not prevent Bar Ilan University, Israel's counterpart to Yeshiva University, from selecting Rackman as its president. But Bar Ilan, in contrast to Yeshiva, did not have a rabbinical seminary pushing it toward the religious right.

The stretching of "Modern Orthodoxy" was accelerated after the 1993 death of Joseph B. Soloveitchik, its unquestioned intellectual voice, and as it responded in various ways to the challenges of feminism,

homosexuality, cooperation with non-Orthodox organizations, and secular learning. Some observers even proposed dropping the term “Modern Orthodoxy” because it no longer supposedly encompassed a community of the like-minded. A 2017 report by the Orthodox think tank Nishma Research titled *The Nishma Research Profile of American Modern Orthodox Jews* concluded there was such a wide diversity of beliefs and practices within Modern Orthodoxy that one could no longer assume “the viability of there being a single camp known as Modern Orthodoxy” (320). A headline in August 2015 in the Israel newspaper *Ha’aretz* put it succinctly: “Has Modern Orthodoxy in America Reached Its Breaking Point?”

The major problem that Modern Orthodoxy sought to resolve remains how to live within two worlds with conflicting values. The unpredictable history of post-1945 Orthodoxy should make us cautious regarding prognostications of its future, including those by Grossman. As the great philosopher Yogi Berra said, making predictions is tough, particularly about the future.

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Richard Kreitner, *Fear No Pharoah: American Jews, the Civil War, and the Fight to End Slavery* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2025), 416pp.

In 1951, Rabbi Bertram W. Korn published *American Jewry and the Civil War*, which was an extraordinary book, especially because Korn did not have a Ph.D. in history and was also the senior rabbi at a huge congregation. The book lacked any serious discussion of Jewish slave owning, which Korn partially remedied in a subsequent edition, adding his presidential address for the American Jewish Historical Society, “Jews and Negro Slavery in the Old South, 1789–1865.” Korn’s book does not reflect modern understandings of the Civil War, especially the fact that slavery was a central cause of secession and the war. But

Korn's pioneering research was carefully footnoted and documented. Remarkably, it was reprinted as recently as 2009.

Korn's staying power is illustrated by the fact that Jonathan D. Sarna and Adam Mendelsohn reprinted two of Korn's pieces in *Jews and the Civil War*.¹ This anthology is one of several recent and important books that deal with slavery and Jews in the Civil War era.² All of these new books reposition slavery as part of the American Jewish experience. They support Shari Rabin's conclusion that Southern "Jews did not originate, innovate, or dominate chattel slavery in the Americas, but neither did they avoid it or contest it."³ Richard Kreitner's elegantly written, although also problematic, *Fear No Pharaoh*, adds to this list.

Kreitner, like Korn, has no graduate training in history. His book is ambitious and useful. It is important and will be illuminating to many people. But it is also frustrating, idiosyncratic, and often wrong or inaccurate. Kreitner sometimes throws out facts without any regard for their accuracy. He asserts that, during the Civil War, 6,000 Jews served in the United States army and half that number in the Confederate army (193). However, the Shapell Manuscript Foundation, which is the gold standard for data on Jews in the Civil War, and is enormously helpful to scholars, has documented fewer than 1,800 Jews in the United States army and navy and fewer than 1,550 in the Confederate army.⁴

1 Jonathan D. Sarna and Adam Mendelsohn, *Jews and the Civil War* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

2 These include Adam D. Mendelsohn, *Jewish Soldiers in the Civil War: The Union Army* (New York: New York University Press, 2022); Laura Arnold Leibman, *Once We Were Slaves: The Extraordinary Journey of a Multi-Racial Jewish Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Jonathan D. Sarna, *When General Grant Expelled the Jews* (New York: Schocken, 2012); Jason K. Friedman, *Liberty Street: A Savannah Family, Its Golden Boy, and the Civil War* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2024); Dianne Ashton and Melissa R. Klapper, *The Civil War Diary of Emma Mordecai* (New York: New York University Press, 2024).

3 Shari Rabin, *The Jewish South: An American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2025), xiv–xv.

4 The Shapell Roster of Jewish Service in the American Civil War, <https://www.shapell.org/roster/>, 9 January 2026. I thank Adrienne DeArmas, Caitlin Winkler, and the staff at the Shapell Manuscript Foundation for their assistance in putting these numbers together. See also, Mendelsohn, *Jewish Soldiers*, 240–241.

Similarly, he tells us that “between three and six thousand Jews” lived in Charleston, South Carolina, “by the Revolution,” (53) but at the time there were only about 12,000 people in the whole city, and half were slaves. Kreitner is thus claiming either all or half of the non-slave population was Jewish. This is simply absurd. Indeed, in 1775, the accepted estimates of Jews for *all* the colonies is between 1,000 and 2,500 people.⁵ There are many similar errors in the book that undermine its utility and even its credibility.⁶

Kreitner focuses on six mid-century Jews—three antislavery and three proslavery—to tell his story about Jews and slavery and Jews and the Civil War. All were immigrants, even though, in 1861, Jews had been in what was the United States for more than two centuries. Two are Northerners who opposed slavery, and a third is a rabbi who left Baltimore as the Civil War began and vigorously denounced slavery. Two are proslavery Northern rabbis who supported slavery. The sixth is Judah P. Benjamin, a slave owner raised in the United States and a successful politician who eventually served as Secretary of State for the Confederacy. There were many American-born Southern Jewish slave owners (and some in the North in the Founding period). Inexplicably,

5 Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 391. Some historians argue that there were 3,000 Jews across the thirteen colonies.

6 These include his statement that President Lincoln drank a beer with a prominent Jew, when it is well known that Lincoln never drank, and his claim that “most American Jews had tried their best to stay aloof from politics” before the 1850s (18) when in fact Jews held political office at the national, state, and local levels from the beginning of the Revolution, including Jews serving in Congress before 1850. He asserts that Thomas R. R. Cobb, the Georgia lawyer who co-founded the University of Georgia law school and authored the only southern treatise on slave law (*An Inquiry into the Law of Negro Slavery*) was “a leading Georgia politician” and the cousin of the state’s former governor, Howell Cobb (233). Howell was actually his brother, and, except for serving for a few months as a member of the Confederate provisional congress, where he was the main drafter of the Confederate Constitution, Thomas R.R. never held any elected office. He calls Baltimore, Maryland, a “northern” city and Lexington, Kentucky, a “southern” city (170). Both cities were in “loyal” slave states, so both were either southern, northern, or something in between. Individually, these and many other errors might seem like small points, but, cumulatively, they leave us with the sense that Kreitner does not fully understand the politics, geography, or history of the United States from the Revolution to the Civil War.

Kreitner mostly ignores them; and he discusses only one major figure, Judah Benjamin, who actually owned slaves.

We first meet Vienna-born August Bondi, who arrived in the United States along with tens of thousands of other Jews in the wake of the failed European revolutions of 1848. By 1856, he was riding with John Brown in Kansas, fighting to prevent the Kansas Territory from becoming a slave state. He joined the 5th Kansas Cavalry, was promoted to the rank of sergeant, severely wounded, and later became a politician.⁷ His career is fascinating. Many readers will be surprised (and impressed) that a young Jewish immigrant rode with Brown. His life shows how some new immigrants quickly understood the utter evil of slavery and fought against it. He was also a leader within his own Jewish community.

Kreitner's second opponent of slavery, Ernestine Rose, left Poland to avoid her arranged marriage, became a leading feminist, flitted around the antislavery movement, experimented in utopian socialism with Robert Dale Owen, renounced Judaism and all religion, and left the United States before the Civil War began. She is not much of an example of a Northern opponent of slavery. When spending time in the American South, she "found herself growing accustomed to being waited on" by slaves (104), which suggests that her commitment to antislavery was somewhat ambivalent. Exotic and interesting, she was not actively abolitionist for much of the antebellum period, often isolated from the movement and absent during the war. It is hard to understand why Kreitner focused on her to explain Jewish opposition to slavery, since she was as much opposed to Judaism as slavery.

His third Northerner, Rabbi David Einhorn, a major figure in the Reform movement, moved from Europe in 1855 to officiate at Har Sinai in Baltimore. He had no interaction with the antislavery movement until the spring of 1861, when he gave a powerful sermon condemning Morris J. Raphall, a proslavery Orthodox rabbi in New York. After his antislavery sermon was published in English, Einhorn left

7 See <https://www.shapell.org/civil-war-soldier-database/soldier/8690> (last visited 2 December 2025).

Baltimore, where slavery was legal. He spent the war at Keneseth Israel in Philadelphia (where Rabbi Korn would later serve), which became known as the abolition temple. He later moved to New York. Einhorn's sermon was passionate, intellectual, and powerful in its use of Jewish sources to condemn slavery. He is the best example of Jewish theological opposition to slavery.

On the proslavery side, Kreitner discusses Rabbi Morris J. Raphall, who came from Sweden in 1849. He was an ardent opponent of Lincoln and emancipation and argued that Jewish law supported slavery. He was the first rabbi to give the opening prayer in Congress, when it was controlled by proslavery representatives. Kreitner's second proslavery American Jew is Reform rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, who emigrated from Bohemia in 1846 to take the pulpit at Congregation Beth-El in Albany. He was an outspoken critic of Lincoln, a leading opponent of the anti-slavery movement, and openly racist. He called Africans "savages" and wanted American Blacks (almost all of whom were born in the United States) deported to Africa. He wanted Jews to ignore slavery in order to focus on faith, family, and community.

His third supporter of slavery, the Caribbean-born Benjamin, is the only one of the six raised in the United States and the only slave owner. Benjamin embraced slavery, bought and sold human beings, and was a United States senator and then a member of the Confederate cabinet. Benjamin was a voice for slavery. But, oddly for this book, he was not a voice for Judaism and, after his bar mitzvah, never did anything Jewish in his political or his private life. He never joined a synagogue, married a Catholic woman, never associated with Jews, and, when the Senate discussed European persecution of Jews, he said nothing. He silently supported a treaty with Switzerland that blatantly discriminated against Jews. He never renounced his Judaism; he just abandoned it.

Kreitner's most significant contribution is his discussion of how Southern Jews (and some in the North) accepted and embraced slavery. Importantly, he recognizes that "the story of slavery and white supremacy in America and the story of the Jews in America—have in fact, from the beginning, been thoroughly intertwined" (9). Kreitner demonstrates that most Southern Jews were comfortable as slaveowners and secessionists, while many Northern Jews, like Rabbis Wise and

Raphall, were unconcerned about slavery or defended it. Southern Jews (and some in the North) embraced the world they lived in, as they bought and sold human beings to increase their comfort and prosperity. His conclusion is clearly correct: “While Jews did not contribute much to American slavery, American slavery contributed greatly to the success of early American Jews. Slavery, and the bigotry it supported deflected much of the hostility that Jews had faced in the old world” (67).

Kreitner has also rescued from obscurity some Jews who opposed slavery. Moses E. Levy, an early settler in Florida, published an abolitionist tract (while his son became a proslavery United States senator). Twenty-four Philadelphia Jews petitioned Congress in 1838 to end slavery in the District of Columbia, while Rebecca Hart was an officer of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society in the 1840s. Mordechai Myers, “an active member of both Congregation Shearith Israel and the [New York] Manumission Society,” was the first Jew elected to the New York legislature (63). He retells the story, unknown to most Jews, of Joseph and Isaac Friedman, peddlers from Cincinnati, who operated a store in Alabama and bought a slave named Peter in order to take him to Cincinnati, where he was instantly free. They then helped Peter get to Philadelphia, where he was miraculously reconnected to his brother, William Still, the most important Black abolitionist in the city. Kreitner’s conclusion from this story is important; namely, that for some antebellum Jews like the Friedman brothers, “there was nothing inevitable about...unquestioning complicity with bondage” (137).

On the flip side, Kreitner offers many examples of Jewish slave owners, who, like their Christian neighbors, were not concerned with the justice or morality of buying, owning, or selling human beings. I suspect many readers will cringe when they learn that Haym Salomon, an icon of American Jewish history, was not in fact the “financier of the Revolution” but a merchant who sold slaves (52). Similarly, Hyman Gratz, a leader of the Philadelphia Jewish community, the brother of the more famous Rebecca Gratz, and the philanthropist who endowed Gratz College (the oldest independent Jewish college in the nation), also acquired seventy slaves in Kentucky to mine guano in Mammoth Cave, while his younger brother, Benjamin, moved to Kentucky, married into

the family of Senator Henry Clay, and owned seventy-five slaves (52). Many readers will doubtless be disturbed by the sheer number of Jews who owned slaves in the South. Most books on Jews and the South ignore or downplay Jewish participation in slavery. Despite his many errors and his odd choice of his six major figures, Kreitner's book is important because he exposes that some important Northern Jews were indifferent, at best, to slavery—the greatest moral issue in the United States before 1865—and that many Southern Jews embraced slavery, profited from it, and were willing to die (or at least see their sons die) to preserve it. For example, about 83 percent of all Jewish families in Charleston owned slaves in 1830.⁸ Mordecai Cohen, a South Carolina planter and businessman, bought and sold more than fifty slaves. Other Southern Jews owned as many or more.

Despite his understanding that Jews, especially in the South, were generally enthusiastic slaveowners (and later enthusiastic Confederates), Kreitner sometimes seems to bend over backward to explain away or excuse Jewish support for slavery. He correctly notes that, in the South, “outright criticism of the slave system would have been dangerous” (10–11), but he frames the point as though he assumes that Southern Jews did not like slavery. He never asks the more significant question: if Jews were uncomfortable with slavery, why did they remain in the South, embrace slavery, and actively profit from the labor (and the births) of the people they owned? He seems to imply that Southern Jews were somehow secretly opposed to slavery, as though they were the abolitionist version of Marranos during the Inquisition. Yet Kreitner's own evidence shows that this was not true.

On the other hand, except for the Friedman brothers, Kreitner fails to explore Jews living in the South who left the region or resisted personal involvement in slavery. For example, Francis Lieber never criticized slavery while a professor at what is now the University of South Carolina because he would have been fired, but, in the 1850s, he moved to New York, where he became a professor at Columbia University. During the Civil War, he worked for Lincoln's War Department and wrote the field

8 Rabin, *Jewish South*, 44.

manual for the United States army, known as the Lieber Code, which explicitly declared: “if a person held in bondage by that belligerent [the Confederacy] be captured by or come as a fugitive under the protection of the military forces of the United States, such person is immediately entitled to the rights and privileges of a freeman.” Had Kreitner been looking for Jews in the South who helped abolish slavery, he would have written about Lieber.

Other Jews, however, made a conscious and personal decision to engage in slaveholding or support it. Rabbis Raphall and Wise, both of whom lived in the North, were proslavery and anti-Black. But they certainly did not support slavery and embrace racism merely because of fears of retaliation from their neighbors. Rather, they believed in both. Benjamin went to college at Yale and might have stayed in the North, abandoning the South and slavery.⁹ Instead, like many other Jews who went North for college, he returned to the slaveholding South, settling in New Orleans, where he became a wealthy lawyer, successful politician, and slave owner.

Kreitner suggests that Benjamin did not really support slavery because, in one legal case, he argued that slaves were people (20). But lawyers make arguments to win cases, not necessarily because they believe them. After becoming a rich and successful lawyer with many slaves in his household, Benjamin purchased a plantation with more than 140 slaves as an investment and in order to confirm his status as a rich White Southerner. Kreitner explains away this purchase, claiming that Benjamin bought the plantation “because as a Jew...he would be deemed a potential threat to the slave system unless he presented himself as both its direct beneficiary and stalwart defender” (20). But Benjamin already owned slaves and was a wealthy successful lawyer and defender of slavery. His mansion in the French Quarter of New Orleans (which still stands) had an entire wing where his household slaves lived. He hardly needed 140 more slaves to prove his Southern bona fides. He vigorously supported slavery in the Senate, leading one abolitionist senator to call him an “Israelite with Egyptian principles.”

9 Rabin, *Jewish South*, 43.

Kreitner suggests that this was an antisemitic slur, but it was in fact an accurate portrayal of Benjamin. On the eve of the Civil War, the vice president of the Confederacy, Alexander Stephens, publicly declared that the “cornerstone” of the Confederacy “rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition.” Benjamin enthusiastically agreed with this analysis of slavery, race, and secession, holding three positions in the Confederate cabinet. Like other Jewish Confederates, he fully supported slavery and White supremacy. After the war, he escaped to England, where he practiced law and defended slavery and the Confederacy for the rest of his life. Benjamin used his intelligence and skills to preserve and protect slavery. This contrasts with Lieber or the six Jewish generals (when there were no Jewish generals in any western European armies) and forty-nine other high officers who served in the United States Army and helped destroy slavery. Kreitner never mentions them.

As I have argued, this book is important and useful but idiosyncratic, sometimes quite wrong, and often frustrating. There are no real footnotes—references are mostly shorthand and situated at the back of the book—and the volume lacks a bibliography, making it cumbersome to find the source of a fact or a quotation. For readers interested only in the narrative, this will not be a problem. For scholars, it raises all sorts of questions about why the publisher chose to undermine the seriousness of the subject and make the book far less useful and reliable.

In the end, this is an important book but one that must be read with care. The subject is important, and the writing is elegant. His theme that Southern Jews embraced slavery is not only convincing but significant. I just wish the history were better and the analysis sharper.

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**Pamella S. Nadell, *Antisemitism, An American Tradition*
(New York: W.W. Norton Company, 2025), 352pp.**

For all their differences, historians who have studied antisemitism in recent decades have tended to do so from an objective standpoint. By this I mean that they have sought to uncover a set of properties applicable to all or a subset of all phenomena that Jews in the past and present have described as “antisemitic.” From those properties they have spun an answer to the question “What is antisemitism?” a definition that can guide their examination of thoughts and actions that have victimized Jews. Three historians of antisemitism referenced in Pamela Nadell’s timely new book, *Antisemitism, An American Tradition*, fit this description (47, 237, 248). Leonard Dinnerstein, Robert Wistrich, and Deborah Lipstadt each developed definitions of antisemitism that they believed could sustain wide-ranging historical inquiries of antisemitism in the past and present.

At the same time, recent historians have generally eschewed a subjective approach. Typically evinced by Jewish communal leaders and professionals rather than scholars, this approach does not define antisemitism based on a common set of properties that inheres in the thoughts and actions of “antisemites.” Instead, it assigns as the term’s referent all manner of concepts, habits, attitudes, statements, and actions that Jews have perceived to be threatening. This is to say that how Jews subjectively experience antisemitism, rather than what motivates antisemites or what they seek to target, determines what antisemitism is.

Departing from her scholarly forbearers, Nadell squarely places her study in the subjectivist camp. After briefly acknowledging the term’s history and the scholarly disagreements over its proper definition, Nadell writes, “I bypass those arguments. Instead, as readers will discover, the many episodes of anti-Jewish animus discussed in this book speak for themselves. They may not have been called antisemitism when they occurred. But readers will have no trouble recognizing them as antisemitic.” What is and is not antisemitism, in other words, rests on the instincts of Nadell’s historical actors and her (ostensibly Jewish) readers. And those instincts, per the book’s thesis, attest to a long history of antisemitism in the United States that exposes the post-October 7th troubles as a continuity rather than a departure in American Jewish history (xviii).

Antisemitism demonstrates the virtues of Nadell's framework. For one, it allows her to avoid the tedious disagreements over definitions of antisemitism that have so far failed to establish a consensus as to what constitutes antisemitism. But it also supports her compelling storytelling about how ordinary Jews have experienced animosity and prejudice. *Antisemitism* is chock-full of interesting vignettes such as the Brownsville student who openly challenged her principal's Christian sermonizing at a public school assembly (74), the mother enraged by her son's spurned promotion in the US military who succeeded in getting President Taft to intervene (88), and the aspiring secretary denied admission into a prestigious stenography school on account of her "Jewish nationality" (115). The book's focus on ordinary Jews and their experiences with prejudice, in turn, emphasizes not just those immediate experiences but also their aftereffects, like the raw memories of the Leo Frank assassination for an Atlanta contemporary (97), the "emotional toll" of employment discrimination for the many who endured it (121), and the long-lasting traumas of a blood libel accusation among the local Jews of Messena, New York (136).

The result is a diverse and impressive catalog of moments, some well known but others unearthed in Nadell's research, that American Jews have perceived as threatening. Her overarching claim is that antisemitism ebbs and flows but ultimately has persisted across historical eras, from the colonial period to the present day. This ebb and flow can get lost, however, in a narrative that also depicts the things Jews have found offensive or threatening to be constant and ubiquitous. Nadell acknowledges that antisemitism in colonial America was qualitatively different than what Jews faced in Europe but also claims that it was "deeply entrenched" in the former (15). She explores in great detail the uptick in discrimination and hostility directed at Jews between the Civil War and World War II but then claims that it "continued without pause" into the early Cold War era (180). She asserts that antisemitism "erupt[ed] in America in the new millennium with a force few would have imagined" (228). She then concludes the book with the old saw, "The more things have changed, the more they have stayed the same" (257). Jews' responses to these things—"they stood up for their people and the truth against hate-mongers"—have been consistent over the centuries as well (228).

Even if we accept Nadell's argument that antisemitism has remained constant throughout history, *Antisemitism* misses an opportunity to analyze how Jews' tolerance of those things they have found threatening may actually have changed over time. A book committed to enumerating what Jews have perceived to be antisemitism would be well placed to investigate which threats or behaviors in a specific historical era Jews considered odious but tolerable and which threats or behaviors they saw as true security challenges. A book of this sort may also identify how that threshold of tolerability evolves and why.

Consider the following example. Not unlike other historians who have studied the interwar era, Nadell portrays a particularly grim scene, illustrated by, among other things, the pervasive job discrimination Jews such as the aspiring secretary, Pearl Cohen, faced. When Cohen's father appealed to the American Jewish Committee (AJC) for help, the Committee responded, "Such discrimination...is present in many walks of life and there are thousands, even tens of thousands of Jewish young men and women who suffer in one way or another," and so Jews must get "on our way doing the best we can in spite of such hardships" (116). For the AJC of the time, evidently, widespread discriminatory hiring practices were unfortunate but also predictable and seemingly tolerable. This represents a significant contrast with the way Jews today, as documented in Nadell's final chapter, perceive verbal expressions of anti-Zionist hostility.

For all its strengths, the book's subjective approach is not without downsides. It results, for one, in the mustering of historical cases of questionable relevance. In the chapter on the early decades of the United States, for instance, Nadell mentions the 1791 Rebecca Alexander Samuels correspondence, in which Samuels laments how she and her husband were "completely isolated" in their abode of Petersburg, Virginia (25). Nadell leaves unexplained why Samuels's social frustrations matter at all for understanding antisemitism in the new nation. At other times she passes off as conclusive events whose antisemitic character remain the subject of unresolved scholarly debate due to the mismatch between what we know, or do not know, about the perpetrators' motivations and Jews' reactions to those events. She labels the 1902 riot that marred the funeral procession of Rabbi Jacob Joseph as a "significant antisemitic assault" and "the single largest antisemitic attack in US history" (126, 128), even as

scholarly interpretations of this complicated conflagration of interethnic urban tension continue to run the gamut. Likewise, Nadell construes the 1965 Watts riot as antisemitic while asserting that “it really did not matter if antisemitism motivated the destruction” of Jewish-owned Los Angeles businesses (213). The same goes for cemetery vandalism, which in one case she assumes to be antisemitic despite the fact that “no one knows who did it, how many people were involved, nor their motivations” (257). Nadell includes at least one event that may not have taken place at all. She admits that an alleged blood libel in New York City in 1850 mentioned in a Jewish Leipzig-based newspaper that relied for its reporting on a Bremen-based newspaper, an event that no American organ ever recorded, may have been “exaggerated” or even “pure fiction,” but she still deems it of great significance for early American Jewry (35). In these cases, antisemitic intent may be undetermined or entirely lacking, but Jewish perceptions seem to be all that governs.

But then *Antisemitism* does not consistently adhere to the subjective approach. The problem is evident in the book’s title, for it is unclear how Nadell can prove that an American tradition of antisemitism exists when the antisemitism she aims to study is predicated on the instincts of American Jews rather than the mental worlds and social patterns of those who espouse it. Her avowed approach may indeed reveal that *Jews* have a tradition in America of seeing a certain set of behaviors as antisemitic, but the book is limited in what it says about the history of such a tradition extrinsic to them. At times, Nadell seems to take up the objective rather than the subjective approach, only without defining antisemitism in an objective way. The book surmises that there really is a thing in the world that we may call “antisemitism” that exists apart from Jewish assessments of it. This thing, according to Nadell, manifests in different historical contexts and also lurks throughout the annals of American history. Consider these quotes that reify antisemitism: “[A]ntisemitism has coursed throughout American history...no matter where or when [Jews] lived” (xvii). “This antisemitism places America’s Jews within the long and larger history of anti-Jewish hate...it goes back to the biblical book of Exodus” (4–5). “[T]hose prejudices...were already instilled in the American mind” (45). “Moments of crisis emboldened antisemitism” (47). “A closer look at this ‘golden age’ of American Jewish life

reveals that antisemitism did not decline...it continued without a pause” (180). “[A]ntisemitism burst out in the online sphere” (229). “Durban and 9/11 unleashed an international torrent of the new antisemitism” (237). One wonders what relationship exists between these differing examples of antisemitism that would justify calling them all “antisemitism.” In what way, for example, is the anger Black Los Angelenos felt toward Whites that erupted in rioting in 1965 that happened to injure stores, including but not limited to Jewish-owned ones (213), part of the same phenomenon as the unreasonably high fine Dutch colonial authorities levied against a Jew in New Amsterdam in 1655 for keeping a store open on Sunday (21)? If antisemitism is understood to mean more than just the manifold things that Jews consider threatening, but also a coherent phenomenon independent of Jewish perceptions, then this question calls for an answer.

These issues notwithstanding, *Antisemitism* is a welcome study of a topic that, sadly, retains historical immediacy. It will no doubt provoke renewed scholarly debate and popular interest. Students of American Jewish history, the history of American prejudice, and the history of intergroup relations in the United States will gain much from reading it.

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Haim Sperber, *The Plight of Jewish Deserted Wives, 1851–1900: A Social History of East European Agunah* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic, 2023), 256pp. and *A Social History Database of East European Jewish Deserted Wives, 1851–1900* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2023), 212pp.

Haim Sperber’s *The Plight of Jewish Deserted Wives* maps *agunot*—Orthodox Jewish women who wish to remarry but have no *get* that will permit them to do so according to halakhah—in the latter half of the nineteenth century across “Jewish eastern Europe,” which Sperber understands “as a cultural rather than...[a] geographical term” for a region

that stretches across political boundaries from the Russian Empire to Congress Poland to Bulgaria (*Plight*, 2). Sperber's study and companion database offer an exhaustive and unprecedented survey of *agunot* that draws on hundreds of multilingual sources. He documents the circumstances of over five thousand individual *agunot*, primarily based on Hebrew-language Eastern European press and rabbinical responsa, although he also draws on European and North American newspapers in Yiddish and English, as well as Russian state sources.

Such documentation is Sperber's primary aim, and the thoroughness of his work will prove invaluable to future researchers. His database tabulates *agunah* cases by decade, noting where possible for each case the source, the reason for *agunut*, the names of both husband and wife, the location, and migration destinations. The first two chapters of his study outline the range of reasons why women became *agunot* and why husbands left their wives without a *get*. Sperber's most central and striking argument here is the unexpectedly complex relationship between individual circumstance and Jewish law; he finds that, in nearly a third of cases, *agunot* were not abandoned by untraceable husbands. Instead, they faced more complex halakhic dilemmas. Take, for example, a widow whose husband's remains could not be identified by a rabbi or whose brothers-in-law refused to permit her to marry again. In both chapters, Sperber provides numerous individual examples that underscore the breadth of situations that placed women in the category of *agunot*.

The rest of the study considers the phenomenon of *agunot* as a bellwether and impetus for changes in Eastern European Jewish society, even as these social changes themselves increased the prevalence and visibility of *agunut*. Over the course of the second half of the nineteenth century, Sperber argues, the decline of traditional rabbinic authority through both the *Haskalah* and Hasidism; the rise of Jewish cultural forums such as press and literature; and increasing nation-state authority over Jewish communities, such as the Russian Empire's new appointment of "state rabbis," all "turned the *agunah* phenomenon from a legal issue into a sociocultural issue" (*Plight*, 64). Indeed, he asserts that "the *agunah* issue played a major role in undermining the authority the rabbinate had in Jewish life" (*Plight*, 69). Attempts to resolve cases of *agunot* sparked clashes between state-backed and community-backed rabbinic authority,

while *agunot* themselves found new secular forums, such as newspaper advertisements seeking missing husbands, that were more responsive to their needs than rabbis, who tended to adhere to the limited options halakhah provided for women. Sperber closes by suggesting additional explanations for the increase in *aginut*, including the onset of mass migration, straitened economic conditions, and the prevalence of relationships in which older husbands left younger wives to raise their (the men's) children from first marriages.

Although Sperber's attention to detail is remarkable, this slim volume would have benefitted from more context to develop his arguments. For instance, he presents his additional explanations for the growth of *aginut*—mass migration, economic conditions, and, most intriguingly, childcare in second marriages—as brief “speculat[ions]” near the end of the monograph, leaving the reader wishing for more details that might confirm or explain these suggestions (*Plight*, 77). Similarly, I wanted more context about the *Plight* of Sperber's title, particularly since the subtitle is *A Social History*. What economic and social conditions did women face, particularly those left to raise their husbands' children from a first marriage, as he notes? Why, in other words, might they be desperate to remarry? Moreover, how did this “plight” vary by region, empire, or nation-state and time period, as the number of Eastern European *aginot* increased?

I also hoped for more substantial discussion of the insights that result from Sperber's methodical categorization of *agunah* cases. The term *agunot* is usually rendered as “deserted wives” in English, including in Sperber's own title. But he tracks numerous cases of *agunot* seeking to divorce husbands who were physically present yet ruled incapable of offering a *get*, for example, because of mental or physical disability or conversion to Christianity. Other historical scholarship on *agunot*, such as by ChaeRan Freeze and Anna Igra, has complicated the framework of “desertion” by emphasizing women's agency in separating from their husbands, particularly in the period immediately after Sperber's study.¹

1 ChaeRan Freeze, *Jewish Marriage and Divorce in Imperial Russia* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2002); Anna Igra, *Wives without Husbands: Marriage, Desertion, and Welfare in New York, 1900–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

How might cases of *agunut* through disability and conversions further reframe “desertion” beyond migration? Moreover, what might such cases tell us about Jewish gender, labor, and family in Eastern Europe more broadly?

Nonetheless, Sperber’s meticulous presentation of his data makes this a vital study that opens up rich possibilities for further research. For instance, while he notes that most husbands left *agunot* in Eastern Europe for the United States or Palestine, his examples and database document a remarkable breadth of migrations to places including Australia, Iraq, Egypt, Paris, India, and Southeast Asia. Did attempts to trace husbands and resolve *agunut* forge Jewish diasporic ties among these far-flung destinations? Scholars and curious readers will find many such new questions and reference points for further research in Sperber’s comprehensive mapping of *agunot* in nineteenth-century Jewish Eastern Europe.

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