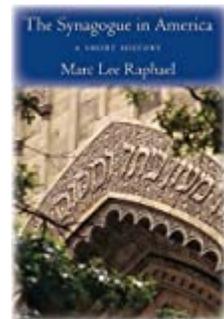




**Marc Lee Raphael.** *The Synagogue in America: A Short History.* New York and London: New York University Press, 2011. 224 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-7582-0; ISBN 978-0-8147-7704-6.



**Reviewed by** Emily Katz (University of California, Irvine)

**Published on** H-Judaic (September, 2011)

**Commissioned by** Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

## Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about the American Synagogue but Were Afraid to Ask

A pop quiz: What architectural fashion was so popular in American synagogue design that it became known as the “Jewish style”? Which Orthodox rabbi lectured on Jesus, in Yiddish—as well as giving sermons on Aristotle, Confucianism, and Muhammad—and assigned himself a letter grade for each public performance? True or false: In the colonial period, Shearith Israel, bastion of New York’s Sephardic elite, had more presidents of Ashkenazi than Sephardic descent. Stumped? Marc Lee Raphael has all the answers in his new book, *The Synagogue in America: A Short History*.

Raphael, one of the foremost scholars on American Judaism and American Jewish history, has written a first-rate account of a fundamental institution in American Jewish life. The author’s methodology is rigorous and his research abundant. He has mined years of bulletins, rabbis’ sermons, and board minutes from synagogues in seven distinct regions of the country, as well as conducting interviews, observing worship, and assessing architecture firsthand. The author wields his mastery of the details judiciously in order to present synagogues as liv-

ing organisms. What did it mean, in concrete terms, to belong to an Orthodox shul in 1908? In the 1950s? In 2008? What did a week in the life of a Reform or Conservative synagogue in the same periods look like? Raphael makes it clear that, to answer these sorts of questions, congregation Beth El of Phoenix, Arizona, has as much to teach us as New York’s B’nai Jeshurun. He offers precise portraits of individual synagogues but also shows how those institutions, in the aggregate, reveal larger patterns of affiliation, worship, leadership, and design.

Raphael likes to weigh evidence in plain sight. This is a good strategy: As he points out, much of the secondary literature on individual American synagogues has been written by nonprofessional historians who tend to write in a celebratory mode and usually provide a less than meticulous account of an institution’s past. In the first chapter, for example, Raphael shows that many congregational histories offer conflicting information on their precise dates of origin; he then pauses to establish which congregation can truly claim to be the oldest in the United States. Historians of American Jewry may not

be surprised with his verdict (congratulations, Shearith Israel). Raphael dispatches the problem quickly and irrefutably, however, a testament to his command not just of the facts but also of the form of the short history.

His discussion and analysis of the Reform synagogue, woven throughout the book, is particularly strong. In an early chapter on nineteenth-century American Judaism, for example, Raphael provides a cogent distillation of what, exactly, distinguished synagogue reforms (nearly ubiquitous in this period) from Reform synagogues. Drawing on his extensive research, Raphael crafts a valuable typology of the twenty most popular synagogue reforms of the day, from the introduction of an organ to the elimination of the bar mitzvah. Ultimately, he finds that only one of these—changing the traditional liturgy—moved a congregation decisively into the Reform camp. Similarly, Raphael amasses a preponderance of evidence in order to make definitive statements about the character of the Reform synagogue (as well as its Conservative, Orthodox, and Reconstructionist competitors) in later eras. We become acquainted with a number of “classical” Reform rabbis of late nineteenth century, who excelled as public orators but shaped a Reform laity “inarticulate in the synagogue and unobservant at home” (p. 60). We learn that their counterparts of the late 1950s and early 1960s preached about civil rights more than any other single topic—often citing the Prophetic tradition, and passionately urging their congregants to take a personal stake in the issue—while they generally avoided the subject of the Holocaust until the 1970s. While we may know, intuitively, that informal dress, services, and seating became the norm in Reform congregations beginning in the late 1960s, Raphael proves it conclusively.

The book, as any, has some weaknesses. Though Raphael uses a conversational style that is generally a pleasure to read, he occasionally produces long and

winding sentences that are difficult to follow. Conceptually, the significance of denominational identity remains somewhat fuzzy. To be sure, Raphael cites definitional ambiguity among the denominational wings as a perennial theme in American synagogue history, at least until the postwar period. Raphael’s point, throughout, is that one must pay close attention to the informal, day-to-day choices and practices that characterize congregational life and avoid anachronistic or inappropriate use of official denominational labels. Nevertheless, his very cautiousness in this regard sometimes muddies rather than clarifies his assessments. One example: “As congregations that we would identify, unofficially, as Orthodox ... reformed so much that they became, officially, Conservative,” reformers frequently confronted traditionalists—opponents of reforming—with synagogue constitutions that contained ambivalent language about definitions of ritual” (p. 78). It takes several readings to untangle that sentence; here and elsewhere, his simultaneous use and avoidance of denominational labels can confound.

Still, one can hardly ask for a better overview of an essential subject. For most of American Jewish history, only a minority of Jews have affiliated with any synagogue. Yet this enduring religious, social, and cultural entity has been, in Raphael’s words, “the most significant institution in the life of the Jews” in the United States (p. 207). *The Synagogue in America* is a succinct, authoritative, and generally lucid account; it is also fascinating and funny, peppered with Raphael’s dry asides and gleeful revelations. It is a rare treat to read a historical survey this compact and full of personality. The book is a boon for those who teach American Jewish history—it could be usefully employed as a required text for an undergraduate course or, at the very least, as a helpful reference for instructors. It deserves to find a place among general audiences, too. Raphael has given us a history of the American synagogue on one foot, and that is no small achievement.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

**Citation:** Emily Katz. Review of Raphael, Marc Lee, *The Synagogue in America: A Short History*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. September, 2011.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32935>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.