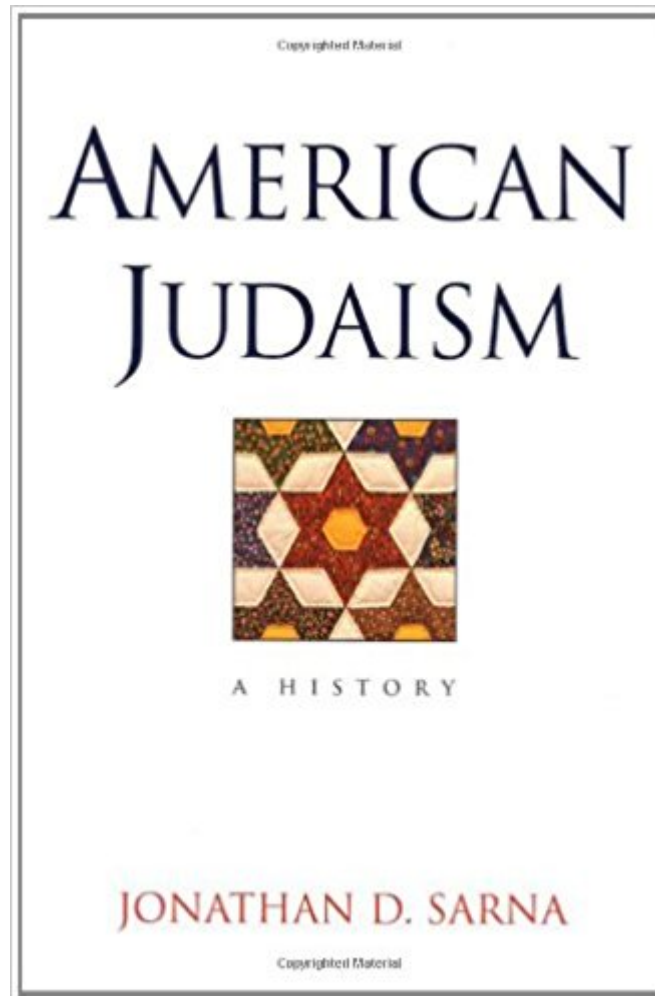




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# American Judaism: A History



## Synopsis

This magisterial work chronicles the 350-year history of the Jewish religion in America. Tracing American Judaism from its origins in the colonial era through the present day, Jonathan Sarna explores the ways in which Judaism adapted in this new context. How did American culture - predominantly Protestant and overwhelmingly capitalist - affect Jewish religion and culture? And how did American Jews shape their own communities and faith in the new world? Jonathan Sarna, a preeminent scholar of American Judaism, tells the story of individuals struggling to remain Jewish while also becoming American. He offers a dynamic and timely history of assimilation and revitalisation, of faith lost and faith regained. The first comprehensive history of American Judaism in over fifty years, this book is both a celebration of 350 years of Jewish life in America and essential reading for anyone interested in American religion and life.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Such scholars as Howard M. Sachar, Henry L. Feingold and Jacob R. Marcus, among others, have produced complete histories of American Jewry. Sarna, a Brandeis University professor who has published on various aspects of American Jewish history, now joins the ranks of his distinguished predecessors. Marking the 350th anniversary of Jewish settlement in New Amsterdam (now New York), this outstanding survey emphasizes the religious history of Jews in America. Since it is difficult to disentangle religious history from the entire story of how Jews fared generally in the United States, the book provides a sweeping overview of the trials, tribulations and triumphs of American Jews from 1654 to the present. Sarna writes in sprightly prose, usefully presenting

anecdotes about some unfamiliar people and events: for example, he introduces Rachel "Ray" Frank, an obscure late-19th-century "charismatic woman Jewish revivalist." Full attention is also paid to the great rabbinical leaders, the movements they led and the problems they encountered. Sarna's fact-filled presentation demonstrates that American Jews have always worried about intermarriage, assimilation and continuity. At various times, they have found answers in regeneration, revitalization and renewal. Concluding with a consideration of contemporary dilemmas, Sarna draws from history the possibility that "American Jews will find creative ways to maintain and revitalize American Judaism." Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Sarna's detailed history of Jewish life in the U.S. spans 350 years, from its colonial beginnings in 1654 to the present. Sarna points out that already in the late colonial period American Judaism had begun to diverge from religious patterns that existed in Europe and the Caribbean. The American Revolution, the ratification of the Constitution, the passage of the Bill of Rights, and the nationwide democratization of religion further transformed Jewish religious life. Fear for American Judaism's future underlies many aspects of its history, but Sarna believes that the many creative responses to this fear, the innovations and revivals promoted by those determined to ensure that American Jewish life continues and thrives, seem of far greater historical significance. This comprehensive and insightful study of the American Jewish experience is much more than just a record of events. It is an account of how people shaped events: establishing and maintaining communities, responding to challenges, and working for change. It is compelling reading for Jews and non-Jews alike.

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Jonathan Sarna's book is the first American Jewish History that I could not put down. Should be required reading for all American Jews. I have read Jewish history and studied in college under Arthur Hertzberg, Arnie Eisen, Michael Stanislawski, so that little here was actually new to me. The book, however, put everything into proper perspective and traced trends in a logical readable way -- beautiful analysis of the origins, history and current status of the major movements of Judaism. In case Dr. Sarna reads this -- here are my gripes: Personalities, such as Zalman Schachter-Shalomi merit too much of Sarna's attention. Similarly, Rebbetzin Jungreis is interesting but not far reaching in impact. Hadassah, and the extent to which it went hand in hand with Sisterhood's domination of suburban women's lives, barely gets passing mention. So too with the Soviet Jewry movement. While Sarna does a beautiful job tracing the origins and sequelae of Orthodoxy's shift "to

the right," he makes a few important omissions in describing other movements, such as Conservative Judaism. For example, he neglects to point out that the Movement's Law Committee had already approved Women's ordination before the Rabbinical Assembly voted to include women or the JTS faculty put it to a vote. Sarna suggests that the JTS faculty decision was purely expedient and not based on halachic considerations, which at least institutionally if not to the lay people, remains crucial. Similarly, at one point, Sarna notes that there is little distance today between left-wing Conservative and right-wing Reform. Quite true. But also worthy of note is the little distance between left-wing Orthodox "Modern orthodox" and right -wing Conservative, both of those last groups a vanishing breed. Note too, Dr. Sarna, that Joe Leiberman carefully avoided describing himself as "Orthodox," preferring the word "observant." All in all, an absolutely magnificent work.

Jonathan Sarna gives an insightful, comprehensive and fascinating overview of American Jewish history in "American Judaism" I really developed a great sense of how each school of thought and movement in Judaism developed, evolved, and adapted over time. I thoroughly enjoyed it and was sad for it to end.

Professor Jonathan Sarna, pre-eminent scholar of the American Jewish experience, has written the book of the year for 2004, the 350th anniversary of Jewish settlement in America. Sarna's book is a brilliant chronicle of the 350 year history of the Jewish religion in America. Yes, his focus is on American Judaism and not another history of Jews in America. He asks all of the right questions: How has Judaism developed in America? How has it changed? What is its relationship to American religion? Where does it stand today? How have Jews been affected by the great turning points--the various awakenings, the Civil War, the women's movement, etc. He concludes that American Judaism is distinctive and different from Judaism in Israel or in Europe. While the book is very readable and lively, I found his sense of optimism and his analysis of the challenges facing American Judaism in the future to be the greatest contributions of this monumental work. Sarna observes that the age-old fear that Judaism would not survive here provided an important stimulus for creative innovations. Time and again, concern for the future of Judaism inspired religious renewal. And he is equally surprised by the quickening pace of change. Sarna has already won the National Jewish Book Award's 2004 Book of the Year and has traveled the country speaking to large and enthusiastic audiences. I think this is a book that will stand the test of time, and one that you will be coming back to as a reference for many, many years. What an excellent choice for gift-giving at this holiday time.

Excellent book, well-researched, interesting read.

Sarna goes into detail about Jews who played a part in American history. Often the history or personalities he describes is not well-known by the average reader. That is what makes this book so engaging.

Trying to cover the breadth and depth of American Jewish history is a difficult task. Sarna does an effective job at hitting both the highlights as well as treating important topics in depth.

I have not completed reading all of it but it seems very comprehensive and informative. An excellent source of information.

A great Bar Mitzvah Gift!

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