

# APPROBATIONS

*JPS: The Americanization of Jewish Culture, 1888–1988*,  
by Jonathan D. Sarna. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989. 430 pp.

Reviewed by:  
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Brooklyn, NY

## Introduction

One of the more important mirrors of any society is the kind of books it publishes. If this is so for society as a whole, it is all the more so for the People of the Book. Ironically, while American Jewry has published and/or reprinted thousands of titles, it has produced very little scholarship on Jewish book publishing in the United States. With the appearance of Jonathan D. Sarna's centennial history of the Jewish Publication Society (JPS), justice has been done to at least one small, albeit important, segment of the Jewish publishing scene. While Sarna's book is not a ready reference tool (except for its useful lists of authors, titles, illustrators, translators, and members of the JPS Governing Board), a review of this work fits in well with the aims of this journal.

During the past century, JPS published and distributed eight million copies of over 700 titles, many of outstanding and enduring scholarship. Multi-volume works, such as the monumental Jewish histories by Graetz, Dubnow, and Baron; the JPS Bible translation; the Jewish community series; the Schiff Classics; and last but not least, the *American Jewish Year Book (AJYB)*—that indispensable, ongoing Jewish reference tool, which began in 1899—are but a few highlights of a magnificent collection.

By any standard, these statistics and titles demonstrate that JPS occupies a major niche in the annals of American Jewish publishing. Yet, beyond the statistics, the importance of JPS lies in the fact that it provided members with some of the best Jewish books in history, philosophy, and literature—ancient, medieval, or modern—for a reasonable price.

Of great value to JPS is the fact that Sarna, a well-known historian of American Jewry, has wisely chosen not to write an institutional history. Instead, he sought, and to a great degree succeeded, in writing the history of JPS—its books, and the men and women behind it—placing the publisher

within the broader context of American Jewish history. Though he surely does not ignore the many personalities that strut the stage of this fascinating story, Sarna focuses more on the issues he feels concerned American Jewry over the past century:

the relationship between European and American Jewry; evolving attitudes toward America, modern Christianity, world Jewry, Reform Judaism, Zionism, the Holocaust, and modern Israel; the clash of interests between rabbis, scholars, and laymen; debates over cultural aims, purposes and responsibilities, and standards; perennial tensions over such issues as assimilation and identity, tradition and change, unity and diversity, timelessness and relevance, caution and risk. (p. x)

Vignettes of the authors, as well as the travails of publishing in America, are included. Among the most fascinating sketches are those dealing with the translations of the Schiff Library of Jewish Classics.

## Origins of the JPS

Sarna describes several early, unsuccessful attempts, beginning in the 1840s, to establish a Jewish Publication Society geared toward books promoting Jewish education, while resisting Christian missionary efforts and the generally assimilatory trends of this era. Several such efforts were led by Isaac Leeser, the indefatigable defender of Jewish Tradition and pioneer in numerous publication ventures, including a "Jewish" translation of the Bible. It was his protégé, Mayer Sulzberger, who became a major figure in this eventually successful translation.

Finally, on June 3, 1888, the Jewish Publication Society, which was to become one of American Jewry's most enduring ventures, was launched. Among the reasons for this success was the fact that the essentially German-Jewish community in America had reached a level of maturity

and financial success that provided a reasonable assurance of support. The philanthropist Jacob R. Schiff, head of Kuhn, Loeb and Co. (and grandfather of Dorothy Schiff, the former publisher of the *New York Post*), was most generous in the founding and support of numerous major JPS projects.

## JPS Personalities

Among Sarna's talents is his ability to portray the personalities who are frequently as interesting as the books they wrote or translated. Take, for example, Nina Salaman and her effort, in the face of a terminal illness, to publish her translations of the poems of Judah Halevi (1924). Or, consider Mayer Sulzberger, Cyrus Adler, and Henrietta Szold—three outstanding figures in American Jewish history who had a hand in shaping the growth and direction of JPS. All had scholarly backgrounds (Adler had a Ph.D. in Semitics) as well as broader communal interests.

The most poignant portrayal is aptly titled, "The Legends, Louis Ginzberg and Henrietta Szold." Szold was the dedicated unofficial secretary of JPS, who for two decades was one of the mainstays of the Society, serving as editor, translator, proofreader, and executive secretary. Already in her forties in 1903, when she met Louis Ginzberg, one of the greatest Talmudic scholars to come to these shores, she fell passionately in love for the first time in her life. It was a love that had been previously channeled into filial devotion for her scholarly father, Rabbi Benjamin Szold. The product of the Szold-Ginzberg collaboration for several years was the latter's multi-volume *Legends of the Jews* (1909–1938), one of the great scholarly achievements of American Jewry, for which Szold served as translator and editor.

Five years later, their relationship ended precipitously when Ginzberg announced his engagement to a much younger woman, and a devastated Szold could not

sustain her work on the *Legends* with the same enthusiasm and devotion. After a few years, she left JPS, and the rest of Ginzberg's work languished unattended for years. To Zionism's good fortune, Szold recovered and devoted the rest of her life to developing Hadassah and, during the Hitler era, to rescuing children via Youth Aliyah.

### Effects of History

Each era left its imprint on JPS, as it did on all facets of the Jewish community. Thus, the great changes that took place during the year prior to World War I, with the rise and stabilization of the vast East European migration, had their effect on the perspective of JPS. Witness, for example, the translations of great Yiddish literature, such as *Stories and Pictures* by I. L. Peretz (1904), and books on East European Jewry, such as Zangwill's *Dreamers of the Ghetto* (1898).

Yet, as Sarna correctly points out, the long road of JPS was far from a straight line of progress. There were the heady days of the First World War, when government subsidies and private donations enabled JPS to publish over 100,000 volumes for Jewish servicemen, including an abridged prayerbook, and *Readings from the Holy Scriptures* (1917), a book of 276 pages weighing but two ounces. These were followed by the "lean years," when competition from general as well as Jewish publishers, among other factors, greatly reduced the output of JPS.

### The Holocaust Years

The thirties and forties presented still other concerns, such as the Depression and the worldwide increase in antisemitism, particularly following the rise of Hitler. These, too, are reflected in the editorial decisions and in the books published, or ignored, by JPS. The vogue in this era was to use publishing as a major weapon in the fight against antisemitism. Thus, JPS sponsored such books as Marvin Lowenthal's *The Jews of Germany* (1936) as well as well-documented articles in the *AJYB* about the situation of Jews in Germany, focusing on the deterioration of that once civilized country. In 1939, the Society published a book titled *Cold Pogrom*, which provided a "... convincing portrait of the overall Jewish situation in Germany, showing more graphically than ... any newspaper report or historical treatise the terrible repercussions of the Hitler tragedy" (p. 186).

This, however, was as far as JPS was willing to go. One of the most telling sections involving the Holocaust portrays the amazingly insensitive attitude held by JPS and its Board toward the suffering of European Jewry. Sarna informs us that Dr. Solomon Grayzel, the Jewish historian and editor of JPS (undoubtedly supported by the Board) refused to utilize books to inform American Jews of the tragedy that had struck their European brethren. As early as 1941, Grayzel declined to publish a manuscript entitled "The Massacre of the Jews in Vienna," plus several personal accounts of experiences in Dachau and Buchenwald (ca. 1939), although he found them "gripping" and was certain that they would make effective anti-Nazi propaganda. He was accommodating enough to encourage the authors to try to publish their works elsewhere, so that non-Jews would have a chance to read them.

Grayzel's rationale was: "*I think the time has come when a responsible organization like ours must call a halt to terrorizing the Jewish population in this country. . . .*" [emphasis added]. Sarna interprets this to mean that "the news from Europe was so bad that the Society worried lest Jews despair of their situation"—"a not unjustified fear," he added, "considering the wave of well-publicized suicides among Jewish intellectuals of the period" (pp. 186–187). Grayzel and the JPS Board, however, were out of sync with the majority of American Jews, who were tough enough to have endured the terrible news. To cite but one example: in response to the article in *The New York Times* dated November 26, 1944, announcing that the American government had confirmed the gassing of 1,765,000 Jews in Auschwitz, over 400 Jewish newspapers and organizations expressed interest in obtaining this Government report on the atrocities committed by Hitler's Germany. Sadly, Grayzel chose instead to publish Rabbi Joseph L. Baron's *Candles in the Night and Stars and Sand*, which portrayed the "nice" things written about Jews by non-Jews, and "held aloft the banner of interfaith harmony . . ." (p. 187).

### Zionism, Reform Judaism, and the JPS Board

There is surprisingly little analysis in this book of the JPS Board—in particular, the role that Zionism and Reform Judaism played in its deliberations. In his account of "The Explosive Debate over Zionism," Sarna seems to skirt such issues as Zionism and Reform; he euphemistically refers to Reform Jews as "those who saw Judaism as a religion rather than as a na-

tionality." He simply claims that JPS steered clear of political Zionism by publishing more books on Palestine as a haven for refugees—a position both Zionists and non-Zionists could accept. Sarna does not adequately emphasize the changing climate of opinion during the Hitler era. A large proportion of Reform rabbis (except for the members of the American Council for Judaism) began to change their attitude toward Zionism during the thirties, as they became more ethnically identified with Jews and somewhat more traditional, as evidenced by the 1937 Columbus Platform. The Holocaust caused most American Jews to support Zionism as a means of sending the survivors of a ravaged postwar Europe to Eretz Israel.

A deeper analysis of the ideological nature of the Board would have revealed why Orthodox Jews were (and still are) extremely underrepresented on the Board. Sarna mentions in passing that Rabbi Dr. Samuel Belkin (president of Yeshiva University), the first Orthodox Jew on the Board, was appointed only in 1941. A closer look would also have helped readers to understand why it took another quarter of a century for the Society to recognize the existence of Orthodox Jews other than those associated with Yeshiva University. This occurred only with the publication of Charles Liebman's classic article, "Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life," in the *AJYB* (1965). Such analysis would also have explained why the title of the 1917 translation of the Bible was "The Holy Scriptures," while the 1962 translation was labeled, "The Torah."

Among the better chapters in this study are the ones on "the leaner years" following World War I, with a good balance of internal and external factors that changed the course of JPS's almost exclusive role as publisher of Jewish books to one competing with other Jewish and general publishers.

Sarna also does well in dealing with the postwar era, describing the "triumphalist" attitude of American Jews, which made the case for American exceptionalism and proclaimed that America was not the *Galut* (Diaspora). He does equally well for the sixties and the counter-culture, providing a fascinating glimpse into the publication of the *Jewish Catalog*, that runaway best-seller so unlike anything the "stodgy" JPS had ever before issued. It was clearly a case of JPS being in step with its contemporaries,

rather than behind. At the same time, Sarna dwells on the growing relationship between Israel and American Jewry, especially after the Six-Day War in June 1967, which resulted in Israel-related books becoming the largest single component of the Society's publications. By 1974, JPS had even opened an office in Jerusalem and, in a related shift of focus, opened one in New York four years later.

Although Sarna concentrates on the JPS, he mentions in passing the broader context of university and trade publishing, which competed with Jewish books issued by the Society. One would also have liked at least a superficial description of the wider world of Jewish publishing during the past generation, including other Jewish book clubs. In addition, by the seventies, a veritable Jewish reprint industry was producing hundreds, if not thousands, of classic Hebraica. At least the minimal facts could have been gleaned from Charles Madison's book, *Jewish Publishing in America* (1976), which is cited in Sarna's footnotes.

Despite some reservations, I feel that Sarna has produced a major work on American Jewish history.

#### Reference

Madison, Charles A. *Jewish Publishing in America*. New York: Sanhedrin Press, 1976.

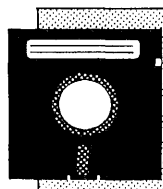
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*Dr. David Kranzler is a retired full professor of Library Science at CUNY. He is also a historian specializing in modern history and the Holocaust, with five books, numerous articles, and contributions to the so-called Goldberg Commission Report on American Jewry During the Holocaust and The Encyclopedia of the Holocaust. His Japanese, Nazis and Jews: the Jewish Refugee Community of Shanghai, 1938-1945, is currently being translated into Chinese.*

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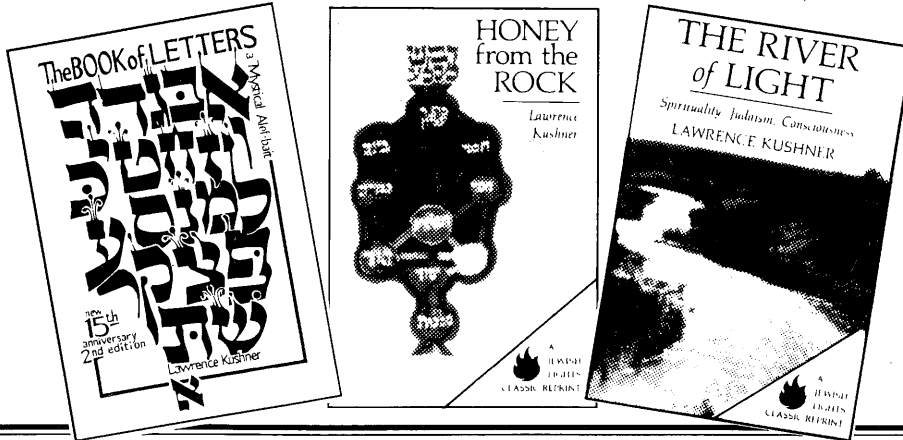
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