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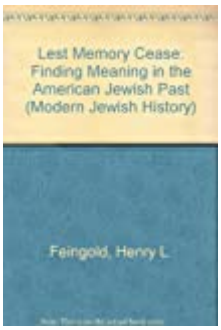

Henry L. Feingold. *Lest Memory Cease: Finding Meaning in the American Jewish Past.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996. x + 226 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8156-0400-6; $44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-2710-4.

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Reflections upon the American Jewish Past and the Uncertain Future

Just how the Jews have survived in the Diaspora through centuries of persecution and the lure of competing social and religious influences has been a fruitful subject of scholarly debate. In *Lest Memory Cease: Finding Meaning in the American Jewish Past*, Henry L. Feingold–a prolific scholar of American Jewish history–examines the ongoing burdens that beset the American Jewish community, specifically.

Feingold describes himself as a "Jewish survivalist" and, indeed, one detects in these thirteen wide-ranging essays (collected in four sections, "History," "Anti-Semitism," "Political Culture," and "Secularism") a pervasive concern for the survivability of a meaningful Jewish identity in America. As the title of the study suggests, Feingold attributes worldwide Jewish survival largely to a "shared corporate memory" of "group history and sacred text" (p. 2). From the outset, Feingold contends, the American milieu posed a threat to this crucial element of the Jewish ethos: "For immigrant Jews, the historic memory that bound them gradually dimmed, and communal boundaries became porous. It is that process that serves as the motor force for the writing of these essays. Never far beneath the surface of the various subjects examined is a concern about the survivability of a Jewish community and culture in this benevolent, absorbing democracy" (p. 3).

Each of the book's four sections contains at least one essay that stands out for its insightfulness. For example, Feingold's meditations upon "Jewish Exceptionalism" in the "History" section elucidates provocatively through four foci–Jewish mobility, the Jewish labor movement, Jewish organizational life, and the Jewish interest in foreign affairs–how the distinct, hyphenated identity of American Jews manifests itself on the American scene. That is, he explores how the "internal tension between the American and the Jewish plays itself out ... in the actual Jewish experience in America" (p. 35). Feingold examines cogently each of these four phenomena, but reserves his strongest assertions for the rich organizational structure of American Jewish life. Specifically, he contends that the galvanization of the American Jewish community around the Zionist movement by the late 1930s became a kind of center that held, and continues to hold, the increasingly fragmented community together.

"Zionism," Feingold argues, "became a crucial element in a new kind of civil religion for American Jews when the purely religious modality was no longer tenable ... Today, whether it is called Israelism or Zionism, it is the cement that holds Jews to its corporate memory" (p. 49).

Feingold offers a deft analysis of anti-Semitism in America in "Studying the Problem," taking into account the contrasting perspectives of several notable scholars, such as Jonathan D. Sarna, Ben Halpern, and Oscar Handlin. That the degree of anti-Semitism in America–depending upon whom one listens to–ranges from negligible to severe might prove frustrating to most readers. But Feingold, to his credit, puts his finger on the uniquely American dilemma that accounts for the disparity of opinion: "The pluralist character of American society makes it difficult to differentiate anti-Semitism from intergroup tensions normally at play in such societies ..." (p. 82). His astute, albeit brief, examination of surging Black-Jewish tensions exemplifies this difficulty. Moreover, Feingold's reflections upon Harvard's anti-Semitic enrollment quotas earlier in the century in "The Struggle for Middle-Class Status and Acceptance at Harvard" illustrates that the most virulent forms of anti-Semitism in America are often insidious rather than overt.

In his three essays on Political Culture, Feingold offers a detailed analysis of the ebb and flow of the American Jewish political identity throughout this century. Through identifying the impetus behind Jewish radicalism earlier in this century (the specific "historical experience" of American Jews, not "the memory of the ancient religious and prophetic precepts") he accounts for the increasing conservatism within the American Jewish community: "Liberalism, which has been used to identify the Jewish political gestalt in America, is only an outer and perhaps temporary masking. Behind it lies a well-honed survival wisdom that recognizes that there must be ordered change in both the domestic and the international arena ... It is almost as if Jews had instinctively come to understand that deep-seated inequities in the social order, when mobilized by groups seeking change, can spell insecurity and danger for their own group interest" (pp. 113-14). Hence, the current rift between American Jews and African-Americans, who, as Feingold notes, have displaced Jews as America's most liberal voting bloc.

Feingold devotes five essays to Secularism, the greatest threat to Jewish survivability (indeed, he observes repeatedly that intermarriage, an inevitable occurrence among a population that resembles the secular mainstream more and more each day, poses a far greater threat to Judaism than anti-Semitism). Still, he is more sanguine on the topic of secularism than many of his cohorts, most notably Arthur Hertzberg. To be sure, Feingold laments the decline of *yiddishkeit* in the American Jewish community; but he gives secularism its due, as well. He notes, for example, that "the idea of pluralism ... comes to us from the secular world" (p. 147), while the "sense of social justice" also survives among secular American Jews (p. 172). What is more, a new *yiddishkeit*, Feingold suggests, just might take hold in America given the sheer need for meaningful Judaism amid our spiritually devoid Zeitgeist: "[R]oom can be found within this hard secular environment for the thriving of a Judaic religio-ethnic culture, many of whose basic tenets and practices do not fit easily into modernity. . . . The rising violence of American urban life, with which American Jewry has cast its lot, suggests that national life organized around the extreme selfness at the core of America's hard secularism cannot be sustained" (p. 196).

That Feingold does not propose any concrete strategies for renewing Judaic culture is a shortcoming of the collection. True, he warns the reader early on that he will not provide answers to the conundrum. But one might justifiably begin wonder, "If Feingold doesn't have any answers . . .?" It is also worth noting that several critics have offered more exhaustive explorations of the issues at hand. Those especially interested in American anti-Semitism might wish to consult, say, Leonard Dinnerstein's *Antisemitism in America* (1995), while Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers* (1976) and Alexander Bloom's *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World* (1986) offer invaluable insights regarding the Political Culture of American Jews. All told, however, Feingold aptly addresses, in a style at once intelligent and engaging, the issues that have threatened to dissolve American Judaism in the past, and frames those most pressing issues that bear down upon the American Jewish ethos at the cusp of the twenty-first century.

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