Strangers in a Strange Land: Jewish Immigrants in America, 1836-1914

GREER GAMBLE

MHIS305 America and Europe from Colonization to Coca-Colonization: 1492 to the present

Throughout the history of European Christendom, Jews have functioned as the quintessential ‘Others’. Yet on their arrival in the New World, they joined the ranks of other ‘Others’: the maligned Puritan, the persecuted Catholic, the subjugated Irishman, and the African slave. This essay seeks to answer the question of whether European Jews shed their historic “Otherness” in the New World; that is, whether America in the period 1836 to 1914 functioned as many hoped Israel would function in the twentieth century – that is, as an answer to millennia of Old World persecution – or whether the anti-Semitism of Europe was in fact imported into the New World. To answer this question, we will first compare the North American and European Jewish contexts, and conclude that the New World made the ideal sanctuary for persecuted Jews. We will then look at the dynamics of American Judaism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and analyze Anglo-American attitudes towards Jews. From this discussion it will emerge that nineteenth and early twentieth-century Americans, with some reservations, gave Jews a historically unique chance to negotiate their religion and place in society, free of the coercing hand of institutional anti-Semitism that had been their burden since biblical times.

An examination of some of the founding principles of the United States makes clear the ripeness of nineteenth-century America as a Jewish sanctuary. The earliest Puritans fleeing from European persecution had explicitly identified themselves with the children of Israel fleeing from Egypt, and Thomas Jefferson had in fact proposed that the seal of the United States be a picture of the persecuted Israelites.1 Soon afterward came the Bill of Rights, the first Western legal document to fully emancipate the Jews in 1791.2 Of course, it was not aimed at particularly Jewish emancipation, but rather the emancipation of all whites. Yet this non-specificity can be read as favourable to Jewish freedom: the Jew, for

---

once, was not singled out, but rather one of many persecuted minorities that made up early America. While Sephardic Jews, who settled in America in small numbers from 1654, had initially encountered medieval-style anti-Semitic restrictions, like so many vestiges of the Old World these restrictions quickly withered away in the face of the leveling forces of capital.³

The strength of capitalism in the New World would prove a major contributing factor to the desirability of nineteenth and early twentieth-century America as a Jewish haven. This did not escape contemporary Europeans, who would often register the symbiosis between Jewish mercantilism and the American glorification of free trade. An 1804 emigration manual penned in Switzerland could think of no better term than Landjude to describe American ‘land-jobbers’,⁴ while a German anti-immigration pamphlet of 1853 grouped the Jew and the American as non-Europeans and claimed, ‘Americans like Jews consider themselves “the chosen people of Jehovah” and can thus go further than the rest of humanity in trade and haggling.’⁵ According to the same source, ‘both nationalities’ embraced vulgarized capitalism to the detriment of high culture and true refinement, and thus ‘show almost the same liking for bad taste in luxury.’⁶ In fact, in the only two recorded instances of the word ‘Yankee’ being used as a verb in nineteenth-century European literature, it is used synonymously with ‘the Jew’.⁷

‘The Yankee himself,’ wrote the German Franz Loher in 1847, referring to New Englanders, ‘is too Jewish in trade and religion, even for the Jew himself… Nevertheless, the Yankees are founding societies for converting the Jews.’⁸ While this remark does touch on a grain of truth, on the whole it is unsubstantiated by any actual major drives for conversion. For Americans, at least those of the dominant Protestant majority, and Jews shared an aversion to central religious authorities and felt the importance of religious freedom.⁹ For Jews, throughout most of European history— with some notable exceptions— to assimilate has meant to convert, and to convert has meant to become extinct, so intimately connected

⁵ Uber die Auswanderung nach den Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika (Karlsruhe, 1853), quoted in Glanz, 11.
⁶ Uber die..., 68.
⁸ Franz Loher, Geschichte und Zustande der Deutschen in Amerika (Cinncinati, 1847), quoted in Glanz, 12
⁹ Higham, ‘Social Discrimination’, 50.
is Judaism with Jewish peoplehood. Yet in the USA Jews could practice their religion and associate freely, as long as they adhered to the basic tenets of American philosophy. Having discussed and compared the American and European Jewish contexts, and highlighted those commonalities that made them so ripe for mutual beneficence, we shall look at the experiences of actual Jewish immigrants to ascertain whether these fortuitous prospects translated into historical reality.

The first mass migration of Jews to the USA came from Bavaria from 1836, as a result of restrictive taxes, marriage quotas, and an economic slump. Lower-class immigrants began to arrive and were soon followed, in the late 1840s and 1850s, by the Jewish middle-classes from other Germanic states. It was the middle-classes, though the lower classes would soon be converted, who brought with them Reform Judaism. By the end of the eighteenth century in Central Europe many Talmudic laws were no longer observed, and seemed to many middle-class Jews to exist solely as a source of embarrassment and a handicap to acceptance by the Gentile middle-classes. So it was that by the 1810s, Reform Judaism in Germany had replaced Hebrew prayer services with German, employed a preacher in line with contemporary Protestant churches, and had even begun to use an organ in services. Reform Judaism was actually more successful when imported to America, as it did not have to battle with an established, traditional synagogue authority, as did its German brand.

As Reform took hold of the immigrant population— by 1881, 200 major congregations existed in the USA only 12 of which were still Orthodox— changes became more radical. Elements of Mosaic law that seemed premodern were dispensed with, and for the first time the project of Israel was abandoned: a rabbinical conference in Philadelphia under the influential Samuel Hirsch in 1869 declared that ‘the Messianic aim of Israel is not the restoration of the old Jewish state... but the union of all the children of God’, and a Pittsburgh conference in 1885 under Kaufman Kohler confirmed the Reform platform:

---

11 Glazer, American Judaism, 31.
12 Glazer, American Judaism, 25-7.
13 Glazer, American Judaism, 28.
14 Glazer, American Judaism, 33.
15 Glazer, American Judaism, 38.
16 Qtd. in David Philipson, The Reform Movement in Judaism (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 357.
We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine... nor the restoration of any laws concerning the Jewish state.\textsuperscript{17}

Thus the project of Israel was abandoned and the diaspora embraced, for, according the 1869 conference, it was the ‘the divine purpose’ to disperse ‘the Jews to all parts of the world... to lead the nations to the true knowledge and worship of God’.\textsuperscript{18} One can almost discern traces of popular nineteenth-century Protestant evangelism here, and certainly in the following statement, though it was made earlier, in 1831, by the Reformed Society of Israelites, describing themselves thus: ‘They subscribe to nothing of rabbinical interpretation... They are their own teachers, drawing their knowledge from the Bible.’\textsuperscript{19}

In social terms as well as religious, Reform Jews assimilated easily into American society. Jewish immigrants tended to scatter into small communities made up of other nationalities, some of which they helped to found, as opposed to conglomerating in ghettos. But lest we begin to believe that the German Jewish immigrants flourished in America only because of the Reform brand’s similarities to Protestantism, and the immigrants’ demographically unthreatening dispersal, let us look at another Jewish immigrant population, who did conglomerate and who were decidedly not Protestant.

Whereas German Reform Jews clearly felt that assimilation was a possibility, and indeed were often admitted into German salons and intellectual circles,\textsuperscript{20} the opposite was true of Orthodox Eastern European Jews. This population was highly insular and generally had little to do with the Gentile world. There was no such thing as a Jewish middle class in the Pale of Settlement, anti-Semitic economic and educational restrictions having coerced the Jewish population into the position of a proletariat.\textsuperscript{21} Reform, owing to the anti-Semitic policies of successive tsars of the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century, was impossible. In these extreme circumstances, change meant total denunciation of religion.\textsuperscript{22} Thus there existed an Orthodox population remarkable not only in Jewish but world history for its

\textsuperscript{17} Qutd. in Glazer, \textit{American Judaism}, 42.
\textsuperscript{18} Qutd. in Philipson, \textit{The Reform Movement in Judaism}, 357.
\textsuperscript{19} Qutd. in Barnett A. Elzas, \textit{The Jews of South Carolina} (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1905), 160
\textsuperscript{21} Glazer, \textit{American Judaism}, 64-5.
\textsuperscript{22} Glazer, \textit{American Judaism}, 63.
religiosity, living alongside its apostates, who were equally remarkable for their radicalism, which could encompass Zionism, socialism, nihilism and anarchism.  

Eastern European Jews began to flock en masse to the USA and elsewhere as a result of the May Laws of 1882 which radically restricted Jewish freedom of movement and commerce within the Pale, and successive pogroms across Russia, Poland and other Eastern states which continued well into the twentieth century. From 1880 to 1924, one and three-quarter of a million Jews migrated from Eastern Europe to the United States, most before 1914. Unlike their German coreligionists, who tended to be politically progressive on account of the association between conservatism and anti-Semitism in their native land, the Orthodox immigrants could not be described as ‘liberal’ in the American sense: they were either radical or highly traditional. They did not spread out into the South, West and mid-West, to join and sometimes help to found American communities, as the Germans had done, but concentrated in ghettos along the eastern seaboard. Initially they remained a proletariat, unlike the by-now prosperous German Jews, many of whom now employed Orthodox labour in their factories. Though often employed by Reformed Jews, Orthodox immigrants considered Reformed Jews to be little better than Gentiles, whereas their radical compatriots of course scorned the Germans’ bourgeois, exploitative lifestyles. In their turn, German Jews were scared of the immigrants’ poverty, religiosity, and radical politics, and the detrimental effect they may have, by association, on the more established Jewish population.

Yet the sheer force of America, of co-existence, of capitalism, soon eroded these differences. Eastern European Jews began to prosper at the turn of the century and thus economically joined the ranks of the earlier German migrants. As they aspired to reach their coreligionists on economic terms, their coreligionists were often inspired by them in turn. Consider the case of Sioux City, Iowa, which in the late nineteenth century was home to a small population of German Jews, who had built no temple of their own, but served on the board of Sioux City’s Unitarian Church. Yet soon after Eastern European immigrants began

---

23 Glazer, American Judaism, 63.
25 Glazer, American Judaism, 60.
26 Glazer, American Judaism, 30.
27 Glazer, American Judaism, 61.
28 Glazer, American Judaism, 61.
29 Glazer, American Judaism, 66.
to arrive in the 1880s, and built an Orthodox synagogue in 1888, the existing German Jewish population built their own Reform temple, in 1901. One can speculate that they had been in some sense ‘shamed’ into a re-embrace of Judaism.

The Orthodox population had initially tried to implement a central community leadership under Rabbi Jacob Joseph, who was imported from Vilna for the purpose. Due to opposition from higher-class and more radical Jews however, the plan failed and so congregational independence, which had always been the rule in North America, remained. Talmudic education had been thorough in Eastern Europe, yet the emphasis placed on rituals and practices, to the expense of theology, meant that away from a central community the number of those professing Orthodox beliefs quickly subsided. With time Zionism also became less and less influential among Orthodox immigrants, in line with a general Jewish trend which saw the Central Conference of American Rabbis declare in 1897: ‘We totally disapprove of any attempt to establish a Jewish state.’ Even so, radicalism remained attractive to the immigrants, many of the children of whom would drop their parents’ Orthodoxy in exchange for radical politics and intensive education: ‘The Jewish children,’ wrote an Industrial Commission Report in 1900 in reference to ‘low schools’ in Orthodox ghettos, ‘are the delight of their teachers for cleverness at their books, obedience and general good conduct.’

In nineteenth-century America, Reform and Orthodox Jews could publicly debate and influence each other. Freedom of movement meant that Jews could disperse and absorb themselves into small communities, if they liked, or concentrate in ghettos, if they liked (although of course this was often due to economic necessity). This freedom to negotiate place and identity could have been possible only in an environment that lacked the institutional anti-Semitism of the Old World. But we must ask, although institutionally anti-Semitism did not hinder the Jew’s prosperity or happiness, what of social anti-Semitism? Had that prejudice, like anti-Catholicism, been transplanted into the New World, or did institutional emancipation reflect real attitudes and social realities? We must answer

---

30 Glazer, American Judaism, 101.
31 Glazer, American Judaism, 70.
32 Glazer, American Judaism, 67.
this question in order to ascertain whether nineteenth and early twentieth-century America was, *de facto* as well as *de jure*, a sanctuary for the European Jew.

John Higham asks whether, in light of successful postwar Jewish integration, we should consider historic American anti-Semitism as the result not of the incompatibility of specific Jewish traits with specific American traits, but rather as the result of peculiar historical circumstances.36 This essay basically subscribes to Higham’s view, in that the discrimination experienced by Jews in nineteenth-century America was comparable with and often smaller in scale than the discrimination experienced by groups such as the Catholics, who were a more important target than the Jews of the Ku Klux Klan’s ire until the early twentieth century.37 This is because specifically anti-Jewish ideologies never took much hold in America, due, as has been hypothesized earlier in the essay, to the leveling influences of capitalism, and the historical compatibility of Jewish and American aspirations. This is not to say that ideological anti-Semitism did not exist at all in the nineteenth century. Agrarian anti-Semitism was often expressed by rural Americans, who felt that Jews were parasitic and not productive: ‘They will not sit down and labor like other people— they create nothing and are mere consumers,’ complained the *Niles Weekly Register* in 1820, ‘preferring to live by their wit in dealing, and acting as if they had a home nowhere.’38 Yet this sentiment tended to be expressed by alienated, marginalized groups excluded from the success engendered by America’s industrialization, and is thus not necessarily reflective of mainstream America.39 Still, accusations of ritual murder were not unheard of, and were reported even in major organs like the New York *Herald*,40 and anti-Semitic ballads such as ‘The Jew’s Daughter’ remained popular after the turn of the century in rural America.41 Similarly, as Higham notes, the earliest American plays with Jewish characters always portrayed them in Shylock-like lights, and by the 1840s ‘to Jew’ was common slang.42 Yet this essay argues that the stereotype of ‘The Jew’ actually coexisted with acceptance of real-life Jews. Consider the Klan’s efforts to enforce boycotts of local Jewish stores in rural America in the early 1900s, which failed miserably because though supporters of the Klan

38 Editorial, *Niles Weekly Register* 7 (October 1820), 114
39 Higham, “American Anti-Semitism,” 248
40 Editorial, New York *Herald* April 6 1850, 1
42 Higham, “Social Discrimination,” 5
subscribed to its anti-Semitic ideology, they trusted and peacefully coexisted with their actual Jewish neighbours.\footnote{Higham, “American Anti-Semitism,” 249}

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, social anti-Semitism was becoming less of a vague abstraction. A growing gap between America’s rich and poor in the new industrial economy, and an influx of \textit{nouveau riches}, led to a heightened emphasis on social status among society’s middle and upper echelons.\footnote{Higham, “Social Discrimination,” 8-10} While Jews had never been subject to the kind of economic discrimination experienced by groups like the Irish (who were often warned ‘Irish Need Not Apply’ in job advertisements\footnote{Higham, “Social Discrimination,” 29}), they began to be subjected to growing social exclusion, as money ceased to be the all-important marker of status and the emphasis shifted to etiquette, culture, and genealogy.\footnote{Higham, “Social Discrimination,” 10} Having often come from a poor, uneducated background, the \textit{nouveau rich} Jew was seen as loud, unrefined and ostentatiously rich. Even philo-Semites like Anna Laurens Dawes, author of the 1884 \textit{The Modern Jew}, remarked that the Jewish immigrant had ‘the half education and the little breeding of the small trader. When such a man becomes very rich,’ she observed, ‘he naturally assumes the manners of the peacock, and receives the usual dislike of that bird among his fellows.’\footnote{Anna Laurens Dawes, \textit{The Modern Jew: His Present and Future} (Boston: D. Lothrop, 1884), 29-30} Yet the Jew was not alone here, and the upper and middle classes of America tended to categorize all wealthy European immigrants, Gentile or otherwise, as ‘vulgar arrivistes’ who lacked the dignity and refinement which were apparently unique to the Anglo-Saxon races.\footnote{Higham, “Social Discrimination,” 9} However, incidents such as the Saratoga resort’s refusal to accommodate wealthy banker Joseph Seligman in 1877 show us that the Jew bore the brunt of these prejudices. Interestingly, however, Saratoga by this time was not a hot spot for ‘High Society’, but a rather flashy and cheap destination, and Higham has demonstrated that anti-Semitism was far more pronounced in cheaper lodging houses in this period, thus exposing a link between socio-economic insecurity and anti-Semitism not unique to America.\footnote{Higham, “Social Discrimination,” 11-12} Yet in America, Jews had recourse to an action unavailable to them in most of Europe: in 1913 the American Jewish Committee successfully petitioned the New York
legislature for a civil rights bill forbidding public accommodation advertisements from restricting on the basis of ‘race, color, or creed’.\footnote{Higham, “Social Discrimination,” 16}

It is clear that some vestiges of ideological anti-Semitism from the Old World did remain in nineteenth and early twentieth-century America. Yet they tended to coexist with day-to-day acceptance of Jews, and importantly, never escalated into pogroms or violent riots. Where tensions did arise, they were generally grounded in historical circumstance and anti-immigrant prejudice, rather than ideological anti-Semitism.

This essay has aimed to show the ways late nineteenth and early twentieth-century America functioned as a haven for persecuted European Jewry. We have looked at the fortuitous circumstances in American history that carved it out as a nation peculiar to nineteenth-century Western civilization in its capacity for tolerance. We have compared the experiences of Jewish immigrants in their nations of origin, where institutional anti-Semitism abounded, with their experiences in America, which nation’s institutions lacked the same prejudice, towards Jews at least. The comparison made clear that free of institutional shackles, Jews from Germany and Eastern Europe were able to negotiate their social, religious, and economic identities in such a way as to create a thriving and flourishing culture. While social anti-Semitism did exist, particularly towards the end of our period of study, this essay has argued that it was not rooted in ideology or historic animosity, but rather in transitory historical circumstances. As such it did not, and perhaps will not, present a major roadblock to the idea of America as an alternative Zion for the European Jewish people.

**Bibliography**

**Primary Sources**


*Uber die Auswanderung nach ben Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika*. Karlsruhe, 1853.
*Yearbook of the Central Conference of American Rabbis*. VIII. 1897.

**Secondary Sources**