

Rabbi Dr. Zev Eleff is Chief Academic Officer of Hebrew Theological College in Skokie, IL.

Review Essay:

BEYOND SCHOOLS AND SHULS: TOWARD A FULLER APPRECIATION OF AMERICAN ORTHODOX HISTORY

MARNI DAVIS, *Jews and Booze: Becoming American in the Age of Prohibition*. New York: New York University Press, 2012, 262 pp.

LIBBY GARLAND, *After They Closed the Gates: Jewish Illegal Immigration to the United States, 1921-1965*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014, 288 pp.

In November 1925, Rabbi Simon Glazer testified before the U.S. Treasury Department. The chairman of the Kneseth Harabonim traveled to Washington, D.C., to formally request permits to obtain sacramental wine. Glazer reported to government officials that his organization, in the midst of the Prohibition Era, intended to “see to it that no form or manner of abuse be connected in issuing such permits.”¹ For several years, the Kneseth Harabonim had struggled to acquire alcohol licenses due to aspersions casted upon it by a rival rabbinical organization. In particular, Rabbi Moses Margolies (the “Ramaz”) of the Agudath Ha-Rabbonim had told newspapers and government officials that the members of Glazer’s group were part of a “fake organization” and many card-carrying members of the Kneseth Harabonim lacked proper rabbinical credentials.²

Historians grow accustomed to the name-calling; a consequence of the animated interpersonal dramas found in many files and archive boxes. Yet, for many Orthodox Jews interested in their community’s history, the vitriol is no doubt too difficult to bear. In fact, it may be altogether

¹ Interview between Hon. Lincoln C. Andrews and Rabbi Simon Glazer, November 12, 1925, Box 1, Folder 1, MS-269, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH.

² See Joshua Hoffman, “The American Rabbinic Career of Rabbi Gavriel Zev Margolis” (MA thesis: Yeshiva University, 1992), 98-100.

irrelevant to a full telling of Orthodox Jewish history. The bulk of the battles waged between rabbinical organizations had little to do with the heralded upkeep and defense of Orthodox Judaism in the United States. According to a certain perspective, there is much to learn, say, from the grueling polemics between the Yiddish-speaking rabbinate and Americanized rabbis on matters of synagogue decorum and schooling. These disputes, however cantankerous, throw light on the religious development of Orthodox Judaism in the New World and provide insight into contemporary issues, as well. Other historical data on petty squabbling during Prohibition or questionable actions to circumvent U.S. laws, this line of reasoning might argue, are less helpful to understand the religious experience of Orthodox Jews. Therefore, these unseemly sides of Orthodox Jews can only prove harmful and is in no wise constructive to the assembly of a collective American Orthodox memory.³

I contend that this position is shortsighted. Of course, the noble debates on behalf of “Tradition” and “Orthodoxy” accomplished a great deal; they plotted lines of demarcation between the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox that, in time, enabled the latter group to flourish in unprecedented fashion. It is not at all clear, however, that this highbrow history was more pivotal than the trenchant bouts fought over more mundane social issues. Consider, for example, the matter of the five-day work week in American life. In the early twentieth century, it was well-known that most traditional-minded Jews had little choice but to work on the Sabbath. Philanthropist Harry Fischel—who refused to work on Saturdays—recalled in his memoirs his first employers’ creed: “If you don’t come tomorrow [Saturday], you need not come on Monday.”⁴ Consequently, Orthodox Jews eagerly joined with leftist unions in support of a socioeconomic reform that would enable workers to absent themselves from Saturday labor without penalty. In 1915, the diplomatically-savvy Rabbi Bernard Drachman traveled to the Bay Area to convince influential Christian ministers that what was “needed is a vigorous campaign of education to show the community the eminent desirability of the double weekly holiday from every point of view, sanitary, social and religious.”⁵ To Drachman and other

³ On these matters and literature on this fascinating perspective, see Jacob J. Schacter, “Facing the Truths of History,” *Torah u-Madda Journal* 8 (1998-1999): 200-73.

⁴ See Herbert S. Goldstein, *Forty Years of Struggle for a Principle: The Biography of Harry Fischel* (New York: Bloch, 1928), 17.

⁵ Bernard Drachman, *The Jewish Sabbath Question: As Presented before a Christian Convention at Oakland, California* (New York: n.p. 1915), 16.

Orthodox Jews, Sabbath observance was linked to other fundamental social concerns.

The Orthodox participation in this area of U.S. labor politics is not often included in the recounting of Orthodox Jews' embrace of Sabbath observance. More often, historians and writers have stressed other factors: namely, that later generations of Orthodox Jews emerged more religiously punctilious and gained access to more lucrative professions that did not force them to work on Saturdays. I submit, though, that this narrowness stifles any attempt to gain a fuller understanding of this important pivot-point in Orthodox Jewish history. Orthodox participation in the five-day work week reform reflects an attitude that its rabbinic leaders projected to both non-Jews and to their laities. What is more, Drachman's call for parity between a Jew's Saturday and a Christian's Sunday represented Orthodox Judaism's increased self-confidence in Protestant-dominated America.⁶

Context is crucial. The history of Orthodox Judaism in the United States should take into account the external forces that impelled leaders and the rank-and-file to move in one direction as opposed to another. Unhinged from the broader historical backdrop, the lessons to be learned from the tales of America's Orthodox Jews, I fear, lose more than a modicum of meaning for those who wish to learn from them. On the other hand, a rigorous treatment of history that is more fully informed provides greater nuance and utility for all those who seek guidance for contemporary and future challenges. Two recent monographs, then, come to mind as fine examples of histories that might be useful to the broadening the Orthodox historical mind.

JEW AND BOOZE

Marni Davis's important work on American Jewry's relationship with alcohol consumption is part of a growing literature on Jews, alcohol (and other beverages) and acculturation.⁷ Its three sections grapple with the Jewish struggle to achieve cultural standing in the United States. The first engages the Jewish response to the Temperance Movement in the late

⁶ See Kevin M. Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to its Protestant Promise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 15-42.

⁷ See, for example, Glenn Dynner, *Yankel's Tavern: Jews, Liquor, and Life in the Kingdom of Poland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Robert Liberles, *Jews Welcome Coffee: Tradition and Innovation in Early Modern Germany* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2012).

nineteenth century. On the whole, Jewish leaders banded together in opposition to groups such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union that sought to suppress alcohol in the name of Protestant values. Reformers of various kinds like Rabbis Isaac Mayer Wise and Marcus Jastrow attacked these organizations as a form of "despotism" that impeded on American notions of freedom. Similarly, Rabbi Jacob Peres of Memphis represented vocal Orthodox Jews who freely admitted to drinking on occasion but "feel a patriotism too holy to prove themselves bad citizens by indulging in low debauchery."⁸

In time, it became much too risky to employ this sort of rhetoric in defense of Jews and alcohol. In the early twentieth century, the Jewish population spiked, due to mass migration from Eastern Europe. In 1880, Jews numbered about 250,000 souls in the United States. In 1900, that figure totaled more than one million Jewish women and men.⁹ As Davis demonstrated in the second part of her book, many of the newcomers brought their experience in the alcohol trade to Manhattan's Lower East Side and other "Jewish" locales. Nativists and bigots seized on Jewish involvement with "low class" alcohol culture to form a new and negative stereotype of immigrant Jews. Once again, Jewish leaders united to combat this bigotry but their efforts were mitigated by the growing support for Prohibition and the much more visible image of Jews and whisky bottles.

The final section of *Jews and Booze* addresses Jews, the Eighteenth Amendment, and the 1919 Volstead Act which inaugurated the Prohibition Era in the United States. In this instance, Jews were no longer of one mind. In particular, Reform Jewish leaders were beside themselves after reading prominent headlines such as "Jewish Rabbis Reap Fabulous Sums by Flouting Dry Law." Likewise, Louis Marshall of the American Jewish Committee toiled hard to convince Orthodox rabbis to "abstain from placing themselves in a position of asking for exceptional treatment in respect to the use of wine."¹⁰ For many Orthodox (and other) rabbis, especially those that earned rather meager wages, bootlegging was too lucrative an enterprise to pass up.¹¹ It also generated an ugly form of

⁸ Marni Davis, *Jews and Booze: Becoming American in the Age of Prohibition* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 59.

⁹ See Jacob Rader Marcus, *To Count a People: American Jewish Population Data, 1585-1984* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1990), 240.

¹⁰ Davis, *Jews and Booze*, 176.

¹¹ On rabbinic salaries in this period, see Kimmy Caplan, "In God We Trust: Salaries and Income of American Orthodox Rabbis, 1881-1924," *American Jewish History* (March 1998): 77-106.

competition and smearing that pitted major Talmud scholars against one another. One victim of Prohibition was Rabbi Gavriel Zev Margolies, president of the Knesseth Harabonim (no relation to the Ramaz).¹² Leading Orthodox rabbis openly questioned this scholar's rabbinic credentials and intellectual bona fides. For several years, Margolies and his colleagues were shut out from the approved list of rabbis able to receive wine for religious rituals. In 1925, Margolies therefore wrote a letter to a government official to plead his case and lend support to the government's effort to "curb abuse, and protect religious freedom in our blessed land."¹³

Taken together, the chapters in Marni Davis's book—a 2014 Sami Rohr Prize finalist—utilizes an assortment of primary sources to teach more than Jewish economic history and antisemitism in the United States. Moreover, while there are certainly more glorious instances of Jewish contributions to capitalism in American history, the cleverly titled *Jews and Booze* serves as a reminder that the Jews who had emigrated from Europe more than a century ago were tasked with negotiating the tumultuous cultural and religious tensions in their attempts to become Americans.

AFTER THEY CLOSED THE GATES

In May 1924, President Calvin Coolidge signed the Johnson-Reed Act into law. For many historians, the new legislation that imposed further quotas on immigration to the United States represented the "closing of the gates." By this time, the Jewish population had reached nearly four million; or almost twenty times the number of Jews in 1880, just before the period of mass migration.¹⁴ Owing to this, scholars have tended to presume little need to address questions of Jewish migration to the United States in the late-1920s and 1930s. Historian Libby Garland has changed the narrative. Her book on Jewish illegal immigration is another very fine work, especially for Orthodox Jews who consider the "immigrant" experience an integral part of their historical memory. A prodigious display of

¹² R. Margolies possessed a very bold and assertive personality that, in any case, did not endear him to other rabbinic leaders in the United States. On Margolies, in addition to the earlier cited Hoffman thesis, see Jeffrey S. Gurock, "American Orthodox Organizations in Support of Zionism, 1880-1930," in *Zionism and Religion*, eds. Shmuel Almog, Jehuda Reinharz, and Anita Shapira (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1998), 219-34.

¹³ G. Wolfe Margolies to Lincoln C. Andrews, December 4, 1925, MS-269, Box 1, Folder 1, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH.

¹⁴ Marcus, *To Count a People*, 241.

archival mining, this monograph challenges the assumption that in fact the doors to the United States were so tightly shut. Rather, small numbers of Jews still successfully transported their families to the United States while others, with the aid of smugglers (usually via Cuba or Mexico) and covert contacts, tried to travel beneath detection and illegally immigrate to America.

A sizable portion of this book addresses the important evolution of anti-immigrant legislation that, in part, focused on Jews. In many respects, Jews emerged as one of the first groups of “illegal aliens” in American history. In 1921, for instance, the federal government passed an emergency quota act that was meant to temporarily restrict the flow of migration from overseas. Lawmakers had Jews—among other populations—in mind as they drafted the law. In December 1920, the Committee on Immigration of the U.S. House of Representatives warned of “Russian Poles or Polish Jews of the usual ghetto type.” This lot, alleged politicians, was “filthy, un-American and often dangerous in their habits.”¹⁵ To combat this bigoted behavior, the American Jewish Committee and other organizations did their very best to debate with government officials and raise awareness within American society. Due to these efforts, Jews managed to push for the repeal of various “alien registration laws” and release themselves from the “illegal alien” designation. They were, in turn, replaced by other races and classes that could not manage to so successfully shake this nomenclature.

The other chapters in Garland’s award winning study—it garnered major prizes from the American Historical Association and American Jewish Historical Society—engage the immigrant experience as the “illegal alien,” constantly nervous about her or his security in a self-adopted country. Yiddish newspapers published in the United States and Europe warned against taking risks and challenging American border surveillance. Seedier sources, however, offered suggestions on how to game the system. In one poignant illustration, the author explores the correspondence between Joseph Goldberg and his son, who had failed to illegally migrate from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico into El Paso, Texas. The elder Goldberg had legally migrated to the United States several decades before his sons’ attempt but pleaded with the junior Goldberg to not test the formidable American authorities and smuggle his way into the country. The son defied his father’s wishes and, to the chagrin of both men, failed to gain access into the United States. The tension that existed

¹⁵ See Libby Garland, *After They Closed the Gates: Jewish Illegal Immigration to the United States, 1921-1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 38.

between family members over matters of illegal immigration represents one of the most sobering aspects of this book. “The fact that the son disobeyed his father and heeded his cousin’s advice, and that the son’s dishonesty and repeated requests for money so rankled with the father,” explained Garland, “speaks to the way decisions about migration could be shaped by the particular dynamics of family relationships.”¹⁶

Finally, Garland’s book is a reminder to Orthodox Jews that some of its most pivotal contributors arrived in the United States after the imposed quota system had deflated the hopes of many of Europe’s Jews to reach America’s shores. Consider that Rabbis Ahron Kotler, Moshe Feinstein, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, and Joseph B. Soloveitchik all touched down on American soil after 1924.¹⁷ To be sure, these leaders did not attempt to migrate in any sort of illegal manner. To the contrary, each obtained special visas that permitted “ministers and professors” to enter the United States under specific circumstances. Still, each of these men and their families endured a struggle in some degree or another to gain admission in this very tense and circumspect period in American history.

HISTORY LESSONS

In the epilogue of her book, Libby Garland reflects on the relative timeliness of her research. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush and other officials who had spoken previously about relaxing immigration laws were forced to abandon such possibilities. Terrorism on American soil impelled the White House to reevaluate the propriety of inviting so-called “aliens” into the mainstream. While she was careful not to pose any solutions based on her historical research, Garland did offer that history might help frame the appropriate questions for lawmakers to answer. In November 2014, President Barack Obama reversed the course, announcing a policy that would allow illegal immigrants to remain and work in the United States. One year later, politicians and the media clashed over whether to absorb refugees of the Syrian Civil War.

America’s Jews also weighed in on the commotion. Those in favor were fond of invoking a biblical passage made famous by the Passover *Haggadah*: “My father was a wandering Aramean.” The refrain, of course,

¹⁶ Ibid., 127.

¹⁷ I thank my teacher, Jonathan Sarna, for this acute observation. Dr. Sarna and I look forward to exploring this interesting matter in a forthcoming article.

TRADITION

was meant to convince Jews in the United States to connect their ancient heritage to the current political predicament. Yet, it should be apparent that the American Jewish experience offers far more intimate and imitable historical examples. Likewise, a recent essay on the use of grape juice as an alternative to wine in the Prohibition Era that appeared in *Tradition* demonstrated no knowledge of Marni Davis's noted work—she did address the grape juice “solution” in her pages—and would no doubt have gained substance and perspective from her research.¹⁸ Thankfully, the field of American Jewish history is in vogue. The field regularly receives heightened attention from leading presses and journals. More importantly, scholars of American Judaism no longer fear the repercussions of zeroing in on the less heroic aspects of Jewish life in the United States. These recent monographs serve as a reminder that there is much to the history of Orthodox Judaism beyond schools and shuls.

¹⁸ See Yaakov S. Weinstein, “Grape Juice: The Solution to Prohibition,” *Tradition* 48:1 (2015), 19-32.