

**Zeitschrift:** Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religions- und Kulturgeschichte = Revue suisse d'histoire religieuse et culturelle = Rivista svizzera di storia religiosa e culturale

**Herausgeber:** Vereinigung für Schweizerische Kirchengeschichte

**Band:** 108 (2014)

**Artikel:** American judaism, jewish piety, and the Great War

**Autor:** Ebel, Jonathan E.

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-544995>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 13.02.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# American Judaism, Jewish Piety, and the Great War

Jonathan H. Ebel

This essay examines the wartime piety of American Jews on the Western Front and on the home front, with particular attention to the ways that Jews in the United States responded to long-standing concerns about the possibility of Jewish loyalty to non-Jewish collectives, most importantly the modern, western, generally Christian nation-state. Placing piety in the foreground of this multi-faceted story forces an awareness of division and diversity within Great War-era American Judaism while also highlighting the creativity of Jewish soldiers and citizens in the face of circumstances and attitudes that were challenging and sometimes outright hostile to the living out of Judaism. On the Western Front, Jewish chaplains and soldiers worked to maintain a recognizable, communal Jewish piety in spite of challenges from without and divisions within. On the home front, Jewish leaders and laity described and enacted a totally piety of national service, countering all who would question the American-ness of American Jews with arguments supported by men, money, and material. By war's end, Jewish leaders were touting the myriad expressions of devotion to the nation in which Jews had taken part, telling themselves and all who would listen that war had proven the authenticity of Jewish citizenship and shown the way forward for American Judaism. Though war had been a massive tragedy, it had also allowed careful observers of Americanism and of Judaism to glimpse the truest truths of Jewish belonging in and to America and the vitality of an ancient faith in a relentlessly modern age.

I will begin with a brief description of the Great War as an American experience and the situation of Judaism in the United States in the years leading up to the war. I will then turn to discussions of the piety of Jewish soldiers on the Western Front and the piety of Jewish Americans on the home front. Examining these varieties of piety side-by-side underscores the multi-directional normativity of piety. By this I mean that expressions of devotion to the divine and to the nation

always occur within a framework of right and wrong, good and bad, proper and improper, that acts of piety not only express *right* devotion to a higher power *rightly* understood, but also argue that one stance toward piety is better than another. This normative context became especially important to American Jews simultaneously coming to terms with deep internal differences over the question of how to be properly Jewish, and working to orient themselves toward the American nation and, occasionally, the developing Zionist movement. While it is indeed important to describe and understand acts of Jewish piety as expressions of devotion to the divine, they were also, noticeably and importantly, pieces of an ongoing conversation in American and Western European Judaism about tradition, peoplehood, and the right place of Jews not only in a nation, but in the world as well.

The sources for this essay are rich but limited. It is inevitable given the limits of sources and space, not to mention the expansiveness of this topic, that I will fall short in my accounting of the wartime piety of Jewish Americans. I hope that others will continue to address the many questions that this essay raises. I am comforted, though, by the extent to which my findings coincide with my own previous work on the piety of the American Expeditionary Force's Christian majority, with Jonathan Sarna's treatment of the Great War as an American Jewish experience, and with Deborah Dash Moore's work on American Jewish soldiers in World War II.<sup>1</sup> Like their Christian counterparts in the U.S. Army, Jewish soldiers serving in the Great War stepped into theological and ritual spaces left empty by the circumstances of war and filled them as best they could with meaning shaped and sustained by practice. Like their Jewish counterparts in a later, more global war, Jewish soldiers of the Great War worked to forge an American Jewish identity as they fought to secure peace in their time.

### *The Great War, Judaism, and America*

Situating histories of America's involvement in the Great War alongside other combatant nations' experiences of the war brings some important perspective to a long-standing (though not exclusively American) tradition of martial egocentrism. While it is true that a few American citizens involved themselves in the war from its earliest days, the United States did not enter the war until nearly three-years after the first shots were fired, and played only a minor role in combat operations until the war's final six months. Of the roughly eight million soldiers who died in the course of the war, no more than 115,000 were American. At nearly every imaginable level and in most calculable ways, the Great War was not an American conflict.

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History*, New Haven 2004, 208–214; Deborah Dash Moore, *GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation*, Cambridge, MA 2004; Jonathan Ebel, *Faith in the Fight: Religion and the American Soldier in the Great War*, Princeton, NJ 2010.

Yet Americans at the time did not see it this way. Or, rather, while many Americans understood the Great War to be intensely European in origin and scope, they also spoke and wrote extensively of the role the United States would have in it and the religious meaning of the war for the nation.<sup>2</sup> This should come as no surprise. In the second decade of the twentieth century, American citizens were already well practiced in the art of theologizing both nationhood and war. Myriad histories of the American Civil War have made this point forcefully and beyond refutation.<sup>3</sup> Recent scholarly attention to the Spanish-American War demonstrates that even a «splendid little war» could call forth robust religious justification and impressive displays of military-missionary zeal.<sup>4</sup> Though scholars seldom integrate the Indian Wars of the late-nineteenth century into narratives of religion and American war-craft, those frontier campaigns offered clergy, politicians, soldiers, and citizens ample opportunity to weave together a sense of national chosenness and unabashedly genocidal programs of violence and dispossession.<sup>5</sup> Near-term historic tributaries and more established religio-ideological currents flowed together to shape Americans' understandings of the Great War and reinforced each other on certain key points. Wars were tragic, bloody, and burdensome, but there was divine meaning in them. If Americans discerned that meaning properly and acted in accordance with God's will, history would favor the United States, «God's New Israel»<sup>6</sup>.

This meta-level of religious meaning is an important part of the story of Americans' experiences of the Great War. Yet the war appealed at a more personal level as well, even to those, such as the United States' Jewish, African-Ameri-

<sup>2</sup> Relevant recent books include Philip Jenkins, *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade*, New York 2014; Richard Gamble, *The War for Righteousness: Progressive Christianity, the Great War, and the Rise of the Messianic Nation*, Wilmington 2003; and Ebel, *Faith* (see note 1).

<sup>3</sup> Harry Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War*, New York 2007; Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, New York 2008; Mark Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, Chapel Hill, NC 2006; George Rable, *God's Almost Chosen People: A Religious History of the American Civil War*, Chapel Hill, NC 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew McCullough, *My Brother's Keeper: Civil Religion, Messianic Interventionism, and the Spanish-American War of 1898*, Vanderbilt, TN 2011. See also Edward Linenthal, *Changing Images of the Warrior Hero in American: A History of Popular Symbolism*, Lewiston, NY 1982.

<sup>5</sup> See Jennifer Graber, *Mighty Upheaval on the Minnesota Frontier: Violence, War, and Death in Dakota and Missionary Christianity*, in: *Church History*, 80/1 (March 2011), 76–108; and *If a war it may be called: The Peace Policy with the American Indians*, in: *Religion and American Culture*, 24/1 (Winter 2014), 36–69. See also Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890*, Norman, OK 1998.

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent collection of documents on the theme of American chosenness see Conrad Cherry, ed. *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*, Chapel Hill, NC 1998. For scholarly essays connecting this theme to violence in American history see John Carlson/Jonathan Ebel (ed.), *From Jeremiad to Jihad: Religion, Violence, and America*, Berkeley, CA 2012.



can, and Native American populations, living at or beyond the edges of the cultural mainstream. The Great War offered men and women an opportunity to demonstrate their devotion to the nation in an intensely embodied form, to argue more forcefully than words would allow that they too were Americans. European national collectives encouraged and often received such devotion from polyglot and religiously plural populations. But at the outbreak of the Great War, the United States found itself with a level of linguistic, religious, cultural, and racial diversity that made questions of national belonging especially acute. Between 1880 and 1914 some twenty-five million new immigrants flowed into America's cities. Where Irish and German Catholics had once seemed exotic in the eyes of Protestant Anglo-Americans, these groups now seemed downright common by comparison to the Greek, Italian, Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Czech, Hungarian, and Rumanian immigrants with their dizzying array of languages and faiths. Judaism had been a part of the «New World» religious tapestry since the seventeenth century, but never in anything close to its early-twentieth-century variety.<sup>7</sup>

On the eve of the Great War, Judaism was an extreme minority religion in the United States. It had, however, grown dramatically in the preceding three decades. According to the *American Jewish Yearbook* for 1918–1919, the Jewish population of the U.S., which stood at an estimated 400,000 in 1887, had ballooned to roughly 3.2 million by 1918.<sup>8</sup> The locus of this growth was the urban northeast, more specifically New York City, which in 1918 was home to 1.4 million Jews. But with such rapid growth came diversity, and with diversity came the interwoven questions of piety and belonging. One group within American Judaism, the majority until the late nineteenth century, consisted of Northern European and Sephardic Jews who tended to be liberal or Reform in their piety and assimilationist vis-à-vis American culture and society. As the Reform movement took hold among American Jews, Jewish worship and everyday Jewish piety often took on the shape of the Protestantism so influential in the United States. Synagogues came to look and function more like churches, worshippers within the synagogue sat as families without regard to gender, English was used as a or the language of worship, and even the structure and presentation of prayer and song followed patterns adopted from Protestant hymnody.<sup>9</sup> These developments reflected a reconsideration of the meaning of Torah and tradition for the modern Jew, whereby the former was not to be taken as a timeless, authoritative guide for proper Jewish piety and the latter, while not to be dismissed completely, had to be weighed against the cost of separation so

<sup>7</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism* (see note 1). Chapter Four in particular describes the effects of immigration and diversification on American Jewry.

<sup>8</sup> The Jewish Population of the United States, in: *American Jewish Yearbook*, Volume 21, 1918–1919, Philadelphia, PA 1919, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism* (see note 1), Chapters 3 and 4.

frequently borne by «traditionalists». The piety associated with Sabbath keeping and observing Jewish dietary law was often reframed as antique, a hindrance to the full participation of Jews in American society.

Reform Jews also regularly wove their sense of Jewish peoplehood into a broader sense of nationhood, looking at themselves as rightful inheritors and trustworthy bearers of American, German, French, and British identities. Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, a mid-nineteenth-century immigrant to the United States, represented their viewpoint eloquently when he wrote of the United States in 1869:

«Our country is the heiress of the European civilization. All her shipwrecked men and shipwrecked ideas continually pour into our lap with a wealth of thoughts, designs, energies, learning, skill and enterprise which steadily fill our mental coffers, and enlarge our horizon of conceptions. ... we continually assimilate and Americanize, absorb and recast all the foreign elements which we receive. So powerful is the affinity of freedom among men that it unites and amalgamates them quicker than any other agency.»<sup>10</sup>

Wise embraced Americanist orthodoxy enthusiastically and sought to orient the Jewish community toward that orthodoxy as an essential element of their progressive faith. In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, Rabbi Wise could speak in such terms and be confident of approval from within the American Jewish community. A mere two decades later there were many more dissenting Jewish voices.

The immigrants who increased the number of Jews in the United States by 800% in the thirty years prior to the Great War were understandably more skeptical of the promises of life beyond the Jewish community. Victims of centuries of violence at the hands of Christian majorities, these Jews were also more traditional in their practices and more openly connected to the cultures and life ways of the shtetls and ghettos of Eastern Europe and Russia. In speech, dress, food, and piety, they frequently embraced an identity as a people apart, an identity forged over centuries and sanctified by its very endurance. Often using Yiddish to communicate with each other and Hebrew to communicate with the divine, these Jews did their best to follow the laws of kashrut in spite of unscrupulous butchers, and to observe the Sabbath in spite of employers unwilling to release them from Saturday labor.<sup>11</sup> In short, many traditionalist or Orthodox Jews saw daily life as an opportunity to demonstrate the depths of one's devotion to the divine and did not see assimilation and adaptation as either righteous or healthy for Judaism.

These differences between America's native-born and northern European Jews and the recently-arrived immigrant masses were apparent in profession, education, social status, and influence, and also in terms of specifically Jewish attitudes, rituals, and practices. As Jonathan Sarna has detailed, reform/assimi-

<sup>10</sup> Isaac Mayer Wise, *Our Country's Place in History*, in: Conrad Cherry (ed.), *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*, Chapel Hill, NC 1998, 232.

<sup>11</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism* (see note 1), 135–207.

lationist Jews and traditionalist/separationist Jews struggled mightily with each other, staking out strongly normative positions regarding the practices of Jewish piety while also, sometimes more quietly, arguing about the proper outlines of Judaism in the United States.<sup>12</sup> One side saw the other as unreasonably attached to antique ways, teachings, and an ossified sense of peoplehood. The other side saw Jews who were willing to give away everything that was distinctive about Judaism to buy a conditional and perilous acceptance from a potentially vicious mainstream culture.

When the United States entered the Great War in April of 1917, and looked for an organization to coordinate Jewish activities for servicemen, the extent of intra-Jewish diversity and contestation became readily apparent. As an account penned in 1918 details, this diversity made it necessary to create an entirely new Jewish organization to provide services to soldiers and to mediate the interests of no fewer than fourteen national organizations.<sup>13</sup> This new entity, the Jewish Welfare Board, was charged, in the words of its executive director Chester Jacob Teller, to «contribute on behalf of the Jews of America to the national work of welfare among the nation's uniformed men» and, more generally, «to help America win the war».<sup>14</sup> A significant part of the Board's work involved securing spaces and resources for Jewish soldiers desiring to practice their faith. Teller reported further that «rabbinical bodies», the Jewish Publication Society of America, and the Board had worked together to produce and distribute two small volumes the *Abridged Prayer Book for Jews in the Army and Navy of the United States* and *Readings from the Holy Scripture*, to guide and sustain «soldiers and sailors» throughout their service. The Board was also active, he noted, in pursuing kosher food «wherever such supply is warranted by the demand therefor»<sup>15</sup>. The overriding concern of the Board, as far as soldierly piety was concerned, was to «meet the needs of the men as these needs are ascertained. For Jews desiring an orthodox service it promotes orthodox services. For sons of Reform Jews it supplies reform services with the Union Prayer Book», Teller continued, «the Welfare Board endorses all degrees of doctrine, if soldiers of Jewish faith uphold them».<sup>16</sup> As further testimony to the ecumenical spirit of these coordinating efforts (and to the recent history of strenuous disagreement among Jewish Americans), the preface to the *Abridged Prayer Book* stated clearly that the book was «not intended in any way to supersede existing books of prayer, and is designed solely for the emergency for which it is being published».<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism* (see note 1), 212–213.

<sup>14</sup> Chester Jacob Teller, *The Jewish Welfare Board*, in: *The American Jewish Yearbook*, Volume 20, 1918–1919, Philadelphia, PA 1919, 88–89.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>17</sup> *Abridged Prayer Book for Jews in the Army and Navy of the United States*, Philadelphia, PA 1917, vi.

Yet no matter how sincere displays of ecumenism and unity were, reactions to the actual work of the board – its efforts to create opportunities for the expression of Jewish piety – were frustratingly cacophonous. Teller reported,

«We have been criticized now for being too Jewish, and again for not being Jewish enough; for advocating what has been called «segregation», and again for being exponents of what has been called the melting pot theory; on the one hand, for making martyrs of the Jewish men ... because we have failed to furnish them with kosher food, and, on the other, for making martyrs of them in our sympathy with those who desire such dietary restrictions. Fault is found with us for permitting Yiddish books to be circulated in the camps, and again we are blamed for not providing enough literature.»<sup>18</sup>

These differences within the overall difference that American Jews experienced as, in Sarna's terms, an «anxious subculture» informed Jewish hopes for what their displays of nationalist piety – in uniform and out – could accomplish. Full-throated «Jewish» support for the American war effort would alleviate societal concerns about Jewish participation in the American project. The experience of war and the sacrifices of Jewish soldiers would bind Jew to Jew, showing a way forward for a divided community. In the body of the Jewish soldier, Jewish Americans would witness the fusion and the balancing of Jewish and American identities. Some even believed that the piety displayed by Jews wearing the uniforms of the U.S. military would provide a model for the practices and attitudes of all American Jews.<sup>19</sup> This attention to and sanctification of the soldier is particularly apparent in the wartime writings of home front Jewish leaders and the thought worlds of Jewish chaplains. Both groups argued that by serving Jewish soldiers they were serving the nation and giving shape to the future of American Judaism.

### *Piety and the American Jewish Soldier*

War disrupts theology and practice. War also fuels innovations in the realms of theology and practice. Given the connectedness of Jewish piety, the community, the home, and the *schul*, experiences of enlistment, indoctrination, deployment, and combat were at least as disruptive and perhaps more so for America's Jews than for non-Jewish servicemen. Yet in examining expressions of Jewish piety on the Western Front we see not only the challenges faced by Jewish soldiers who wished to practice their faith in the midst of war, but also creative responses to those challenges.

As noted above, Judaism was an extreme minority faith in the United States in 1918 in spite of having grown and diversified dramatically since 1880. Judaism was also a minority faith in the American Expeditionary Force, but it was

<sup>18</sup> Teller, *The Jewish Welfare* (see note 14), 99.

<sup>19</sup> Rabbi Abraham Nowak, *Jewish Youth to be «Rejudaized»*, in: *Jewish Advocate*, 13 September 1917, 9.



slightly less so. Analysis conducted by the American Jewish Committee during and after the war indicated that Jews volunteered and were drafted in numbers that exceeded their percentage of the population. Precise numbers are difficult to pin down, but in 1918 Jews represented about 3% of the population of the United States. Out of a mobilized military force of 4.8 million men, between 200,000 and 250,000, or 4–5%, were Jewish.<sup>20</sup> This sizable Jewish population presented problems of piety for those whose job it was to serve them. Who would lead them in worship? What types of religious observance would the young men want? How traditional should the services be? What types of piety were appropriate to the wartime context? These questions emerged daily as Jews ate, weekly as they contemplated the Sabbath, and in the course of the liturgical year with the major holidays of Passover, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur. Given the fractious nature of American Judaism, any answer to these questions of piety would be simultaneously true and false, right and wrong.

Life in the military and life at war placed many obstacles in the way of Jewish soldiers who wished to practice their faith, irrespective of the level and intensity of their piety. As Rabbi Lee Levinger, an A.E.F. chaplain wrote, «Of course, it was hard to be a good Jew in the Army». Observing the Sabbath proved difficult if not impossible for Orthodox and Reform Jews alike. This was true, Levinger explained, «even in rest areas where there was no immediate danger to life». He continued, «No soldier could disobey an order to work on the Sabbath; if the work was there, the soldier had to do it.»<sup>21</sup> This is not to say that Sabbath services were absent from American sectors of the front, or that more observant soldiers did not long for a weekly day of prayer, rest, and reflection. It is merely to note that the exigencies of war placed pressures, some gentle, some extreme, on this practice of piety.

Jewish chaplains and welfare workers helped soldiers observe major holidays, but these observances too were shaped by war. In 1918, Passover began on March 27, a comparatively quiet moment for American forces. But participation in a Seder or a close approximation thereof depended greatly on a soldier's proximity to either a Jewish Welfare Board hut or a resourceful Jewish chaplain. The same was true (though even more acutely) during the High Holy Days, which began on September 6, 1918 when American forces were far more deeply engaged in combat. In the midst of this holiest time of the Jewish year, the A.E.F. launched its first major offensive of the war, a push to reclaim the St. Mihiel salient, and thereby flatten out the front in their sector. In these challenging logistical and emotional circumstances, Rabbi Jacob Kohn of the Jewish

<sup>20</sup> Julian Leavitt, *American Jews in the World War*, in: *The American Jewish Yearbook*, Volume 21, 1919–1920, Philadelphia, PA 1920, 141–155. Leavitt also published an article presenting these statistics in the *Jewish Advocate*, see Leavitt, *War Record of American Jews*, in: *Jewish Advocate*, 16 January 1919, 1,6. See also Sarna, *American Judaism* (see note 1), 212.

<sup>21</sup> Lee Levinger, *A Jewish Chaplain in France*, New York 1921, 150.

Welfare Board organized Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services using «an old, neglected scroll of the law» borrowed from a French villager, a shofar that he found, and the YMCA auditorium. He was able to reach Jewish soldiers assigned to the headquarters of the A.E.F. and some from surrounding units as well – between 500–600 by his estimate. Kohn wrote that the services were «in the traditional fashion, somewhat abridged, but with the addition of English prayers». He noted also that the men were responsive and eager to participate «even to the extent of reading from the law and chanting the memorial prayers».<sup>22</sup>

Given the range of commitments to piety among Jewish soldiers, there would surely have been Jewish soldiers who objected to this abbreviated service – Deborah Dash Moore tells of Orthodox Jewish frustration with such observances during World War II – but the experience also took place within a framework of necessary ecumenism that most soldiers seem to have accepted.<sup>23</sup> During the High Holy Days Rabbi Kohn traveled to the front to observe the fighting and to interact with Jewish soldiers there. He observed, «Every one was anxious to help every one else. This spirit pervades the entire army. Catholic Chaplains distribute Jewish prayer books, and similar services are rendered by the other religious representatives for those not of their own faiths.» Kohn's account, though very short on detail, indicates the flavor of piety at the front as directed by the chaplaincy and practiced by soldiers. The denominational and traditional particularity that characterized home front practice was often impossible to maintain. Jewish chaplains had to be prepared to conduct hybrid services even during the holiest times of the year; they also had to be prepared to minister to non-Jews. Catholic and Protestant chaplains had to be similarly willing. Rabbi Levinger echoed Rabbi Kohn, «I, for one, have read psalms at the bedside of dying Protestant soldiers. I have held the cross before a dying Catholic. I have recited the traditional confession with a dying Jew. We were all one in a very real sense.»<sup>24</sup>

Jewish soldiers who found themselves beyond the reach of a Jewish chaplain could be extremely resourceful. Even facing the pain of loss, they seem to have sustained each other with a mix of «traditional» Judaism and wartime pragmatism. Rabbi Kohn noted in his report that Christian chaplains had assisted Jewish soldiers in setting up semi-regular services, which soldiers led themselves. Given the size of the Jewish contingent in France – 100,000–125,000, or roughly half the number of Jews in uniform – and the scarcity of Jewish chaplains – there were twelve in the entire A.E.F. – lay-led services based, perhaps, on the *Abridged Prayer Book* were likely the only recourse for the majority of Jewish soldiers.<sup>25</sup> And even when they lamented the absence of a proper rabbi, they showed admirable devotion to their faith and to each other. *The Jewish Advocate*

<sup>22</sup> Rev. Dr. Jacob Kohn Describes Beginning of St. Mihiel Offensive, in: *Jewish Advocate*, 10 October 1918.

<sup>23</sup> Moore, *GI Jews* (see note 1), 129–136.

<sup>24</sup> Levinger, Chaplain (see note 21), 137.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.



published a letter that Private Louis Baer of Dorchester, Massachusetts had written to his mother in March of 1918, in which Baer expressed dismay at the position of Jews and Jewish leadership in the A.E.F., «Other religions have their priests and ministers», he wrote. «All we can do is look on.» But Baer went on to describe a funeral that he and a small group of Jewish soldiers conducted for a fallen comrade whom he referred to only as «Kaplan». The details of the situation are few, but it is clear that after Kaplan was killed in combat, Baer and his fellow Jewish soldiers did their best to memorialize him as a Jewish soldier – they may have followed the «Burial Service» outlined in the *Abridged Prayer Book* – and were satisfied with their efforts.<sup>26</sup> Baer wrote, «we held a Minyon [sic] for him. Believe me, it was a touching scene. If some Rabbi would have witnessed it down in the dugout he would have thought it was a church. If the Hun will be lucky enough to muster me out [kill me], I hope the boys will have the same service for me.»<sup>27</sup>

Yet as they ordered their lives and fashioned acts of piety with the objects and people and memories that surrounded them, Jewish soldiers also discovered that the ecumenism so celebrated by Levinger, Kohn, and the Jewish Welfare Board could have a sharp edge to it. Non-Jewish soldiers and officials could be quite unsympathetic when presented with Jews who favored even a modicum of religious particularity. In May of 1918, Private Leo Simons, a member of Company D, Headquarters Battalion, stationed at A.E.F. General Headquarters, wrote a letter to the soldier-authored newspaper, *The Stars and Stripes*, describing a religious problem that he and other Jews had encountered. «Here at G.H.Q. we have some 150 to 200 Jewish men», he wrote, «Some of these men have been here nearly a year and until two weeks ago have never had an opportunity to attend Jewish services.» The men were gathering at the YMCA hut every Friday for «evening services», but without the leadership of a proper «Jewish chaplain». Private Simons sought the guidance of Bishop Charles Brent, Chief of Chaplains, and of his deputy Reverend Paul D. Moody, son of the famed Protestant evangelist Dwight Moody. Both recommended that he write to the *Stars and Stripes*. Apparently not prone to self-pity or inaction, Private Simons had been leading the Friday services which, he noted, «has been a pleasure to me, as I have had a bit of theological training in London». Nevertheless, he and presumably the others, desired a Jewish chaplain, «If not permanently, then just to meet and speak to the boys some Friday evening.» They hoped that the newspaper could help them out.

<sup>26</sup> Abridged Prayer Book for Jews in the Army and Navy of the United States, 46–50.

<sup>27</sup> Baer Tells of Kaplan Funeral, in: *Jewish Advocate*, 18 April 1918, 1. Baer's reference to a «church» here likely reflects the influence of American Reform Judaism in which, for a time, it was common to refer to houses of worship not as synagogues but as churches. See Sarna, Chapters 3 and 4.

The editors were unsympathetic. In pedantic tones they reminded Simons that «war conditions frequently make it impossible for a soldier to have provided [to] him the sort of services he was brought up in». Simons had gone out of his way in his letter to acknowledge this and to explain how he and his fellow Jews had been making the best of the circumstances. But the editors were less interested in the details of Simons' situation than they were in making a point about what mattered most in piety and theology. «[I]t behooves those of us so situated», they continued, «to worship God in company with our more fortunately placed comrades, whether they be Catholics, Protestants, Jews, or Christian Scientists». Put differently, if you can't find a Jewish service, Private Simons, go worship with Christians.

«After all, it is not the creed we worship, but God Almighty, and to the One Living God we surely can all come, under the leadership of whatever chaplain may be at hand, and all of us, as equally His children, humbly pray for that Divine guidance and strength which [...] will enable us as soldiers to live and, if need be, die courageously, for the right as God has given us the power to see the right.»<sup>28</sup>

To want a Jewish chaplain in the absence of a Jewish chaplain was to be both selfish and theologically narrow. The properly religious soldier embraced a religion and, to paraphrase Great War veteran Dwight D. Eisenhower, didn't care what it was.<sup>29</sup>

While acknowledging the earnestness and the creativity of these soldiers in the midst of trying circumstances, we must also acknowledge that the need for Jewish soldiers to be religiously creative was a product of more than just the war experience. Their particular experience of religious isolation was rooted in the extreme minority status of Jews in America and in the American Expeditionary Force, and in the related fact of Americans' lack of familiarity and lack of comfort with Judaism. The faith that many associated with the so-called «Old Testament» of Christian scripture was all but unknown as a living tradition to many Americans and, following on European Christian models, was vilified by quite a few. As Leonard Dinnerstein has chronicled in his history of anti-Semitism in America, even those who knew Jews and knew Judaism often viewed it as a lesser faith evolving slowly away from bizarre pieties and backward-looking worldviews.<sup>30</sup> Put differently, the *Stars and Stripes*' insistence that Jewish soldiers (and, to be fair, anyone longing for specific public pieties) behave as if piety and liturgy were irrelevant, casts a different light on the wartime ecume-

<sup>28</sup> War and the Faith, in: *Stars and Stripes*, 31 May 1918, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Leonard Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America*, New York 1994, 105–110. Dinnerstein's presentation of the anti-Semitism of liberal Protestantism's publication of record, *The Christian Century*, and of the anti-Jewish attitudes of «polite» Americans is especially illuminating on this point.

nism of the A.E.F. Where some saw cooperation, others could have seen – and certainly experienced – a pressure to conform and, in the process, to devalue Jewish particularity in favor of harmonies sung in a clearly Christian key.

Voices from the front, limited as they are, indicate that Jewish soldiers valued expressions of piety even if they did not always participate in organized services. Further, as Rabbis Levinger and Kohn reported, efforts to capture and present the spirit of Jewish home life to soldiers, helped sustain them through separation, hardship, suffering, killing, and loss. «In their religious services, as in most other things», Levinger observed, «the Jewish boys like practices that reminded them of home». Ample evidence suggests that Jews at home liked practices that reminded them of their soldiers in France and that, properly described and reported, reminded America of the loyalty and service of American Jews.

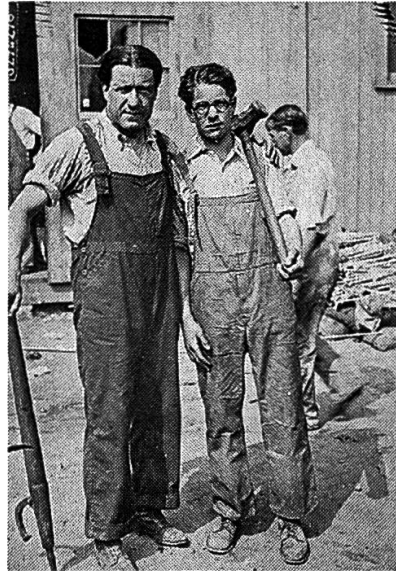


*Picture 1:* Passover Seder, April 1919, provided for American Jewish soldiers in France by the Jewish Welfare Board. Attendees are standing to sing «The Star Spangled Banner». (Photo courtesy of the National Archives of the United States of America, Record Group 111: Records of the Office of the Chief Signal Officer, 1860–1985, Record Identifier: ARC 531148)

### *A Piety of Jewish Americanism*

Considered against the backdrop of anti-Jewish sentiments in early-twentieth-century America, the *Stars and Stripes*' response to Private Simons' letter was mild. The editors' concerns were not about Jews as Americans but rather about the disruptive and disintegrative potential of religious particularism. For Jews on the *home* front the battle before, during, and after the Great War was to demonstrate that Jews could be loyal citizens of the United States, or at least had the right to live freely and pursue happiness in America. An absolutely essential aspect of wartime Jewish piety – and the piety of other groups, whose loyalty could be questioned – was the expression of devotion to the nation. This piety of Jewish Americanism took many forms. The open embrace of the United States'

mythology, as demonstrated by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, was one obvious and common form. But wartime sources evidence an urgency to give material and embodied expression to these patriotic sentiments. In the calculus of American Jews, words were cheap. Actions done, described, and documented were the stuff of true citizenship.



Picture 2: Rabbi Stephen S. Wise and his son «doing their bit» by working at the Luder Marine Construction Company, Stamford, Connecticut in July of 1918. (Photo courtesy of the National Archives of the United States of America, Record Group 165: Records of the War Department, General and Special Staffs, 1860-1952, Record Identifier: ARC 533712)

This emphasis on action is clear in Jewish attention to numbers of men in uniform, a quantifiable measure of devotion to the nation. The American Jewish Yearbooks of 1918–1919 and 1919–1920 were especially attentive to the «Jewish War Record» first describing the on-going efforts to count Jews who had served and then presenting a preliminary list of numbers: numbers of Jewish soldiers who served, numbers of soldiers who volunteered, numbers of soldiers recognized for valor, numbers of soldiers killed.<sup>31</sup> The numbers, interpreted by Julian Leavitt, Director of the Office of War Records for the American Jewish Committee, told a story of loyal service, bravery, and death for the nation. Of course these numbers mattered at the level of individuals and households – for the family of a soldier killed in combat, they say, the casualty rate is one-hundred percent – but the numbers mattered especially as an aggregate. Against those who might claim – as did the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the Dreyfus Affair, and Germany's 1916 inquiry into Jewish participation in the armed services – that Jews were prone to disloyalty, the American Jewish Yearbook could argue back with war records and casualty figures showing that Jews had served at a

<sup>31</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism* (see note 1), 208–214.

higher rate, had chosen danger more frequently, and had fought at least as valiantly as non-Jewish Americans. Leavitt wrote by way of conclusion,

«...the record of Jewish War Service, when fully developed, will demonstrate incontestably that the Jews of America have contributed their full quota to the winning of the war, and a generous margin beyond their quota; that they have enlisted cheerfully, fought gallantly, and died bravely for the United States. Those who knew the quality of Jewish loyalty needed no proof of this. [...] But to communicate this knowledge to the outside world it becomes necessary to establish the known facts on the soundest possible foundations.»<sup>32</sup>

In presenting Jewish soldiers' individual stories, home-front outlets were particularly attentive to interlocking levels of piety, the ways that soldierly sacrifice expressed communal devotion to cause and nation. Reporting in April of 1918 on the death in combat of nineteen-year-old Jacob Sharf, the *Jewish Advocate* announced, «Latest Casualty Lists Disclose Valor of N.E. Jewish Men.» Sharf's death, about which no details were known at the time, was presented as an expression of his own devotion to America and of the community's devotion as well. His valor belonged not just to the Sharf household, Horace Mann High School, or Everett, Massachusetts, his hometown, but to New England Jewish manhood. The *Advocate* noted also that Sharf was one of three boys (Sharf, Samuel Steiner, and Hugh Hunt) from the same street in Everett, Massachusetts killed in the war to date. The report did not mention the religious identity of either of the other boys, but whether Protestant, Catholic, or Jew, their deaths connected Sharf and American Jewish men ever more tightly to the United States.

The wartime sacrifice of Jewish soldiers in combat was the highest expression of Jewish Americanist piety, but it was not the only expression and certainly not the most common. In the eyes of Chester Teller of the Jewish Welfare Board, the sending and support of soldiers were communal acts of piety, expressions of devotion in which all American Jews could and should take part. He wrote,

«It is to the local communities that we turn for both moral and financial support. We look to them, moreover, for definite service. We expect each community to send its Jewish boys into the service with a formal expression of its belief in them, so that each man may feel the power and strength of his community behind him. We expect each community to follow its soldiers with gifts, by correspondence and other aid, as well as by visitation of their families.»<sup>33</sup>

These were unambiguous, visible, often palpable acts of support that, through the body of the soldier, offered Jewish loyalty to the nation. According to Teller, Jews responded eagerly to the call. Jews across the country participated in the work of the Jewish Welfare Board, pooling time, energy, and resources to provide explicitly Jewish support for the war effort. Describing the work of the Board, Teller wrote of the devotion of «local Jewries» to soldiers training at camps in

<sup>32</sup> Leavitt, *American Jews in the World War* (see note 20), 155.

<sup>33</sup> Teller, *The Jewish Welfare* (see note 14), 100–101.



their midst. Organized into «local branches» modeled on the YMCA and the Knights of Columbus, «Jews and Jewesses» developed a piety of hospitality «contributing their time and energies and giving of their means to the entertainment of men on leave, to visiting the sick, and to affording comfort to the lonely and dejected.»<sup>34</sup>

Jews on the home front gave money and material for the aid of Jews in war-torn Europe, exercising long-standing concern for family, friends, and co-religionists who were brutalized by Christian majorities. Jews also gave in support of the national war effort, expressing in gifts both a parallel devotion to the United States and, according to some authors, a deep affinity with the traditions of Judaism.<sup>35</sup> The *Jewish Advocate* ran several pieces that wove together ancient Israelite and American history, arguing into a context complicated by separatist and assimilationist tendencies, that Judaism and Americanism were fully compatible. In one article, Samuel Stayman compared the revolutionary leaders George Washington and Judas Maccabeus, describing both as gifted military tacticians and victors over powerful and oppressive foes.<sup>36</sup>

The *Advocate* also published a Liberty Bond appeal that described the purchase of war bonds as perfectly harmonious with, even an improvement upon the fidelity and wisdom of the «Prophets of Israel». The article appeared on April 18, 1918 and encouraged American Jews to act. «Today, instead of the Prophet standing aloof appealing to the people who trod the evil path, Americans worthy of the proud title *do* things to *save* tottering civilization, to minimize *destruction*, to hasten peace and good will.»<sup>37</sup> At the same time, the author presented the war and support for it as obvious extensions of the will of the prophets and, therefore, of God. «The Prophets demanded a higher moral order. Can it be brought about with Germany a victor?» He continued, «The Prophets preached the love of God. Can we love God and at the same time permit His children to be servants under Wilhelm?» Those Jews who could demonstrate their devotion to the United States by putting uniforms on their bodies, entering military training, and going to war, should of course do that. The Liberty Bond campaigns in general, the article's appeal in particular, offered others a chance to partake of nationalist piety, to show their complete devotion to the nation and, not to be forgotten, their full fidelity to the spirit of the prophets of Israel.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism* (see note 1), 208–209. Sarna writes, «Philanthropy, in a sense, became the civil religion of American Jews in these bleak years. By contributing generously to feed, clothe, and house the suffering Jews of Europe and Palestine, American Jews found a collective mission ...» This mission was directed both at co-religionists and at those who wore the American uniform.

<sup>36</sup> Samuel Stayman, A Comparison of Judas Maccabeus and Geo. Washington, in: *Jewish Advocate*, 25 July 1918, 3.

<sup>37</sup> Alexander Brin, The Voices of the Prophets Re-echo Today, in: *Jewish Advocate*, 18 April 1918, 1.



### *Conclusion*

Presenting the plan for wartime conscription to the American people in 1917, President Woodrow Wilson said, «It is not an army that we must shape and train for war; it is a nation.»<sup>38</sup> Wilson was aware of the potential for division and fractiousness inherent in a nation of immigrants and used the power of his office, not to mention his considerable rhetorical skill, to forge a durable unity. By most accounts, this process of training and shaping was a success. Jewish Americans, among others, heard the call of the nation and, for the most part, answered it. Those who traveled to France to serve and fight crafted forms of Judaism that fit their circumstances and responded to their needs. Those who supported the war effort on the home front gave of their time and resources and built a powerful argument in favor of Jewish belonging in America. Who was more devoted than the Jews to the nation? Who was braver than the Jews in its defense? As an indication of the deep connection between Jews and Judaism and the American war effort, the American Legion, founded by veterans of the Great War in the early months of 1919, chose Rabbi Herman Beck as their National Chaplain in 1928 and Rabbi Lee Levinger as his successor in 1929.

Yet in spite of their symbolic importance, these national offices were not enough to undermine American anti-Semitism. Neither could quantitative measures of Jewish devotion to the United States, no matter how impressive, convince American demagogues and those who clung to their messages of fear, hatred, conspiracy, and insecurity, of the legitimacy of Jewish American citizenship. Indeed, the interwar period brought such a resurgence of anti-Semitism in America that Leonard Dinnerstein has marked it and World War II as the low ebb of Jewish feelings of belonging in the United States. Anti-Jewish groups nationwide looked to European Fascism for organizational models and charismatic heroes, they recycled tired stories of international conspiracies and undue influence in world and national governments. Rabidly anti-Semitic religious leaders Father Coughlin and Gerald L.K. Smith, to name only two, clearly believed that nothing that a Jew could say or do would validate his or her citizenship. Their anti-Semitism was, like so many other psychoses, unresponsive to arguments from evidence, demonstrations of good will, expressions of Americanist piety, or the weight of anything as trivial as fact or truth. Theirs was an anti-Semitism that did not, in the end, depend for its life on the presence of actual Jews and therefore could not meet its «death» through the acts or words of actual Jews.<sup>39</sup>

It would take another war, hundreds of thousands more Jews in U.S. military uniforms, and Jewish communities emboldened by their members' records of

<sup>38</sup> Cited in Linenthal, *Changing Images* (see note 4), 98.

<sup>39</sup> For recent treatments of western attitudes toward Jews, real and imagined, see Sarah Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought*, Chicago, IL 2010; and David Nirnberg, *Anti-Judaism: A Western Tradition*, New York 2013.

service to move the nation into a «tri-faith» era of «Protestant, Catholic, Jew».<sup>40</sup> Whether Jewish soldiers of the Second World War knew it or not, the trails they walked to establish a more comfortable place for Jews in the United States had been blazed two decades earlier by a smaller contingent of Jewish Doughboys. The piety of these Jews in Great War-era America clearly did not deal a deathblow to anti-Semitism. But it may well have shown the young men who came after them that Jewish piety had a place in the American military, that Jewish lives of many types could be directed toward national service, and that adapting one's piety in the face of war's challenges was not a sign of apostasy.

*American Judaism, Jewish Piety, and the Great War*

This article places the war-time piety of Jewish American soldiers and civilians in the religious and political context of Great-War-era America. It describes the many ways that Jewish leaders in the U.S. engaged the crisis of war and some of the religious responses that Jewish soldiers developed in a context that could be unsympathetic to their distinctive piety. Though Jewish soldiers and citizens demonstrated in spectacular ways their devotion to the nation and to the divine, American anti-Semitism persisted throughout the inter-war period.

America – Judaism – anti-Semitism – ecumenism – Jewish Welfare Board – sabbath – kosher.

*Amerikanisches Judentum, jüdische Frömmigkeit und der Grosse Krieg*

Der Artikel ordnet Frömmigkeit jüdisch-amerikanischer Soldaten und Zivilisten während des Krieges in den religiösen und politischen Kontext Amerikas zur Zeit des Grossen Krieges ein. Er beschreibt die vielfältigen Wege, welche jüdische Verantwortungsträger in den Vereinigten Staaten in der Krise des Kriegs eingeschlagen haben und einige der jüdischen Antworten, welche jüdische Soldaten in einem Umfeld, das ihrer spezifischen Frömmigkeit gegenüber teilnahmslos sein konnte, entwickelten. Obwohl jüdische Soldaten und Bürger in spektakulärer Weise ihren Einsatz für die Nation und auch für das Göttliche zeigten, hielt sich in der Zwischenkriegszeit durchgehend ein amerikanischer Antisemitismus.

Amerika – Judentum – Antisemitismus – Ökumene – Jewish Welfare Board – Sabbath – Kosher.

*Judaïsme américain, piété juive, et la Grande Guerre*

Cet article place la piété en temps de guerre des soldats et civils juifs dans le contexte religieux et politique américain de l'époque de la Grande Guerre. Il décrit les diverses voies dans lesquelles se sont engagés les leaders juifs aux Etats-Unis au cours de la crise de la guerre et certaines des réponses développées par les soldats juifs dans un contexte pouvant être insensible à leur piété spécifique. Bien que les soldats juifs et les civils aient démontré de manière spectaculaire leur dévotion envers la nation et le divin, l'antisémitisme américain a persisté à l'entre-deux-guerres.

Amérique – judaïsme – antisémitisme – œcuménisme – Jewish Welfare Board – sabbat – casher.

<sup>40</sup> Moore, GI Jews (see note 1), entire. See also Will Herberg, Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology, Chicago, IL 1955.

*Ebraismo americano, fede ebraica e la Grande guerra*

Questo articolo colloca nel contesto religioso e politico della Grande guerra in America la devozione degli ebrei americani, soldati e civili, in tempo di guerra. L'articolo descrive i diversi modi in cui i leader ebrei negli USA fecero fronte alla crisi della guerra e alcune delle risposte religiose che i soldati ebrei svilupparono in un contesto che poteva essere poco disponibile nei confronti della loro particolare devozione. Anche se i soldati e i civili ebrei dimostrarono in modo spettacolare il loro attaccamento alla nazione e alla fede, l'antisemitismo americano perdurò durante il periodo tra le due guerre.

America – Ebraismo – antisemitismo – ecumenismo – Jewish Welfare Board – sabbath – kosher.

*Jonathan H. Ebel*, Associate professor of American religious history at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.