

Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America

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and cutoffs, photographs and illustrations, a lengthy bibliography, and explanatory introductions and footnotes. It is an impressive effort and, like the earlier volumes produced in this series, an important addition to trail studies.

Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America, by Shari Rabin. North American Religions Series. New York: New York University Press, 2017. viii, 193 pp. Notes, index. \$37.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Hasia R. Diner is professor of history and of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University (NYU), and she directs NYU's Center for American Jewish History. Her books include *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000* (2006) and *Her Works Praise Her: A History of Jewish Women in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (2002).

In this compact but geographically far-ranging book Shari Rabin set out to accomplish three scholarly ends, all of which expand understanding of American and American Jewish history. *Jews on the Frontier*, a straightforward title, looks at the experiences of the Jews who immigrated to the United States in the nineteenth century, during the decades flanking the Civil War, and who spread out beyond the Appalachian Mountains, crossed the Mississippi River, and penetrated in all directions, going to nearly every state and territory in the lands that opened up for the United States during its continental conquest. Most arrived as young men who took up the occupation of on-the-road peddlers and then graduated from peddling to entrepreneurship. Most did reasonably well economically, while a few succeeded spectacularly. As white men, they encountered no legal obstacles as they scouted out the most attractive places for business in this vast terrain.

Rabin's goals grew out of this historical reality about Jewish migration and mobility. In the places they went, they found no laws limiting them and no pre-existing Jewish institutional infrastructure. They came to these places as the first Jews, and whatever they might want of a Jewish life they had to do for themselves.

As a book of religious history, *Jews on the Frontier* considers religion not as a normative matter. Rather it places it in the realm of lived experience. Religion, Rabin shows as she charts physical movement and its impact on European immigrant Jews in the five decades from the 1820s to the 1870s, functioned as something they lived with. They did so by choice and not because they had to. How they engaged with religion did not rest exclusively with the dictates of rabbis or with the inherited laws of the past. Not that clergy did not show up on the frontier or that

Jews did not build synagogues there. Those, however, came later. Instead, their religious lives reflected the needs and sensibilities of quite ordinary Jews, who performed their Jewishness as they felt they had to and as they wanted. The decisions these Jews made about the nature of their religious lives ought to be seen as creative, improvisational, and at times inconsistent, reflecting the immigrating Jews' freedom of movement in pursuit of economic opportunity.

Rabin hoped with this book to show how those decisions represented much more than a project to imitate the forms and styles of the dominant Protestant culture. Many previous historians have asserted that Jewish immigrants to America, particularly those who came from Central Europe during the nineteenth century and who ventured out beyond New York, substituted the trappings of Protestantism for Jewish authenticity. Rabin shows convincingly, instead, that the choices made by the Jews who found themselves in the thousands of small towns sprinkled across the American frontier thought long and hard about how to be Jewish in these seemingly unlikely places. As they settled down, they, as they could, founded organizations, hired rabbis and teachers, dispensed charity, sought out the services of kosher slaughterers, and considered it imperative to raise their children as Jews. They did not fret over every jot and tittle of Jewish law, of *halachah*, but neither did they purposefully set out to become just like the Protestants around them. As these Jews acted—and this book puts action well above ideology—they did so with little guidance from authoritative sources or religious leaders. Their actions grew from the ground up, bearing witness to the imperatives of frontier small-town life.

Rabin's book takes the nineteenth century seriously. Most American Jewish historians have dismissed it and the Jews who emigrated from the German-speaking lands as less interesting and, frankly, as less Jewish, than the millions who left eastern Europe after the 1870s. So, too, historians have built the American Jewish narrative around the sights, sounds, and details of thickly populated Jewish neighborhoods, particularly of New York's Lower East Side or Chicago's Maxwell Street. Rabin makes a compelling case here that the full arc of American Jewish history cannot ignore the young Jewish men who pursued their livelihoods by heading for the frontier. Their religious inconsistencies, creativities, and sense of empowerment as ordinary Jews may actually serve as a better template for thinking about how Judaism developed in America, even after the passing of the frontier era.