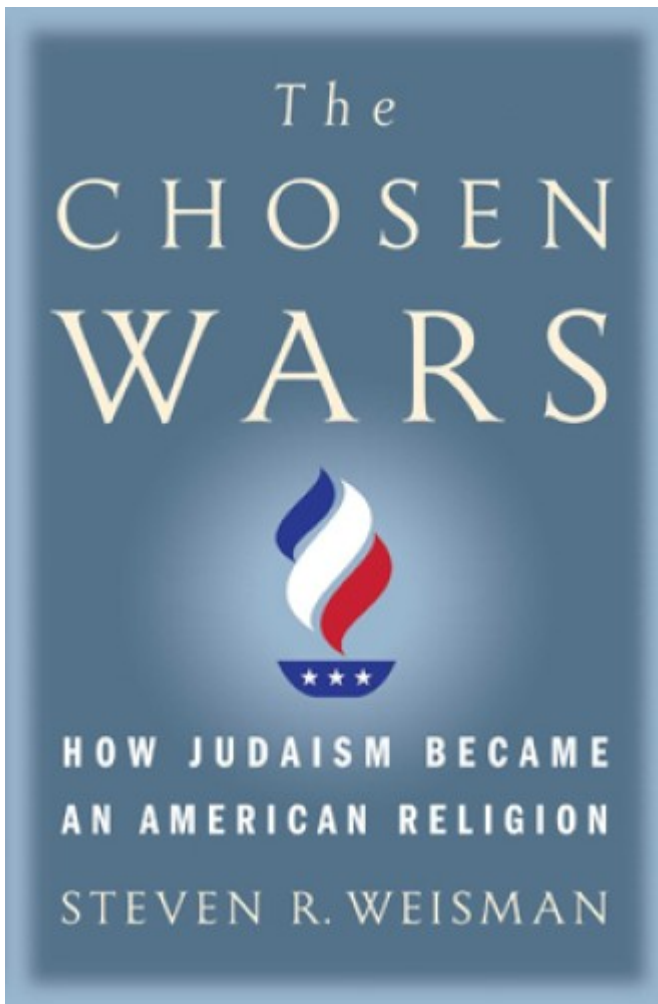


Two glimpses into Judaism in America

Steven Weisman looks at the development of the Reform movement. Jack Wertheimer focuses on the present and future.

by [Emily Soloff](#) in the [December 4, 2019](#) issue

In Review



The Chosen Wars

How Judaism Became an American Religion

By Steven R. Weisman

Simon & Schuster



The New American Judaism

How Jews Practice Their Religion Today

By Jack Wertheimer

Princeton University Press

Who are American Jews? Journalist Steven R. Weisman and professor Jack Wertheimer answer that perennial question from two distinct angles. With very little overlap, their books provide insight into the civic, social, and sacred energies that have influenced and continue to influence American Judaism and individuals who

identify as Jews.

Weisman is a former *New York Times* editor who now works at the Peterson Institute for International Economics. Though his title, *The Chosen Wars*, is intentionally and inventively provocative, the book does not deal with religious questions about the meaning of chosenness. Instead, Weisman offers a breezy history of Jewish settlement in America from the colonial period through the Civil War and the great immigration period of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with a short epilogue focusing on recent decades.

Wertheimer, who teaches Jewish history at Jewish Theological Seminary, focuses on the evolution of Jewish religious practice in America while concentrating on current developments. His subtitle, *How Jews Practice Their Religion Today*, reveals his aim: to explore the lived religion of ordinary American Jews.

Both authors acknowledge similarities and differences between Jewish and Christian experience in America. While Wertheimer provides more examples, Weisman goes so far as to cite Martin Marty: "All religious adherents in America are pilgrims in some sense." Both books will be useful for Christians as well as Jews who wish to better understand—through a Jewish mind-set—how historical and current movements impact believers of all traditions.

Much of Weisman's book is devoted to early American Jewish history, when Jews were a tiny minority and faced the triple challenges of assimilation, nativist antipathy, and active—sometimes forceful—Protestant proselytizing. At its core, the book is about the events and personalities who were instrumental in the development of Reform Judaism.

The awakening of Christian fervor in the early 19th century was destined to influence the character of American Judaism, he writes. But the fracturing of Christian unity during this era also benefited Judaism. As various Christian denominations sought assurances from the government and culture that their views would be respected, Jews were encouraged and allowed to seek the same. American Judaism is *sui generis* because it developed in response to America.

Between 1840 and 1880, the number of synagogues in America increased fifteenfold. The influx of Jewish peddlers and tradesmen when the American economy was expanding benefited the Jewish community economically and socially, although intermarriage and assimilation continued to bedevil leaders. "Economic

opportunities and difficulties were probably paramount in transforming Jewish identity,” Weisman writes.

Internal battles between traditionalists and reformers eventually led to multiple splits in Jewish identification and practice. Weisman devotes a chapter to the infamous 1883 Trefa Banquet in Cincinnati, a meal celebrating the first graduating class of Hebrew Union College at which shellfish and dairy were served. This event, which some viewed as proof that the reformers were jettisoning too much of Jewish tradition and law in an effort to “fit in” in America, helped launch the Conservative movement. Reformers also minimized the concept of nationhood and rejected yearning for return to the Holy Land, deeply imbedded in traditional prayers.

Ironically, the American celebration of Hanukkah, Weisman writes, was a response of the traditionalists to the reformers. “Reformers were comfortable ignoring the holiday . . . because of its obsolete (in their view) association with the importance of restoring the ancient Temple.” The traditionalists’ revival of Hanukkah acknowledged Jewish hopes of return to the Promised Land while reformers preferred to see America as replacing that ancient anticipation. It also had the benefit of “counteracting the increasing appeal of the Christmas holiday among Jews.”

Weisman devotes many pages to key personalities of the late 19th and early 20th centuries who were particularly influential in the Reform movement, including some who aren’t typically studied in Hebrew school. He also devotes a chapter to the two Isaacs: Isaac Mayer Wise, founder of the Free Synagogue movement, and Isaac Leeser, considered by some to be a founder of modern Orthodox Judaism. Another chapter delves into the debate between traditionalist Alexander Kohut and reformer Kaufmann Kohler over the significance of Jewish law and the use of biblical criticism in interpreting it.

Weisman ends on an upbeat if rather indeterminate note. “As they head into an uncertain future, Jews will likely continue to see themselves as Jews. . . . They can do so confidently by looking back to the courageous examples of the past as well as forward to the leadership that will surely come in the future.”

Wertheimer also resists the urge to end on a definitive note, but he comes to his conclusions in a very different way. Where Weisman takes a broad view and offers a few leaders as avatars, Wertheimer digs deeply into current American Jewish

practices through interviews with scholars, communal leaders, and more than 160 rabbis. Weisman is dealing with historical record, if not settled history, while Wertheimer is writing on the cusp of change.

What Wertheimer finds is both heartening and befuddling. He is critical of general surveys that don't reflect the texture of Jewish life. Some of the categories used to study the religious lives of Christians, he explains, "cannot be applied readily to Jews." For example, religious observance and ritual performance are more important to Jews than belief or personal prayer.

Nevertheless, the demographics around Jewish religious life in America resemble demographic trends in Christianity. "This book takes it as a given that Jewish religious life in this country has endured a recession." Wertheimer identifies himself as a serious observer of American Jewish life and an adherent. "I am implicated in this story and I am deeply concerned about its outcome."

Adherence to Jewish denominationalism (Reform, Conservative, Orthodox) is in steep decline, Wertheimer explains, as people are finding less-structured ways of identifying with Judaism.

Labels and neat categories are deemed artificial and therefore expendable, while a spirit of innovation and tinkering is stimulating the creation of hybrid forms of Jewish religious identification. Once dismissed as passing fads on the periphery of Jewish life, unconventional approaches to Judaism are now flourishing—and increasingly influencing the core.

In the course of his research, Wertheimer uncovers Jewish religious settings with enormous vitality and creativity—not so much in synagogues as in what he calls "religious start-ups." These include Orthodox outreach programs that are attracting hundreds (if not thousands) of Jews to the study of Jewish texts without demanding Orthodox adherence.

While he recognizes the decline in identification with denominations in Judaism, Wertheimer is not ready to write them off. He reminds readers that there never was a truly "golden era" of widespread religious observance in American Jewish history.

In our current age, when hyper-individualism reigns and so many Jews imagine it necessary to recast their distinctive religion in "universal"

terms, the rebuilding of Judaism will require a renewed appreciation for Jewish memory, community, and particularistic content. American Jews might well find sustenance and inspiration in these old/new commitments as they create the next iteration of a new/old Judaism.

The fact that Wertheimer—who has spent decades worrying and writing about the decline of American Judaism—ends on an upbeat note is a hopeful sign for the future of Judaism in America.