

The American Jewish Experience through the Nineteenth Century: Immigration and Acculturation

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American Jewish history commenced in 1492 with the expulsion of Jews from Spain. This action set off a period of intense Jewish migration. Seeking to escape the clutches of the Holy Inquisition, some Jews in the sixteenth century sought refuge in the young Calvinist republic of The Netherlands. A century later, hundreds of their descendants crossed the ocean to settle in the new Dutch colony of Recife in Brazil, where Jewish communal life became possible for the first time in the New World. When Portugal recaptured this colony in 1654, its Jews scattered. Refugees spread through the Dutch Caribbean, beginning fresh Jewish communities. A boatload of about 23 Jews sailed into the remote Dutch port of New Amsterdam and requested permission to remain. This marked the beginning of Jewish communal life in North America.

Colonial Jews never exceeded one tenth of one percent of the American population, yet they established patterns of Jewish communal life that persisted for generations.

1. First, most Jews lived in cosmopolitan port cities like New York and Newport where opportunities for commerce and trade abounded, and people of diverse backgrounds and faiths lived side by side.
2. Second, many early American Jewish leaders and institutions were Sephardic, meaning that their origins traced to the Jewish communities of the Iberian peninsula. Sephardic Jews maintained cultural hegemony in Jewish life into the early nineteenth century, although by then Ashkenazi Jews, meaning Jews who traced their origins to Germany, had long been more numerous.
3. Third, Jews organized into synagogue-communities. Savannah, Charleston, Philadelphia, New York, and Newport each had one synagogue that assumed responsibility for the religious and communal needs of all local Jews.

The American Revolution marked a turning point not only in American Jewish history, but in modern Jewish history generally. Never before had a major nation committed itself so definitively to the principles of freedom and democracy in general and to religious freedom in particular. Jews and members of other minority religions could dissent from the religious views of the majority without fear of persecution. Jews still had to fight for their rights on the state level, and they continued to face various forms of prejudice nationwide. However, many Jews benefited materially from the Revolution and interacted freely with their non-Jewish neighbors. Having shed blood for their country side by side with their Christian fellows, Jews as a group felt far more secure than they had in colonial days. They asserted their rights openly and, if challenged, defended themselves both vigorously and self-confidently.

The Civil War divided Jews much as it did the nation as a whole. There were Jews in the North and Jews in the South, Jews who supported slavery and Jews who condemned it, Jews who fought for the Union and Jews who fought for the Confederacy. If in many respects the Civil War affected Jews much as it did other Americans, there were nevertheless three features of the struggle that affected Jews uniquely.

1. First, wartime tensions led to an upsurge of racial and religious prejudice in America, and Jews, both in the North and in the South, proved to be convenient scapegoats. Even famous Americans slipped into anti-Semitic stereotypes when they meant to condemn one Jew alone.
2. Second, Jews in the North (not in this case the South) had to fight for their right to have a Jewish army chaplain--no easy task, since by law an army chaplain had to be a "regularly ordained

minister of some Christian denomination." Although President Lincoln himself urged that this law be amended, it took heavy Jewish lobbying and over a year of hard work until the amendment to the law was passed.

3. Third, and most shocking of all to Jews, they had to face the most sweeping anti-Jewish official order in all of American history--General Order No. 11, published on December 17, 1862, that expelled all Jews from General Grant's military department. An irate and highly prejudiced response to wartime smuggling and speculating, crimes engaged in by Jews and non-Jews alike, it met with forceful Jewish protests. Within eighteen days, thanks to President Lincoln, the order was revoked.

In the 1880s, the profile of Jewish immigration to the United States was profoundly changed by the pogroms directed against the Jews of Russia, leading to an infusion of young Eastern European Jews who were religiously traditional and spoke Yiddish [the historical language of Ashkenazic Jews; a dialect of High German that includes some Hebrew elements]. Swept into a new and alien culture, cut off from loved ones left behind, and in many cases forced to violate religious tenets once held dear, immigrants frequently spent lifetimes trying to reconcile what they had left behind with what they had gained. Many cursed Columbus and wondered aloud if their travail was justified. A few returned to Europe. But in the wake of the infamous Kishinev pogrom of 1903 and subsequent persecutions in Russia and elsewhere, the promise of American life shined ever brighter. By 1924, close to two million Eastern European Jews had immigrated to America's shores.