

BOOK BREAK

Book offers unusual view of American Jews



ESTHER LITTMANN

"Imagine the wonders of America. To begin with, there's the land. It's flowing with milk and honey. People make heaps of money, they literally scoop up gold. And business is so good, it makes you dizzy. You can do anything you want. If you want a factory, you set

up a factory. If you feel like opening a little store, you open a little store. And the size of the cities! The width of the streets! The height of the buildings!"

"That's all very well . . . but tell me: Don't people die in America, just like here? Or do they live on and on?"

"Of course they die, but the way they die — that's what's wonderful."

— from Sholom Aleichem's "Beryl Isaac and the Wonders of America" (1948)

These sentiments, expressed by the Yiddish author whose stories form the basis of "Fiddler on the Roof," were shared by countless Jewish immigrants who came to America. They also provide the framework to "The Wonders of America" (Hill and Wang, 1994), a fascinating and informative book by Jenna Weissman Joselit, Princeton University professor and author of numerous works on popular culture.

When Jews came to America, the freedom to pursue happiness took many forms, religious as well as commercial and professional. But freedom of worship was only the beginning.

After that, writes the author, Jews claimed freedom to discard, modify, invent and reappropriate. Not for them a religious straitjacket of "ideological and behavioral consistency." America was the place to exercise choice, to practice indulgence rather than self-denial, to secure material well-being as well as spiritual welfare.

Grass-roots

Joselit has written a book of modern Jewish history in America like we've never read before. It's about a Judaism shaped by consumers rather than by the "cultural custodians," a grass-roots phenomenon, created by the people and for the people.

When time constraints made strict Sabbath observance too difficult, Jews channeled their energy and enthusiasm to another family event — the Bar Mitzvah celebration. When adherence to dietary laws began to wane, the love of Jewish cooking proliferated, dotting the urban landscape with bagel shops and delicatessens.

The author's 40-page bibliography contains no weighty tomes by biblical scholars. Instead, we find references to temple yearbooks, articles in popular Jewish magazines, personal letters to relatives still living in the "old coun-

try," and advertisements to entice the Jewish homemaker.

Along with the minutiae of daily living — marriage, childbirth, parenting and departing — Joselit includes some startling, little-known items of information.

Beginnings

For example, we learn that Bat Mitzvah (coming-of-age ceremony for girls) isn't a liberal innovation.

It started in the Conservative movement, and was even practiced by some Orthodox congregations before the Reform movement welcomed its inclusion. The latter, after all, already had a ceremony that acknowledged women's religious quality: Confirmation. Bat Mitzvah, purists claimed, was redundant. But who could ignore the tide of popular opinion?

Also interesting is Joselit's account of the double-ring ceremony. Although its roots were in non-Jewish 19th century Germany, the ritual was adopted in 1871, after several educated, cultured German-American Jewish brides asked if they could give their grooms a ring. Reluctant to be passive at the altar, they wanted "equal participation."

But whether the examples come from the kitchen (beef-frye, a meat product that resembled bacon) or the wedding (the electric chupa), Joselit's work is alive with amusing anecdotes and telling detail that describe what it means to be Jewish in America.

When the community's leaders "saw only deterioration," writes Joselit, "the folk, by contrast, saw color, liveliness, fun and good-natured sentimentality. When the elite believed consumption and religious ritual to be . . . adversarial, the folk joined them together."

During this holiday season, many Jewish clergy will, no doubt, address the issue of identity versus assimilation.

"Our distinctive characteristics are going," said one rabbi from a pulpit in Chicago. "Intermarriage is rising, and temple attendance is in decline."

That was 1893. Since then Jews have bemoaned the same trends and continue to ask, "Can we survive freedom?" Joselit's response is provocative: "The wonder of it all — and of America — is that the answer remains the same."

Jenna Weissman Joselit will speak on the topic "The Unaffiliated Jew" 1 p.m. Friday, Oct. 13, at the Birmingham Temple in Farmington Hills as part of "Colloquium '95."

Esther Littmann, a resident of Bloomfield Township, is a lecturer of English and German at Lawrence Technological University in Southfield. As an only child, Littmann grew up regarding books as substitutes for siblings. You can leave her a message from a touch-tone phone at (313) 953-2047, mailbox 1893. Her fax number is (313) 644-1314.

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