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Mordecai: An Early American Family (review)

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success not only by scholars in Jewish Studies, but also by lay readers of many stripes. Members of my *havurah* have praised Sarna for his judicious interpretive approach, for his resistance to oversimplification, and for his presentation of history in such a way as to stimulate thinking about current issues in Jewish life. Ultimately, the *havurah* paid Sarna's text its ultimate compliment: in some twenty-five years of book discussions, *American Judaism* is the first volume for which all members of the group have expressed admiration.

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**Mordecai: An Early American Family**, by Emily Bingham. New York: Hill and Wang, 2003. 346 pp. \$26.00.

Unlike most Jewish immigrants to the United States, who arrived in the mid- and late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Mordecais arrived before the Revolution, and one branch of the family settled in the South. These southern Mordecais sought to define themselves as Americans, even as the nation was defining itself, and as Southerners, even as the region was becoming distinct in the new nation. But unlike most white Americans, the Mordecais were part of a tiny Jewish minority, and they had to define themselves as Jews, even as American Judaism was itself emerging. Their goal was always to achieve success, by which they meant to become prosperous, accepted, and respected members of the developing middle-class. In this book, Emily Bingham traces in fascinating detail how this family adopted what she terms "a protective covenant fusing bourgeois domesticity, intellectual cultivation, and religious liberalism" (p. 5) to become Americans and Southerners and the effects this had on the family over three generations. For some members of the family, their achievements came while remaining Jews—at least nominally. But for other Mordecais, indeed, for most of them by the third generation, becoming Americans and Southerners meant assimilation, intermarriage, and complete abandonment of Judaism.

The Mordecai story begins when Moses Mordecai arrived in the colonies as a convict indentured servant. After serving his indenture term Moses moved to Philadelphia where he became a moderately successful merchant and married an English woman, Elizabeth Whitlock, who converted to Judaism, marking her conversion by changing her name to Esther. Jacob Mordecai, the oldest of their three sons, was born in colonial Philadelphia in 1762. A brief mercantile career in New York, including a short stint in the employ

of Haym Solomon, ended disastrously, and Jacob and his wife, Judith Myers, along with their young family of two sons, moved south. After some wanderings, marked by several more ill-fated business ventures, Jacob finally settled in tiny, isolated Warrenton, North Carolina where he opened a store, selling goods to local farmers, usually for tobacco or for promises of tobacco from future crops. When the store, like his other mercantile efforts, failed, Jacob opened a female academy in Warrenton. This enterprise proved more successful, not because Jacob developed a business sense, but because his children took over both the teaching and the business aspects of the school when they realized that Jacob was unable to do so. Jacob fathered six children with Judith, and after her death he married her younger sister Rebecca with whom he had seven more children. It is Jacob and his large family that Bingham follows over three generations. The Mordecais were prodigious scribblers, publishing books and essays, but also producing and saving extensive correspondence, diaries, memoirs, and other writings that Bingham uses and puts into historical context to bring the family to life.

Bingham does not stray far from these sources produced by the Mordecais, and this gives the narrative a particular slant. We learn more about the family's personal and social life than about its economic and political life and about gender relations mainly from the perspectives of the women rather than the men because a large proportion of the letters, diaries, memoirs, and published material were written by women in the family. For the women, family unity and the maintenance of social position were central concerns. Thus we see the successful lawyers and businessmen in the family mainly through the eyes of the women—the kinds of homes they had and their attitudes towards helping (or refusing to help) one or another family member in need—but we learn less about the nature of their economic activities, their relations with other businessmen and lawyers, the kinds of customers and clients they had, and how their Jewishness might have affected their economic and professional pursuits.

We get a rich picture of the interpersonal relations within a large extended family as it sought, with varying degrees of success, to maintain familial unity over several generations during the early republic and antebellum periods of American history. Unfortunately, however, we learn much less about what it meant to be a Jew in the slave South during these years. The Mordecais seemed to have experienced little antisemitism—at least they did not write about it. The only overt manifestation of antisemitism that Bingham mentions is that of a slave who objected to working for a Jew—and ended up on the auction block for her impertinence. As one Mordecai put it, their Jewish faith presented many “difficulties,” but the occasion for the comment was a problem

arising from a prospective intermarriage. Their Jewish heritage did not seem to stand in the way of most attempts at intermarriage; nor did it interfere with family members gaining enough wealth and a measure of prominence in education, reform movements, the military, the law, and politics to gain the social status that put them into the middle-class. The Jewishness of the Mordecais in Bingham's telling seemed to have created more conflicts within the family than with the outside community. But I suspect that the efforts of the Mordecais to hide or completely abandon their Jewishness reveals that they experienced, or at least perceived, much more antisemitism than Bingham allows.

Jacob and his young family were the only Jews in Warrenton, and early on Jacob decided to keep a low religious profile, in part because keeping the store open and the school in session on Saturday were business necessities and in part because he felt no strong personal pressures to maintain a Jewish presence in a potentially antagonistic environment. Indeed, during the "Great Awakening," when evangelicals visited Warrenton, Jacob came close to converting to Christianity. His brief flirtation with conversion eventually fired a renewed commitment to Judaism, at first primarily on an intellectual level, but later in his life after moving to Richmond, Virginia he became an active participant in the city's Jewish community. He established a reputation as a scholar and became a firm supporter of orthodoxy and opponent of those who were taking the first steps towards establishing Reform Judaism in Richmond.

For his children and grandchildren, the story was different. Those few of his children and grandchildren who remained Jews did not share Jacob's late-life orthodoxy but instead held to Jacob's older view, as his son Solomon put it, "the liberality . . . on points of religion in which our father . . . educated his children constituted them Jews but by name" (p. 95). They often intermarried and allowed their children to be raised outside of the faith, becoming non-practicing Jews and certainly playing no role in maintaining and passing down their heritage. Some, and eventually, most of the Mordecais, however, rejected Judaism altogether by converting to Christianity, and in the case of two of Jacob's daughters, Rachel and Ellen, became ardent Christian proselytizers. The correspondence is full of references to family tensions and conflicts arising from intermarriage and conversion and particularly from the proselytizing efforts of some of the Christian Mordecais and their friends. But given the general indifference of most of the Mordecais towards Judaism and their steady abandonment of the faith, these conflicts had little lasting effects on family unity.

Other actions by some family members raised more concern. When two of Jacob's grandchildren moved to New York and became involved in Fourierian socialism, feminism, hydropathy, free love, and other activities, their

southern relatives, Christian and Jewish alike, found them to be outrageously radical and dangerous because they went counter to their belief in middle-class respectability. A similar challenge to the family's respectability came with the start of the Civil War. The southern Mordecai family members strongly supported the Confederacy, bringing a degree of unity among them by papering over other conflicts that had divided them. They expected that Jacob's son Alfred, a career military officer, would resign from the army and return to the South to take the leading position in the Confederate Army that Jefferson Davis himself had offered. Alfred had a distinguished career, beginning with his appointment to West Point. He graduated first in his class and then served in a variety of responsible positions, including, when the war began, command of an arsenal in New York making munitions that would eventually be used against the Confederacy. He had spent his entire career in the North; his six children were born there, and one, Alfred, Jr. was also a West Point graduate who remained loyal to the Federal cause and would be his enemy if he joined the Confederacy. When he chose to remain aloof by resigning his commission and moving to Philadelphia, the southern Mordecais, including his mother, turned against him, less, it seems, for political reasons and more because they felt his action diminished the respect and prestige of the family.

The Mordecais lived in a slave society, and most of them owned slaves or benefited from the work of slaves other family members owned. But the Mordecais wrote little about their attitudes towards slavery. There is a brief mention of their using slaves for work at the school and at home, and Bingham records that when the family moved from Warrenton, they sold some slaves and took others to their new home. Other passing references in the letters indicate that various members of the family owned slaves, sometimes sizable numbers. Bingham explains that the Mordecais simply took slavery—and the racist views that accompanied it—for granted, and their correspondence and other writings seldom mention slavery except an occasional reference to the difficulty of managing their chattel.

By the end of the third generation, most of the Mordecais had become Christians, but even earlier, except for Jacob and his youngest daughter Emma, the few Mordecais who remained Jews avoided clear and open manifestations of their faith. They felt neither a religious nor a cultural tie to Judaism. This in a way is representative of the history of many Jews in America. But certainly not of all of them, even in the South. In Richmond and Charleston and even in

the smaller towns, some southern Jews, including Jacob and Emma Mordecai, kept a Jewish tradition alive.

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**GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation**, by Deborah Dash Moore. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004. 352 pp. \$25.95.

One of this book's endorsers aptly depicted it as the American Jewish version of Tom Brokaw's "greatest generation." Deborah Dash Moore's work manifests a similar uplifting inspirational tone of American triumphalism and exceptionalism, while simultaneously, I would add, suffering from the same deficiencies characteristic of this kind of history. Inspired by public events surrounding the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II, Moore set out to examine the neglected role of Jews in the U.S. armed forces during that conflict, as most previous studies of this era focused on the home front and the rescue of European Jews. Unlike Brokaw's popular history, however, Moore presents her work as a cultural study of the momentous transformation of American Jewish identity arising out of military service. According to Moore, this "war intensified the interdependence of the men's American and Jewish identities" (p. x). It is both a Jewish and an American story as she attempts to disclose and then integrate the Jewish chapter into the greater American historical narrative. A recurrent theme is that this experience also legitimized the "Judeo-Christian tradition" among Americans generally. From objects of prejudice typical of longstanding and deeply entrenched antisemitism, Jews (together with Catholics) now earned recognition as integral parts of American democracy and its religious values.

Moore's book is essentially a well-written, captivating story of fifteen Jewish young men, one of whom is her father. She recounts their transition from fairly isolated, parochial Jewish communities into the diverse, often alien and antagonistic, culture of the American military to overseas service and, for some, combat. Coming from diverse economic, religious, and ideological Jewish backgrounds themselves, these young men discovered their commonalities and differences with each other as well as with their non-Jewish comrades. Sometimes this occurred dramatically, as with overt antisemitism or cultural shock over army meals, and at other times in subtle nuanced ways, as they absorbed military values that equated masculinity with fighting. One significant difference between Jews and non-Jews is that the former fought not only as