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Albert Isaac Slomovitz. *The Fighting Rabbis: Jewish Military Chaplains and American History.* New York and London: New York University Press, 1999. xiii + 171 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-8098-5.

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Fighting Rabbis is a short, chronological narrative of the history of Jewish chaplains in the US military. It covers the period from colonial times to the present, documenting how "Wherever troops went, their chaplains followed" (123). The author is an ordained rabbi and a CAPT (colonel) in the Navy Chaplain Corps who is currently serving as the Senior Chaplain at the Naval Air Station at Pensacola, Florida. Hoping for a book that would shed light on a topic that was hitherto unknown to me, I was ultimately disappointed by *Fighting Rabbis*. Slomovitz failed to use his subject matter to the fullest and thus left the book's potential unfulfilled. While six of the seven chapters cover the period up to the end of the Second World War, only one chapter covers the postwar world despite its almost unbroken chain of conflicts.

Slomovitz notes that the story of fighting rabbis and hundreds of other Jewish chaplains is an unknown and untold saga in American Jewish history (ix). It is his aim to remedy the fragmented and non-systematic history of existing scholarship on American Jewish military history. While this claim may be correct, it seems rather dubious (as he claims in his preface) that scholars of the social and cultural history of American Jewry have completely omitted the details of US military participation by Jews. Historians of the New York Intellectuals certainly did not fail to consider the impact of Army service during World War II as a contributing factor towards the intellectual acceptance of America in the postwar world. Moreover, the experiences of Jews in the Army such as Norman Mailer and others are well documented. Irving Howe's initial opposition to the war, for example, was 'transformed' by his experience in the Army. Through service in the United States Army or in federal wartime agencies such as the Office of Strategic Services, many Jews (intellectuals and otherwise) felt a greater identification with the national community because the soldier's uniform was a much more effective symbol of fellowship than the Party membership card (see Daniel Aaron, 'Some Reflections on Communism and the Jewish Writer,' in Peter I. Rose, ed. *The Ghetto and Beyond: Essays on Jewish Life in America* [New York: Random House, 1969], 259).

The first chapter provides a short essay on the origins of the chaplaincy in general and of English-style chaplaincy in America in particular. The second chapter is devoted to the first military rabbis. The official military history of Jews in America begins in August 1655, when they won the right to join the local militia and take responsibility for the defense of their homes and colony. The following years up to the Civil War, however, are covered in only two pages when a more in-depth examination of these years would have made interesting read-

ing material. The Civil War marked the introduction of Jews as military chaplains. Up to this time, notes Slomovitz, no rabbi had served as a Jewish military chaplain. Although some 6500 Jews served in Union Army and 2000 joined the Confederacy, only regularly ordained clergymen of Christian denominations were permitted to serve as chaplains. American Jewry successfully fought to amend this regulation and in 1862 Jacob Frankel (the leader of Rodeph Shalom Congregation of Philadelphia) was appointed as the first military rabbi. Slomovitz provides brief biographical details on Frankel and his colleagues, but unfortunately he does not evaluate the significance of their presence in the military. For example, while he documents anti-Semitic prejudice in both armies and the perception by later nineteenth-century Jews that the Civil War years marked the onset of serious anti-Semitism in the United States, he does not relate how either Jewish soldiers or their chaplains responded to it. As such, it is hard to see what Slomovitz adds to Bertram Korn's *American Jewry and the Civil War* (Georgia: R. Bemis Publishing, 1995). He concludes the chapter on a positive note, pointing out that "This process of forcefully and publicly speaking up for their rights would be a recurring dimension of Jewish life in America" (25).

Military chaplaincy may be the main subject of *Fighting Rabbis*, but the title of Chapter Three, 'Fighting Anti-Semitism,' is clearly its focus. Slomovitz is concerned throughout to defend Jews against the charges that they were unpatriotic and consequently never fought for America. In his preface he notes the existence of "an unfounded belief that, except at times of national emergency, Jews have not had a place in the armed forces" (ix). He is keen to rebuff such accusations, arguing that "the story of these rabbis in uniform helps refute the misperception that military service has not been embraced by Jews. This book confirms the facts. American Jews and their rabbis, from the country's earliest days, have had a full and participatory place in the defense of their country" (xi). This is a recurring theme throughout. In Chapter One he writes, "Since arriving in America, Jews have had an active role in the defense of the country" (6). Chapter Three itself deals with these issues in a more explicit fashion. In Chapter Five, which deals with the interwar years, the thread is picked up once again: "the United States military, through its Chaplain Corps, symbolized one institution that stood against anti-Semitic beliefs" (63). This concern with antisemitism leads Slomovitz to cover ground already well-trodden by historians of American antisemitism such as Leonard Dinnerstein (whose works are are strangely absent in the bibliography). Slomovitz's book, however, is original in its contention that as antisemitism grew, the military Chaplain Corps, through its interfaith dialogue, countered it.

An overriding weakness of *Fighting Rabbis* is its failure to place the issue of military participation within the wider continuum of American Jewish History. Slomovitz attempts to use the relationship and absorption of Jews/Rabbis into the military as a microcosm for the concurrent trends in wider American Jewish life. Yet he fails to suggest what exactly enlistment signified at different historical moments. He alludes to such issues, for example, with the observation that, "The desire to join the military may have been viewed as the ultimate form of Americanization. Certainly joining the armed forces provided one definite way of proving one's allegiance and affinity for a new homeland" (38). However, he does not pursue these issues in depth. Perhaps the most interesting dimension of 'fighting' rabbis and Jews is not the simple fact that they fought, but rather the significance of this. As Daniel Aaron observed Army service could bring greater identification with America for its Jews. Citizenship meant the right to bear arms and fight for one's country. Thus the newly emancipated slaves argued that their enlistment in the Union Army de facto implied citizenship following the Civil War (see Aaron, 'Some Reflections on Communism and the Jewish Writer'). Furthermore, the Army seemed to be a great leveller since it projected an image that it did not discriminate on the basis of ancestry and allowed for progression through individual merit. Many Jews would later join the CPUSA for similar reasons. Slomovitz considers none of these points in sufficient depth.

Although the book contains many interesting anecdotes, one does not glean a true understanding of the individuals who became chaplains. Several episodes are related, such as the time when a German Army chaplain conducted a Seder during World War I that included captured Russian Jewish soldiers who were treated as fellow Jews rather than as prisoners of war. Later he describes a World War II Yom Kippur service held not more than 200 yards from a Japanese ridge, well within range of sniper fire, and accompanied by constant artillery bombardment. The makeshift bimah (translated by Slomovitz as 'altar') was constructed from ammo boxes covered in captured Japanese silk. He also recounts how some soldiers removed their dog tags for fear of what may happen if captured by the Germans. But he does not probe their personal feelings any further. One is left asking how these Jews felt during their military service in Europe during World War II? What happened when chap-

lains captured co-religionists on the other side in other conflicts?

The text is at its best when it recounts such incidents or examines the careers of individuals such as Captain Ernst Lorge or Rabbi Herbert Eskin, both of whom strove to save the lives of camp survivors after they had been liberated. Such stories are the exception, however. The illustrations accompanying the text about World War II provide fascinating visual insights into Jewish military life and are perhaps more informative than the text; for instance, there is a striking picture of a Jewish service held amid concrete Dragon-teeth tank barriers in Germany (p. 99). Moreover, at times the human side of the chaplains is submerged beneath the detail about institutional and procedural practices. As such the book is more about the fighting rabbinate than fighting rabbis.

The concept of fighting is clearly important to Slomovitz. It is used on different levels to mean different things: participation in the US Armed Forces, the fight against prejudice and antisemitism, the fight for civil rights and equality, and so on. Slomovitz's overriding concern with proving "that the Jew fights" (34) suggests that the book might have better been called 'Fighting Jews,' and in fact the title of *Fighting Rabbis* is somewhat misleading, as these rabbis (and all US military chaplains) did/do not actually fight.

Nonetheless, Slomovitz has pointed the way towards what could become a new and fascinating dimension of Jewish military history. More work on this topic still remains to be done and whoever takes up the task can build upon Slomovitz's work by contrasting American military rabbis with their Israeli counterparts to see how they differ in practice and to understand what it means to be a military rabbi in a Jewish rather than non-Jewish country. As such *Fighting Rabbis* has provided a good basis for further enquiry into the field of American Jewish military history.

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