
Elliot B. Gertel (editor):

Jewish Belief and Practice in Nineteenth Century America. Seminal Essays by Outstanding Pulpit Rabbis of the Era

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Naomi W. Cohen:

What the Rabbis Said. The Public Discourse of Nineteenth Century American Rabbis

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Marc Saperstein:

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As is now widely recognized, the sermon has played a vital role in creating the culture of American democracy. For American Jews, a tiny but heterogeneous minority, pulpit discourse gradually assumed the particular function of guiding the process of accommodation to and integration into the new society, and promoting the values of democracy, equality, and unity. As Isaac Meyer Wise (1819-1900), a pioneer of modern preaching acknowledged, the nineteenth-century Jewish-American sermon contributed to the formidable task of Americanization, helping a diverse population of Jewish immigrants feel at home in a foreign country. Thus, in 1896, Wise succinctly described the role of the renewed Jewish preaching: "Here begins the transition from the German to the English, from the foreign to the American, from the *derashic* [i.e., traditional] to the modern form of the sermon".¹ A whole new set of religious and political values were disseminated from the pulpit, thus facilitating changes to tradition that were controversial and challenging, but ultimately deemed inescapable. For this reason, the Jewish sermons, like

¹*Sermons by American Rabbis*. Edited and published under the Auspices of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (Chicago: CCAAR, 1896).

their Christian counterparts, remain a valuable source for understanding the ideology of the religious and political evolution in modern culture. Moreover, the modern renaissance of Jewish homiletics is particularly significant in its American dynamic, since it shows how Jewish-American culture is both contextualized by broader American practices of 'democratic eloquence' and influenced by its European roots in the movement of *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment.

Despite its richness and its complexity, the new Jewish sermon has been all but 'forgotten' by most scholars. While there are today many analyses and collections of sermons dating from the Middle Ages, the study of the modern sermon has long been neglected, implying it holds little interest for scholars. All this is now about to change, due in part to the three volumes under review here. Significantly, two of the volumes are collections of sermons while the third one uses the sermons as source material for a synthetic and innovative study of the Jewish-American culture of democratic adjustment.

Elliot Gertel's *Jewish Belief and Practice in Nineteenth Century America. Seminal Essays by Outstanding Pulpit Rabbis of the Era*, conveniently presents – in one volume – both (originally) oral and written texts, which all deal with tradition and change in Jewish America and illustrate the ways in which important topics of religious ideology shaped the discourse of Jewish-American identity. Structured in accordance with the transformation of the religious tradition, the selection of texts privileges Reform sources, but Gertel also includes several texts that represent different denominational trends, some of which are clearly personal favourites. In this way, the volume reflects Gertel's preferences, while also emphasising the continuing influence of some of the most original nineteenth-century rabbinical authors.

A remarkable starting point for the anthology is the work of Max Lilienthal (1815-1882), a preacher of great talent and erudition, whose 1856 discussion of the *Shulchan Aruch* (a sixteenth-century code of religious norms) was an early American attempt at examining the limits of acceptable (moderate) reform. Lilienthal's text, programmatic as it is and characterized by strong argumentation, opens a collection of important and well-crafted compositions (speeches, lectures, and other public addresses) that provide valuable material for examining nineteenth-century ideas and illustrate the growth of liberal trends in American Judaism.

Two preachers are given extensive treatment here: the moderate Liebman Adler (1812-1892), a Chicago preacher of prodigious output, and the innovative Adolph Moses (1840-1902), whose wide interests and tendency to approach every topic from a general comparative standpoint remain impressive. The two preachers' sermons, reproduced in the book, display an interesting variety of homiletic styles, topics, and focuses.

While its overall presentation is somewhat loose, the book is, nevertheless, easy to read and quite helpful in bringing to the fore texts that, despite their significance, are difficult to find. As such, the book is destined for a broad, non-academic readership with a general interest in Jewish-American issues.

However, for a scholarly examination of modern Jewish preaching, one should turn to Naomi Wiener Cohen and Marc Saperstein, two historians who, in different ways and by different means, retrieve and analyze the heritage of the rabbinic discourse in modern times.

Naomi W. Cohen's *What the Rabbis Said. The Public Discourse of Nineteenth Century American Rabbis* is clearly the work of an historian, although Cohen uses a methodology generally associated with the study of synchronic social discourse. The author is a doyenne of American Jewish studies, having published extensively on the history of American Judaism, with a

particular focus on the struggle for Jewish religious equality and civil rights² and the spread of Zionist ideas in America.³ In the book under review, Cohen retraces the development of rabbinical discourse in nineteenth-century America, thus reconstructing a dynamic narrative of association, adaptation, challenges, and growth. Cohen considers the sermons in both their oral and written forms: they were delivered from the synagogue pulpit but also preserved in print, usually in periodical and serial publications. Due to the flourishing, in the late nineteenth century, of a large mass-circulation press, the liturgical practice of preaching was closely linked to newspaper and pamphlet publishing. Thus, oral and printed texts together supported a modernization process that was as diversified as it was complex and contradictory.

By re-examining the religious culture of American Judaism, Cohen aims to shed light on “the riddle of Jewish identity” in post-emancipation times (p. 4). Chapter One, “The Muzzled Rabbi” (pp. 13-32), deals with the first American rabbis’ struggle for authority as they were confronted with a traditional institutional structure that allowed lay leaders to control the lives of their congregations. This domination included details of religious and liturgical practice as well as, most importantly, the overseeing of the synagogue and the content of the sermons. By contrast, the first American rabbis saw themselves as public instructors and regarded the delivery of sermons as a right and a duty that required freedom of expression and justified a position of communal leadership. Comparing two collections of sermons, published in 1881 and in 1896, respectively, the discussion in this first chapter primarily concerns Reform rabbis and follows their progressive recognition of the freedom of the pulpit.

Chapter Two, “From the Words of Sabato Morais” (pp. 33-52), examines the parallel development of a moderate Traditionalist rabbi, Sabato Morais of Philadelphia, who fought for and “won the right to a free pulpit” (p. 35). Morais used this freedom to support causes and values that were controversial but were intended to mitigate the many tensions in the religious and political life of the American Jews. More and more opposed to Reform attitudes and decisions, Morais became the leader of what would later be known as Conservative Judaism, a distinctive program that combined Jewish preservation and change in modern America. Cohen’s foray through Morais’s sermons provides a well-organized view of his many struggles as well as insight into his quite often both complex and ambiguous motivations.

Chapter Three, “Heroes and Villains” (pp. 53-73), examines how the identification with biblical characters provided the nineteenth-century Jewish sermon with a stock of exemplary events and figures that were used in order to interpret current history. Among these was the topos of Amalek, the quintessential ‘villain’ in the Hebrew Bible. This is the central topos in one of the most eloquent of the period’s sermons, David Einhorn’s well-known “War With Amalek!”, which was delivered in March 1864 and supported the fight against slavery.⁴ By following the development of the Amalek topos, Cohen is able to compare sermons representing a wide spectrum of religious differences and to clarify the use of a number of biblical characters in sermons that thematise shared experiences of confrontation and defence.

Chapter Four, “Meant for Children” (pp. 74-93), deals with the beginnings of the Jewish religious press for children and with the first attempts to establish a framework for the religious instruction of Jewish youth. The chapter focuses on Max Lilienthal (in Cincinnati) and Hermann Baar (in New York). While Lilienthal is better known for his innovative religious and social work in the postbellum period, Cohen here discusses his contribution as the founding editor

² Cohen’s *Jews in Christian America: the Pursuit of Religious Equality* (Oxford University Press, 1992) is a standard reference work, widely used in teaching and research.

³ *The Americanization of Zionism 1897-1948* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2003).

⁴ This is one of the very few Jewish sermons that consistently appear in general interdenominational American homiletic collections. See, for example, Michael Warner’s *American Sermons. The Pilgrims to Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: The Library of America, 1999).

(between 1874 and 1882) of the *Sabbath Visitor*, the first periodical for Jewish-American children. Although Cohen criticizes the sugary style of the publication, she also provides a very useful review of the issues published during Lilienthal's years of direction.

The famous but controversial personality of Max Lilienthal is also central to Chapter Five, "Rabbi versus Rabbi" (pp. 94-112), which examines the two important disputes that confronted Reform and Traditionalist rabbis in their struggle to define the new Jewish-American identity. Conducted in the pages of the Jewish press, the two disputes – between Leeser and Lilienthal in 1856-1857, and between Alexander Kohut and Kaufman Kohler in 1885 – set the parameters for acceptable change and defined an ideological struggle that grew more radical and more exclusionary as the century advanced.

Despite the ideal of Jewish unity promoted by both sides, the disputes programmatically expose the range of divisive ideological assumptions within American Judaism. Thus, as Cohen shows in Chapter Six, "Restoration to Palestine" (pp. 113-130), the idea of Zionism was seen as thoroughly opposed to the goal of Americanization promoted by the Reformers, who regarded themselves as American citizens of Jewish faith. This initial rejection of Zionism was upheld by generations of rabbis who understood American Judaism as shaped by a loyal commitment to their new country, a country that, for them, was the New Jerusalem. However, as Cohen shows, when confronted with the revival of anti-Semitism, both at home and abroad, later generations of rabbinical leaders gradually changed their position and began to support the ideas of Herzlian Zionism (pp. 128-130).

In 1894, the layman Leo N. Levi of Texas reignited the debate on the question of progress and accommodation emphasized by the Reformers, involving not just the rabbis but also the larger public. In Chapter Seven, "Rabbis under Attack" (pp. 131-149), Cohen relocates this debate in its institutional setting and shows how it became the unspoken background for the important sermon collection of 1896, already discussed in Chapter One.

While the historical development of American Reform Judaism has had a fundamental internal logic, often responding to various confrontations and to (a frequently muted) ideological competition with the Traditionalists, challenges from outside Judaism also helped shape historical strategies. These external circumstances and the material they offered to the Jewish sermons are discussed in Chapters Eight and Nine, which focus on the questions of American patriotism and the ethnic commitment of the modern Jew, particularly in the context of changing attitudes towards Jews. Thus, in Chapter Eight, "The New Anti-Semitism" (pp. 150-176), Cohen examines the responses of the American rabbis to the violent anti-Jewish racism prevalent in Europe in the 1880s. It was against this background that a handful of Reform rabbis, in their sermons, developed the theme of interfaith negotiation. The Jewish interaction with non-Jewish faiths and denominations, which took place in a scholarly setting in 1894, is the subject of Chapter Nine, "The World's Parliament of Religions" (pp. 177-197).

Finally, in Chapter Ten, "Building a Profession" (pp. 198-216), Cohen examines the consequences of the professionalization of the American rabbi for the modern Jewish sermon. It was through preaching that rabbis gradually gained control of their own platforms, and it was through preaching that they were able to claim leadership in communal affairs. This last chapter also contains a reappraisal of the long and strenuous progress of the nineteenth-century religious Jewish leaders, who at great pains won their struggle for authority and freedom of the pulpit. As described by Cohen, the history of rabbinic discourse in nineteenth-century America was double-edged, including the education of both rabbis and audiences in their intense and constant struggle for Americanization.

Cohen's discussion is learned and lively, clear and well argued: it brings history back to life through some of its most engaged actors, and in their own words. In many ways, this study does for the Jewish-American public discourse what Kenneth Cmiel's *Democratic Eloquence* did for

the mainstream American discourse,⁵ investigating the tensions within a reconstructed ‘democratic Jewish rhetoric’ in the public sphere. Cohen’s examination of nineteenth-century Jewish preaching reveals an intrinsic and polarized dynamic, recovering the core issues of an age that was full of contradictions and controversies, particularly regarding such issues as acculturation/preservation and innovation/tradition. Cohen’s approach is akin to the ideas of the public sphere as conceived by Jürgen Habermas and Quentin Skinner, but her study offers a refreshing examination of the nineteenth-century response to the challenges of Jewish emancipation in post-colonial America. While studying the discourse of the rabbis with remarkable insight, she does not, however, devote much critical attention to its rhetorical effectiveness.

In contrast, Marc Saperstein’s *Jewish Preaching in Times of War 1800-2001* unquestionably has a rhetorical focus. Like Gertel’s volume, it includes a collection of important sermons, as well as an essential exegetical part that is both introductory and critical in its approach; furthermore, like Cohen’s volume, it aims to achieve a synthetic historical view. However, since he chooses his texts from the Anglo-American and even Canadian corpus, Saperstein’s volume considers a larger area and embraces a larger number of styles and cultural models than Gertel’s and Cohen’s volumes. Furthermore, Saperstein’s timeframe is broader, his selection extending from 1800 to the beginning of the new millennium, including a section of sermons responding to 9/11. Focusing on the topics of war and peace – and critically examining the Western culture of wartime argumentation – Saperstein offers an original study of a rhetorical tradition with roots deep in the Orient and in the Old Testament. The selected texts have been organized according to the history of violent conflicts in modern times: the wars of the Napoleonic era, the wars of the mid-nineteenth century, the wars of the late nineteenth century, World War I, World War II, the wars of the later twentieth century, and the responses to 9/11. In terms of content, the sermons cover a wide range of themes, from patriotic fervour to moral judgement as well as appeals to social and political justice. Significantly, however, many of the sermons included in this collection deal more with the quest for peace and the rejection of violence than with the conduct of war. Of particular importance for the present time are the sermons delivered in 1965 by Roland Gittelsohn, boldly and skilfully protesting against the Vietnam War, and the 9/11 sermons, which are already developing into a new homiletic sub-genre.⁶

As in his previously published works on Jewish homiletics, the classics *Jewish Preaching, 1200-1800* (1989) and *Your Voice Like A Ram’s Horn: Themes and Texts in Traditional Jewish Preaching* (1996), Saperstein gives priority to those texts that are particularly significant for the history of Jewish preaching. The nineteenth-century preaching in Britain and in the United States is represented by the works of such founders and luminaries as David Woolf Marks, I. M. Wise, Sabato Morais, David Einhorn, and Joseph Krauskopf. Saperstein introduces each sermon by situating the text in its historical context and providing precise and clear bio-bibliographical information about the preacher, as well as, most importantly, comments on the structure and the rhetorical composition of the text.

Thanks to Saperstein’s analysis, the reader gets a clear impression of each preacher’s personal achievement and contribution to the history of the Jewish sermon. In this respect, the chapter devoted to the “Wars of the Napoleonic Era” (pp. 73-125) is illustrative, since it brings together texts that are iconic for the beginning of modern preaching in both Britain and the United States and illuminates an area of research in constant evolution. Saperstein includes the

⁵ Kenneth Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence. The Fight over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

⁶ See also Jonathan Magonet, “A Survey of New Year Sermons”, in *European Judaism* 35:1 (2002), pp. 4-30.

translations of an early Spanish-language sermon by Isaac Luria, from 1803, and a German-language sermon by Solomon Hirschel, delivered in London in 1805. Together with an English-language sermon by Gershom Seixas, delivered in New York, in 1815, the three texts offer valuable material for further studies of this foundational period of homiletic history. Saperstein also includes sermons that argue powerfully for peace, such as that delivered by Benjamin Artom in London in September 1870.

The wars of the twentieth century are represented by a group of sermons that indicate how much the sensitivity to warfare and violence changes over time, and how new stereotypes and ethical standards develop. Thus, the sermons delivered by Roland Gittelsohn (in 1965, during the Vietnam War) and Colin Eimer and Emmanuel Jacobovits (during the Falkland war of 1982) reformulate classical war topoi and, at the same time, introduce new arguments, as for example compassion for the enemy. Finally, in addition to being personal in terms of both tone and sentiment, the sermons that followed 9/11 all reveal new patterns of organization, moving from expressions of sorrow and tragic loss to a compelling call for humanity, universal compassion, and peaceful understanding in the world.

Saperstein's introduction to this valuable collection ("Modern Jewish Preaching", pp. 1-70) provides an overview of modern Anglo-American Jewish preaching over the 200 years that followed the Jewish emancipation. With its concluding section on Jewish homiletics in modern and post-modern times, the volume completes his earlier examinations of medieval and early-modern Jewish homiletics.⁷ Saperstein lists several changes that define the formation of modern Jewish preaching: the shift from exegesis to exhortation, the introduction of the vernacular, the growth of occasions and opportunities for preaching, and a new rapport to the audience. Furthermore, he comments on radical innovations, many of them recent, like the emergence of women preachers. According to Saperstein, the Jewish reflection on war and peace – a topos that he traces to Central Europe in the eighteenth century – is one of a number of new issues and themes that modern Jewish preaching has brought to the fore.

Embracing the history of the Jewish sermon from the Middle Ages to the present, and restoring and supplying links to the best traditions of Jewish intellectual history, Marc Saperstein's *Jewish Preaching in Times of War 1800-2001*, is an important contribution to the history of rhetoric, providing the framework for a general history of Jewish homiletics.

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⁷ See *Jewish Preaching 1200-1800. An Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), and *Exile in Amsterdam. Saul Levi Morteira's Sermons to a Congregation of "New Jews"* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2005). For the modern period, see also Saperstein's "Changes in the Modern Sermon", *The Encyclopedia of Judaism* 5, suppl. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 2265-2283.