

# SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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## Book Reviews

**Cotton Capitalists: American Jewish Entrepreneurship in the Reconstruction Era.** By Michael R. Cohen. New York: New York University Press, 2017. 259 pages.

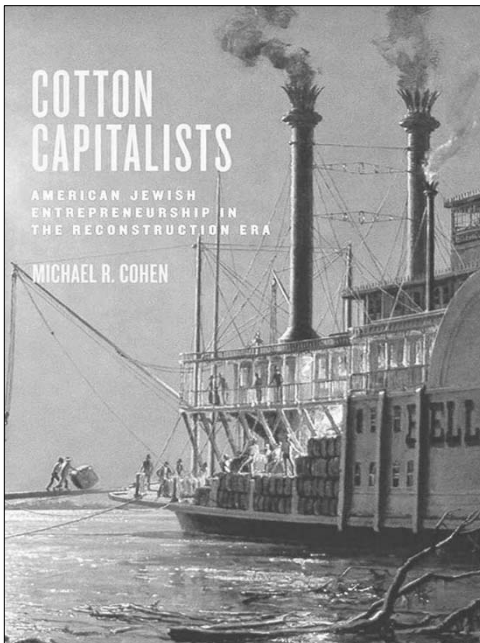
One of the most famous events in the history of American antisemitism occurred on December 17, 1862, when General Ulysses S. Grant, commander of Union forces in the Department of the Tennessee, issued General Order No. 11. The order expelled all Jews from the territory under Grant's command, which then encompassed Kentucky and parts of Illinois, Missouri, Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee. "The Jews, as a class violating every regulation of trade established by the Treasury Department and also department orders," it read, "are hereby expelled from the department within twenty-four hours from the receipt of this order." President Lincoln immediately rescinded the order. As Jonathan D. Sarna reports in *When General Grant Expelled the Jews* (22), Henry W. Halleck, General-in-Chief of all Union armies, explained to Grant that the president did not object to "expelling traitors and Jew peddlers, which, I suppose, was the object of your order; but, as it in terms proscribed an entire religious class, some of whom are fighting in our ranks, the President deemed it necessary to revoke it." Grant, in fact, was not an antisemite, and his order merely reflected the conventional wisdom of the time that equated "Jew peddlers" with unscrupulous business practices, particularly smuggling.

But did his order exaggerate the centrality of Jews to the southern economy and their prominence in smuggling? To answer these and other questions, historians are now able to turn to Michael R. Cohen's *Cotton Capitalists*. It chronicles the role that Jews played in the southern economy during the Civil War and Reconstruction, particularly, as mentioned in his book's title, in the marketing of cotton, the South's major cash

crop. A professor of history at Tulane University and chairman of its Jewish studies program, Cohen earned his Ph.D. in history at Brandeis University, where he was a student of Sarna, the leading contemporary historian of American Jewry. Cohen's first book, *The Birth of Conservative Judaism: Solomon Schechter's Disciples and the Creation of an American Religious Movement* (2012), astutely analyzed Conservative Judaism's early years and marked him as a scholar to be watched.

The engrossing and well-written *Cotton Capitalists* is his second book, and he has not disappointed. It is highly readable, solidly grounded in a wide-ranging reading of primary and secondary sources, sober in its conclusions, and deserving of a wide audience of professional historians and general readers alike, especially those interested in the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction. The history of the South's cotton industry in the latter half of the nineteenth century and of the cotton Jews constitutes an important story that Cohen has told well.

Cotton was the key raw material in the textile factories responsible for much of the rapid industrialization which swept across western Europe and the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century, and nowhere was the cultivation of cotton as productive, profitable,



and central to the local economy as in the Deep South. Cohen's book focuses on Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and part of Arkansas, and here cotton was the leading source of wealth and the determinant of social values. In the two decades prior to the Civil War the value of cotton shipped along the Mississippi River alone increased by forty times, from fifty million dollars to two billion.

Although Jews comprised less than one-third of one percent of the general population in the cotton

South during the 1860s, their importance was disproportionate to their numbers. Except for the actual cultivation of cotton, they were significant in all aspects of the industry during the Civil War and Reconstruction. According to Cohen, Jews were "at the forefront of global capitalist expansion for much of the second half of the nineteenth century" (2). Jewish-owned stores and wholesale firms were ubiquitous in the market towns of the region, purchasing cotton from farmers and providing them the goods and credit without which the local economy could not function. These Jews were primarily immigrants from central Europe, and their involvement in the cotton economy was shaped by informal familial, ethnic, and religious ties. The trust necessary for successful economic relationships came easier when southern Jews were dealing with Jewish exporters, merchants, and bankers both within and outside the South, or with family members who had been sent to northern cities, particularly New York, to represent their interests.

The towns that are featured in Cohen's book were centers of cotton commerce such as Greenville, Natchez, and Vicksburg in Mississippi and Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Bayou Sara, and Shreveport in Louisiana. These communities were located along navigable rivers or were serviced by railroads and were close to centers of cotton production. Cohen calculates that antebellum Jews owned approximately 40 percent of the general stores in these towns. These merchants included Charles Hoffman, Abraham Levy, and Julius Freyhan of Bayou Sara; the Seligman family of Selma and Mobile, Alabama; Isidor and Herman Weil of Opelika, Alabama; Isaac Friedler of Vidalia, Louisiana; Edward and Benjamin Jacobs and Simon Herold of Shreveport; Leopold Wilczinski of Greenville; Levi Lowenberg of Vicksburg; Joseph and Leon Baum of Meridian, Mississippi; Henry Frank, Simon Jacobs, and Isaac Lowenburg of Natchez; Samuel Bernheimer of Port Gibson, Mississippi; Emile Schaefer of Yazoo City, Mississippi; Simon Seelig of Helena, Arkansas; Gabe Meyer of Pine Bluff, Arkansas; and Isaias Meyer, Moses Mann, and Julius Weis of New Orleans. Marriage frequently strengthened the religious and ethnic bonds among these families.

Financial success frequently correlated with social and political prominence; and it was not uncommon for these businessmen to be elected mayors and legislators, to be among the leading philanthropists of their communities, and to win the esteem of gentiles. For example,

T. H. Watts, the wartime governor of Alabama, praised Mayer Lehman as a man “of established character and one of the best Southern patriots . . . and is thoroughly identified with [the Confederate cause]” (76).

The cotton Jews created what Cohen calls a “niche economy,” which was not unusual. Jews also played predominant roles in other niche industries, including the production and marketing of feathers, liquor, jewelry, chickens and eggs, and clothing. Other American ethnic groups have had their own niches as well, such as Asian Indians in motels and convenience stores, Vietnamese in nail salons, and Chinese in dry cleaning and restaurants. Historians and sociologists have long debated the economic and social reasons why certain groups have gravitated to entrepreneurship in general and distinct areas of the economy in particular, and Cohen is undoubtedly correct in identifying one explanation for the success of the cotton Jews as their commercial connections with other Jews. He recounts occasions when the credit provided by this ethnic network enabled Jewish businessmen to survive while their gentile competitors in the cotton economy went bankrupt.

Other elements also help explain the disproportionate number of Jewish merchants in the region. Few barriers impeded the decision to become a merchant in the South. Start-up expenses were small. Prizing economic independence, Jews had a long history of involvement in business. Antisemitism also encouraged Jews to concentrate in niche sectors of the economy and to deal with one another. Distrust of Jews was widespread throughout America during the mid-nineteenth century, and the most common antisemitic canard at this time focused on their supposedly questionable business practices. One credit report described a prominent southern Jewish mercantile family as “trustworthy as it is possible for Jews to be” and “an exception to the race, being [considered] honest” (50).

Among the most interesting chapters in *Cotton Capitalists* is its account of the Lehman brothers—Emanuel, Henry, and Mayer—of Montgomery, Alabama. The profits from their dry goods store enabled them to purchase slaves, buy local real estate, and establish Lehman Brothers, their private investment bank. Most of the bank’s operations moved to New York City in 1865, with important family cotton enterprises remaining in Montgomery and New Orleans. Lehman Brothers provided capital to scores of cotton merchants, most of whom were Jews.

Part of this capital had been generated by their businesses, and part was funneled through Lehman Brothers from European and New York Jewish-owned banks such as Hallgarten, Lazard Frères, J. W. Seligman, M. & M. Warburg, and Kuhn, Loeb. Through such connections, Cohen says, Lehman Brothers “assumed an essential role in an ethnic economy that connected these businesses with the capital and credit they needed to thrive” (151).

Jewish merchants who had their own capital or who could tap Lehman Brothers and other sources for credit were able to recover from the devastation of the Civil War and become significant figures in the post-1865 cotton industry. By World War I, however, the economic importance of the Jewish cotton niche had virtually disappeared. Cohen’s penultimate chapter discusses the broad economic reasons for the marginalization of cotton merchants, including the vicissitudes of the business cycle, the emergence of investment banking, the rise of impersonal cotton exchanges, the growth of new cotton-growing regions in Asia, Africa, and the American Southwest, periodic floods and insect infestation, particularly the boll weevil, and the competition of mail-order companies such as Sears, Roebuck. “Networks of trust, which had been a competitive advantage for ethnic minorities in the industry,” Cohen concludes, “began to lose their importance, overtaken by more impersonal cotton exchanges and state bureaucracy” (181). The “Jew store” remained part of the southern landscape, but the era of the Jewish niche economy in cotton had ended.

But other factors, which Cohen mentions but does not examine in depth, were at work as well. The small size of the Jewish population of the cotton towns, the lack of Jewish educational and religious facilities, the shortage of suitable Jewish marriage partners, and the greater economic and social opportunities offered to younger Jews by industrialization and urbanization inevitably hollowed out the Jewish population and the ethnic and religious identity on which the distinctive Jewish networks rested. The historian Eli N. Evans famously argued that the central theme of the southern Jewish experience is the fact that businessmen built enterprises of which their children wanted no part. This was certainly true of the cotton South.

*Cotton Capitalists* provides more than a chronicle of mercantile Jews in the postbellum South. Cohen’s book also offers a paradigm for inter-



preting economic history in which ethnicity looms large. The history of these merchants shows that “ethnic networks fostered the trust upon which capitalism relied” (202). If the postbellum economy influenced Jews, they, in turn, shaped the economy through an ethnic economic network based on trust. The relationship between the South and its Jews was symbiotic, with each side influencing and being influenced by the other. And if this niche economy was pivotal to the development of modern industrial capitalism, then, by implication, so might be the economic networks of other ethnic groups. *Cotton Capitalists* thus challenges conventional economic historians to realize that their subject cannot be confined to the economy.

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**The Jews of Key West: Smugglers, Cigar Makers, and Revolutionaries, 1823–1969.** By Arlo Haskell. Key West, FL: Sand Paper Press, 2017. 200 pages.

In seven lavishly illustrated chapters, Arlo Haskell, the executive director of the Key West Literary Seminar, explores a century and a half of Jewish life in the nation’s southernmost city, an exotic locale known as the “Conch Republic.” Written in a highly accessible style, this welcome addition to southern Jewish historiography introduces a fascinating cast of characters, revealing a unique saga of Jewish community life that no previous historian has chronicled. Florida State University has awarded Haskell’s book the prestigious 2017 Phillip and Dana Zimmerman Gold Medal for Florida Nonfiction.

The opening chapter, “Sailors and Merchants, 1823–1862,” traces the antebellum roots of a small group of Jewish settlers who migrated to Key West prior to the Civil War. The first of these settlers was Levi Charles Harby, a Charleston, South Carolina, native who served as a sailing master in Commodore David Porter’s antipiracy squadron. But the most influential member of Key West’s nascent Jewish community was Moses Cohen Mordecai, another transplanted South Carolinian, who established the town’s first regular mail service in 1848. A decade later he was joined by Key West’s first Jewish merchants, Mordecai Abraham

“Max” White and Samuel Cline, partners who prospered in a distinctive local economy that relied heavily on salvaging shipwrecks and clandestine involvement in the illegal slave trade.

The second chapter, “Jewish Cigar City, 1867–1886,” documents Jewish involvement in late nineteenth-century Key West’s most dynamic industry: cigar making. Often characterized as a Cuban-based enterprise, cigar making in Key West was, as Haskell demonstrates, “a Jewish story almost as much as . . . a Cuban one” (29). The story began with Samuel Seidenberg, a German-born, New York tobacco wholesaler, who moved to the island in 1867. A decade later, in partnership with another German-born Jew named Samuel Wolf, Seidenberg had become the nation’s largest manufacturer of cigars. In 1880, a poor investment decision drove the partners into bankruptcy, but other Jewish cigar manufacturers soon picked up the slack, including Pincus and David Pohalski, brothers who developed the massive Monte Cristo factory and the adjacent Pohalski City, a company town with more than three hundred residents. As Haskell points out, although Seidenberg and the Pohalskis were generally “known as powerful capitalists, not as Jews,” their activities led to a considerable expansion of Key West Jewry (37).

Chapter 3 focuses on peddlers and shopkeepers from 1886 to 1893, when local Jewish institutions emerged—notably a Jewish cemetery, an organization known as the Jewish Alliance, and Congregation B’nai Zion. The early 1890s arrival of Louis Fine, a grocer, dry goods salesman, and *shochet* from Vilnius, Lithuania, marked the beginning of organized Jewish religious life in Key West. His lay leadership ultimately led in 1904 to the building of the first synagogue, which later housed Roidef Sulim, a congregation derived from B’nai Zion.

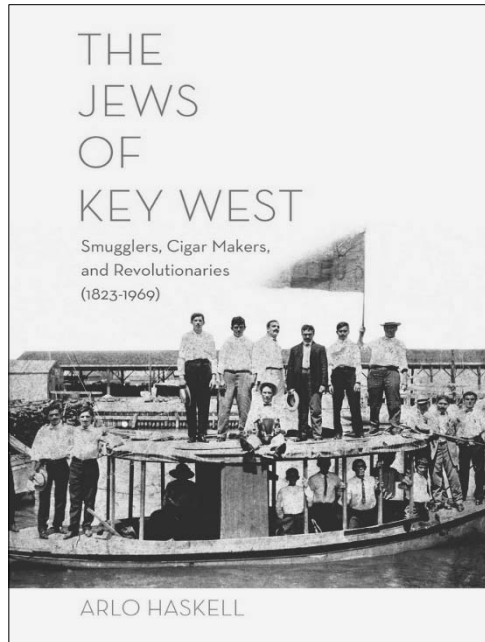
Fine was one of several prominent Key West Jews who became passionately devoted to the war for Cuban independence during the 1890s. Chapter 4, “Jewish Revolutionaries, 1892–1898,” examines the close relationship between Cuban expatriates, especially José Martí, and their Key West Jewish allies. Fine and several other Jewish “filibusterers” smuggled arms for the Cuban revolutionaries and openly supported the Cuban liberation struggle.

Chapter 5, by far the longest chapter of the book, chronicles the maturation of “A Flourishing Jewish Community, 1900–1919.” With help from the New York-based Industrial Removal Office (IRO), the

population of the local Jewish community increased from 158 in 1905 to more than 200 by the close of World War I. The community experienced commercial expansion and growing selfconsciousness as a part of a dynamic early twentieth-century town, but also suffered from a devastating hurricane in 1909 and rising prohibitionist sentiment that threatened Jewish merchants' reliance on the liquor trade.

Chapter 6, "Smugglers and Aliens, 1918–1939," covers the difficult eras of the tribal Twenties and the Great Depression. The xenophobic and antisemitic excesses of the 1920s, fueled by the rise of the second Ku Klux Klan, placed considerable pressure on Key West's Jewish community, including the fostering of illegal Jewish migration from Cuba. Combined with the imposition of Prohibition, the smuggling of Jewish refugees pushed a number of Key West Jews into alliances with notorious Cuban traffickers. Even so, smugglers such as Samuel Weisstein, Abraham Leibovit, and Rabbi Lazarus Schulsinger became folk heroes to many Key West Jews. Set against the backdrop of severe restrictions on immigration to the United States and the rising totalitarianism in Europe—a dark reality dramatized by the nearby Caribbean standoff that prevented the refugee ship *SS St. Louis* from reaching its destination in 1939—the attempt to bring Jewish refugees to Key West was, as Haskell argues, a heroic expression of community will and human compassion.

The final chapter, "Renaissance: 1939–1969," offers a brief extension of the saga of Key West Jewry. Unfortunately, ten pages of text are not enough to do justice to three decades of history. This chapter has a tacked-on quality that detracts from the otherwise balanced approach that characterizes the rest of the book. Key West has experienced enor-



mous change since 1939, developing into a major tourist destination, as Robert Kerstein's excellent 2012 monograph, *Key West on the Edge: Inventing the Conch Republic*, demonstrates. Kerstein's work does not appear in Haskell's bibliography; nor does Maureen Ogle's groundbreaking narrative, *Key West: History of an Island of Dreams* (2003).

There is much to admire in *The Jews of Key West*, including its imaginative use of local archival records. Yet a more comprehensive examination of contextual sources such as Kerstein's and Ogle's, not to mention the broader literature on the Caribbean borderlands, almost certainly would have taken the book to a higher level of sophistication.

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**Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America.** By Shari Rabin. New York: New York University Press, 2017. 192 pages.

*Jews on the Frontier* begins with a brief account of the life of Edward Rosewater, a Bohemia-born Jew who was raised in Cleveland and who, having learned telegraphy, wandered around Kentucky, Missouri, Tennessee, Alabama, and the District of Columbia before finally settling down in Nebraska. This is an appropriate opening for the book because the volume's main thesis is that the unfettered mobility of Jews in nineteenth-century America was the primary factor in shaping the distinctive nature of their religion. More specifically, the book's author, Shari Rabin of the College of Charleston, contends that during the six decades or so before 1880, the Jews in America "did not assimilate" but rather developed "new, more expansive standards" for living Jewish lives "on the road" (8). Readers of *Southern Jewish History* will be especially interested in Rabin's book because the Jewish experience in the South was frequently the kind of itinerant or small-town experience that is the focus of this work.

Rabin's volume is divided into three main sections, each comprised of two chapters. The first section considers the legal status of the Jews in America, contrasting it with the status of Jews in Europe and emphasize-

ing how the acceptance of Jews as white and the general lack of restrictions on Jewish mobility and settlement in the United States promoted an individualism essentially unknown in Europe. This first section also considers how Jewish mobility not only provided Jews with a sense of freedom and with economic opportunities, but also created situations in which they could feel isolated and lonely. In order to mitigate these negative consequences of mobility and to stabilize their identity as Jews, Rabin explains, those in the hinterland adopted a variety of strategies: they found companionship with non-Jews, sought out coreligionists even where these were few and far between, read the Jewish press, joined mutual aid societies and America's nascent Jewish fraternal organizations like the B'nai B'rith (founded in 1843), gathered for informal prayer services, and ultimately established new congregations. In other words, the mobile Jews of the nineteenth century adopted a wide range of innovative approaches to dealing with new realities and complexities.

The second part of Rabin's book explores the impact of mobility on Jewish family life, material culture, and popular theological thinking. It explores the ways in which new forms of what Rabin calls "Jewish authenticity" (8) emerged from the experiences of Jews on the move. This part of the book examines, for example, how American Jews came to rely on individual preferences and on American law even more than on halacha in matters of courtship, marriage, and divorce, and it considers how Jews who lacked the "materials of traditional Judaism," (78) such as Torah scrolls, prayer books, and kosher meat, developed new criteria for what constituted legitimate Jewish practice. The behaviors and the views adopted by mobile Jews, Rabin argues, "fueled the creation of new Jewish ideologies—including Reform Judaism—not the other way around" (80). So, too, the situation of Jews in the hinterland encouraged an emphasis on the spirit of Judaism rather than on its rituals and practices.

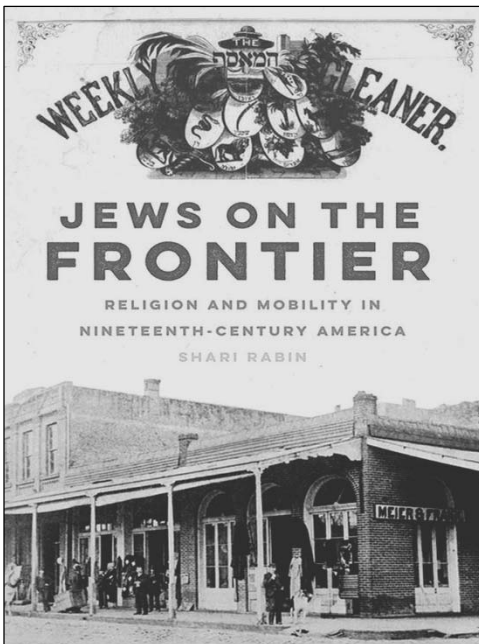
Finally, part three of *Jews on the Frontier* follows some of the key figures of nineteenth-century American Judaism such as rabbis Isaac Mayer Wise and Isaac Leeser as they sought to bring a certain order to the somewhat chaotic nature of the Judaism that was developing in the United States. They saw a need for both institutional formalization and ideological uniformity. Thus Wise, for example, created a new syna-

gogue ritual called *Minhag America*, embodied in a new prayer book that he hoped would be adopted as the standard throughout the United States, and he worked to create a Union of American Hebrew Congregations that would serve as a network linking all American synagogues together. Those seeking to impose order on American Judaism were only partially successful, but their efforts bore some fruit and their labors help to illuminate some of the difficulties American Jewish leaders faced.

Occasionally Rabin attempts to place the history she has studied in a larger context, arguing that the Jewish experience in the United States reflects the history of nineteenth-century religion in America more generally. She asserts that the story of all American religions in that century is one of a search for identity and stability in a nation of mobile strangers. Indeed, Rabin floats the idea that “the mobile Jew, selectively revealing, expressing, and creating religion as he goes” might be seen as the “archetypical religious American” (9).

Rabin’s approach to understanding the development of American Judaism in the nineteenth century is innovative, insightful, and very helpful. Deservedly, *Jews on the Frontier* has been widely praised: it won the 2017 National Jewish Book Award in the category of American Jewish

Studies and was a finalist for the Jewish Book Council’s Sami Rohr Prize. Nonetheless, Rabin’s study is not without its weaknesses. For one thing, some of its author’s assertions are simply too absolute. This is the case, for instance, when, completely discounting influences that other scholars have identified as factors in shaping American Judaism, Rabin contends that the development of the religious lives of nineteenth-century American Jews “were not cases of secularization, assimilation, or Protestantiza-



tion, but rather were reactions to the profound effects of their unfettered mobility" (143). Would it not have been more reasonable to suggest that the new Judaism created by nineteenth-century American Jews resulted not only from secularization, assimilation, or Protestantization, but also (or, even more so) from the effects of their unfettered mobility?

Another shortcoming of this volume is its general failure to substantiate the quantitative generalizations it makes with reference to concrete numerical data. Early in her book, Rabin explains that she has "largely avoid[ed] quantitative data," opting instead to base her narrative on "the lived complexity and ambivalence of individual Jewish lives" (6). Certainly, anecdotal information about individual lives can be interesting and enlightening, but without quantitative data any observations about extent or frequency must remain vague and open to question. Statements such as "many far-flung Jews made Christian friends" or that in "many small communities" Jews and Christians were entirely integrated (36) beg for some confirmation on the basis of quantifiable information. And how can Rabin possibly be so certain that "throughout the country, congregational women . . . attended worship in larger numbers than did men" (45) or that "often corpses had to await their relocation to Jewish burying grounds" (74) without recourse to numerical data? In the few cases where Rabin does report specific numbers, her claims are much more convincing. Thus, when she observes that "in 1840 there were 18 formal Jewish congregations in the United States, in 1850 there were at least 76, and by 1877 there were no less than 277," readers can understand exactly what the author means when she writes that during the middle decades of the nineteenth century, "more and more congregations were founded and managed to persist" (42).

The decision to avoid the use of quantitative data is rather surprising in light of the fact that Rabin herself has recognized the significance of data collection for an understanding of developments in nineteenth-century American Judaism. In a recent article in the journal *American Jewish History* she shows how Jewish leaders came to appreciate the importance of what they called "statistics," and she goes so far as to assert that the collection of demographic data, rather than the creation of Reform Judaism, is the lasting legacy of the nineteenth century. Admittedly, numerical information concerning many of the topics Rabin

explores may be difficult or impossible to locate, but this should only have made her somewhat more circumspect in her assertions.

Despite the limitations related to quantification in her study, Rabin has done a great service by focusing new attention on the nineteenth-century as the formative period for American Judaism. She has made a major contribution to American Jewish history by mining a variety of sources for information about the lives of individual Jews, especially those who were pioneers as Jewish settlement spread across America. Just as importantly, she has focused attention on aspects of nineteenth-century American Jewish history that have been largely overlooked in the past, chief among these being the profound influence of mobility on the American Jewish experience.

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