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Jewish Girls Coming of Age in America, 1860?1920

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Melissa R. Klapper?s *Jewish Girls Coming of Age in America, 1860?1920* explores the identity of middle-class Jewish girls through use of a wide range of sources, including letters and diaries. This important contribution to the history of American Jews builds on previous work that has emphasized immigrants and working class families, the east coast, and urban centres. Klapper opens a window beyond ?sweatshop girls? (p. 3) and explores the history of adolescence, formal, alternative, and religious education, and social life from 1860?1920. In each of these venues, she analyzes the nature of Jewish girls? participation in ?American girl culture? (p. 4) and her subjects? identities?as young women and as Jews. As she notes, Jewish adolescents ?both recognized and were recognized for the role they played in maintaining a particular ethnic identity and religious culture while still aiming for integration into American society at large? (p. 3).

Generally, Jewish girls were quite successful at American integration. According to Klapper, America?s diverse population, significant pattern of immigration, and intriguing similarities in gendered expectations for American and American-Jewish culture eased the process of acculturation during the period she studies. Strikingly, Klapper finds that American and Jewish identity complemented each other; Jewish education ?taught the importance of family as a cornerstone of both American society and traditional Jewish life? (p.

145). Further, the Jewish community developed a broad range of alternative education programs that ?provided both physical and social space for the beginnings of a larger American Jewish culture? (p. 141).

In many ways Judaism and Jewishness shaped Jewish girls? adolescence, but in other ways adolescent experiences were much like those of others boys and girls in America (p. 55). Jewish girls from the Civil War era to World War One shared important similarities. They functioned in social circles that were primarily Jewish, even if Judaism was not a major influence on their lives (pp. 186?7). Judaism did distinguish even acculturated girls, especially with regard to courtship, dating, and marriage (pp. 56, 57). Between 1860 and 1920, many girls embraced American mores and moved some distance away from families and tradition. The process, however, was complex as many families, too, wanted to acculturate (p. 56).

Through an analysis of education, her primary focus, Klapper assessed the pace and nature of acculturation and suggests that education systems were ?microcosms of the issues of acculturation and tradition that continuously confronted Jews? and indicate the ways girls made decisions about their interests and identity (p. 5). Clearly, access to education was pivotal for American Jewish girls and women; the theme appeared in writings ?across the decades? (p. 41). While Klapper may overstate the novelty, America did offer opportunity for secular education in a wide range of schools and sustained, if generally superficial, religious education. Education enabled young women to exhibit some autonomy, but it seems there were limits to the challenges Jewish girls considered (p. 35). While families supported many of their daughters? educational aspirations, Klapper notes that education could throw ?up a barrier of knowledge and worldliness between them [parents] and their children? (p. 55). While education rarely led young women to reject ties to Judaism, most also embraced a new future in America.

Compared to other immigrants, Jewish girls had slightly more freedom and were more similar to non-Jewish girls than were other immigrants (p. 56). Many Jewish girls had slightly greater access to education than other young women, in part because traditional Judaism accepted women?s public and economic role, particularly as enablers of male scholarship (p. 55). Jewish parents were willing to let their daughters attend high school, because schools tended to bolster ?widely shared assumptions about gender and class?. Thus, schools could sustain traditions ?while still exposing students to the individual benefits of modernization? (p. 104). Overall, from 1865 to 1920, American Jewish adolescents? experiences reflected American trends of expanded secondary education and the movement of Jewish girls? education out of home and into school (p. 103).

Gendered assumptions were extremely influential. For example, middle- and upper-class girls studied cooking at school, even though they came from homes where maids did the washing and the girls would never cook (p. 84). The vocational emphasis of many schools, especially for the working class, tended to reinforce ?divided school experiences of boys and girls? (p. 90). Boys were more likely to stay in school than girls and even in the same schools, boys? and girls? curriculum often differed (p. 189). Girls who challenged traditional gender boundaries often discovered there were consequences. Those with college degrees found it difficult to meet marital prospects, leading some to ask if ?Jewish doctors, lawyers, and other professional [were] too busy to enjoy the company of girls who are not only pretty but also intelligent?? (p. 103, n. 152). Concerned parents were reluctant to let daughters attend college ?once it became more directly threatening to religious and social traditions? (p. 103). Gendered expectations also suffused informal educational programs. The Educational Alliance?s David Blaustein considered it his obligation to prepare men for citizenship and women for motherhood (p. 118).

Education provided cultural capital?a crucial marker of class. Thus, middle class Jewish families began to take secondary education for granted long before that was possible for the working class. Some educators were quite blind to the impact of class and gender on ?the ostensibly democratic nature of American education? (p. 83). Often, families privileged sons because the return on a boy?s education was generally greater than for girls. Over time, work that required school training, especially clerical, became increasingly common, and led to a decline of on-the-job training and increased support for formal education. Jewish adolescents ?participated in educational experiences emerging as a cornerstone of American adolescence?

and did so ?without negating their other priorities? (pp. 62, 61).

Community leaders had a special focus toward immigrants, leading to the rise of free religious classes with goals beyond Jewish learning. Dedicated to acculturation, such classes sought to stamp out ?the mental and physical depravity into which generations of oppression and persecution have forced them? (p. 161, n. 59). Klapper concludes that the late-nineteenth-century Jewish community saw no contradiction between Jewish and American identity and religious schools educated in both areas (p. 161). Jewish educators used religious education to prepare children for their new lives as Americans. The Columbia Religious and Industrial School, for example, hired Jewish Theological Seminary students to provide Jewish education, keep girls off the street, and to raise up respectable and religious Jewish women (pp. 162?3). These goals constituted a change from earlier eras when the community used education to ensure continuity (p. 161). As schooling generally gained more acceptance, and as more children remained in school longer, there seemed to be a parallel growth in the acceptance of religious education. This in turn resulted in more ?enthusiasm for things Jewish? (p. 171).

While Klapper argues for the alignment of American and Jewish cultural priorities, she also points to differences in American and European Jewish culture, particularly with regard to education and religious involvement. Middle-class Americans tended to educate their daughters *not* to work?and the ability to meet this ideal reflected the economic success and cultural adaptation of Jewish families (p. 32). America also provided a greater role for women in Judaism?particularly within the Reform movement. This pattern of religious participation in the United States gave Jewish women a way to be more like the Protestant mainstream, while retaining their Jewish religious heritage (p. 33).

Communal leaders tended to target immigrants and widespread public education made that process very efficient. Although historians have tended to be critical of Americanization programs, Klapper cautions that such efforts were more complex than merely ?the worst kind of social control? (p. 106). Americanization was, in part, effective because Jews were anxious to adapt to their new country. Schooling though, remained a luxury, and the Americanization of working class youth had to occur outside of schools (p. 107). American Jews responded enthusiastically; ?they applied a traditional respect for learning to new educational venues and supported a wide array of alternative forms of education?, including print media, lectures, and cultural activities (p. 107). Additionally, philanthropic and educational institutions saw their involvement as part of a traditional Jewish obligation to provide tzedakah?charity (p. 108). Families encouraged their children to participate in such offerings because education reflected well on individuals and their families, and demonstrated ?their ability and willingness to embrace an important component of American life? (p. 107).

Given the rise of Nativism and antisemitism, Jews, especially native born, concluded that acculturation among Jews of all class and levels of observance would undercut negative reactions (p. 108). While most of the host community was quite generous to their new co-religionists, some resented the newcomers and encouraged them to eliminate aspects of foreignness, including foreign sounding names that revealed one?s ?immigrant origins? (p. 108). More established Jews could also be patronizing, and their perceptions often affected the offerings that educators made available. New York?s Young Ladies? Auxiliary offered English, cooking, and dressmaking downtown, but French and dancing uptown (p. 109). Sponsors of the Louisa M. Alcott club exposed working class girls to art and literature, but also trained them ?to wait at our own tables? (p. 116, n. 29). Immigrants who wanted to take advantage of informal education, however, had little choice but to accept services ?regardless of the blatant condescension of the established American Jews who generally ran them? (p. 108). Exceptions existed. At Chicago?s Hebrew Institute, Jewish immigrants became involved in leadership roles soon after its establishment (p. 119). Klapper suggests that immigrant girls had to learn to be American middle-class women and run middle-class homes, ?even if that meant rejecting parental models? (p. 109). One might question such a conclusion. Typically, formal and informal working-class education tended to reinforce class-based gendered expectations. And Klapper herself notes that the types of alternative education available for middle-class women differed from that organized for immigrants; middle-class women tended to rely more on family and individual, rather than community, endeavours (p. 115).

Klapper discusses an inevitable generation gap; while girls flocked to classes, the reality of immigrant life precluded their parents? participation. Some parents accepted the consequences of acculturation as they assumed that such a path meant greater opportunities, even if girls might grow apart from family (pp. 130?2). Young women sometimes found themselves caught between the communal orientation of tradition and individualistic orientation of modernization.

While Klapper sees Jewish and American identity as compatible, she notes tensions in several arenas and the prioritizing of American identity over Jewish. For example, despite the availability of synagogue-based schools, most parents sent children to public schools, which showed that ?in the contest between Jewish and American identity that school choice signified, American identity was winning by the 1870s? (p. 157). By the late-nineteenth century, the Jewish community had established a systematic program of Jewish education. This development reflected, in part, the perception of community leaders that it was too risky to leave Jewish education in the home (p. 155). Samson Benderly, a leader in Jewish education, took over as the head of New York?s new Bureau of Jewish. He recognized the traditional neglect of girls? education, and especially sought to expand offerings for girls (pp. 166?7, 169). As this pattern developed, various types of supplementary Jewish education became the dominant model.

Klapper recognizes two trends?and arguably, they are not fully compatible. She notes a continuity during late 1800s to early 1900s during which girls ?could see through religious education of one kind or another that American and Jewish identity need not negate each other? (p. 181). But she also notes resistance to Jewish education, sometimes emerging from traditional strictures against educating girls, and sometimes because Americanization activities took priority. Supplementary education did attract criticism from many who saw it as too watered down (p. 158). In response, Talmud Torahs emerged. These classes met daily and Hebrew was a central feature of the curriculum (p. 159). Given this on-going commitment of some Jews to more intensive and traditional religious education, Klapper may have underestimated some pockets of resistance. Alongside this more traditional approach, were innovations such as Confirmation services for fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds. While training for this ceremony was less intensive than orthodox education, it does indicate ?The increasing attention paid to adolescence as a stage of life supported the idea of confirmation? (pp. 172?3). Some critics believed that confirmation classes emphasized a test or ceremony, as opposed to religious commitment; others feared that confirmation became a social, rather than religious event. In response, some leaders recommended a bat mitzvah for girls, which involved more intensive education and practice (pp. 174,175?6).

By the late-nineteenth century, it seems parental indifference, not ?theological or cultural opposition?, accounted for the limited development of Jewish education (p. 178). Complaints of Jewish educators suggest that in most cases, parents did not support Jewish education for their daughters. Apparently, families found money for time-consuming lessons that helped one become American and left little opportunity for Jewish education. Many parents who allowed girls to attend supplemental classes at institutions such as the Educational Alliance, still sent sons to cheder (p. 179). Nonetheless, leaders worked to expand and develop Jewish education, part of an effort ?to develop an organic American Jewish identity? (p. 182).

Many Jewish girls absorbed gendered American culture at school where they read many of the same books, and joined the same clubs, as their non-Jewish classmates. Exposure to both worlds meant that they could mediate their families? integration ?without abandoning their religiously defined roles as keepers of tradition? (p. 188). Reading, for example, as individuals and families, both promoted and indicated Americanization (p. 210). Immigrants, especially, found this route important since many ended their formal education quite early. Klapper contends that one?s Jewishness played less of a role in choice of books than in other recreational areas (p. 212). Jewish girls read the popular works of the day, but also those of Jewish interest (p. 213). The recording of one?s reading in diaries, suggests the importance of such activities (pp. 207?8). Klapper claims that, like education, middle-class girls? participation in American girl culture tended to receive parental support and became part of the family?s strategy for acculturation. In contrast, working-class girls who ?wished to become American? risked distancing themselves from their families. Yet, ?middle-class girlhood became the ideal, if not the reality, across class lines,? because their approach

became the model for all classes, even if working class Jews found it harder to reach (p. 190).

The marriage of things Jewish and American was apparently not perfect and religion did set Jewish girls apart from non-Jews. Nonetheless, the values and behaviours of American girlhood were similar enough to those of Jewish girlhood that conflict remained limited and ?was more likely to arise as a result of class issues or family structure? (p. 190). Middle-class Jewish girls, in particular, could combine identities, and participate in American activities and American fashion with Jewish friends and a Jewish boyfriend. Evidence indicates that tension did not disappear altogether; young women recalled that Friday evening Sabbath services could compete with activities such as the high school debating society (p. 196).

The growth of secondary education, and growing recognition of adolescence as a distinct stage of life, supported the development of activities associated with teens (pp. 190?1). Thus, working-class girls, who left school earlier than middle-class ones, found it harder acculturate. Work could contribute to acculturation, but it was often ethnically homogenous and therefore offered fewer opportunities than school (p. 191). Girls of all classes enjoyed many of the same activities, both groups spent a lot of time among friends, and the period witnessed the development ?of a broadly observed youth culture? (p. 191).

Importantly, organizations dedicated to Americanizing Jewish youth also sought to provide opportunities to socialize (p. 219). This led much Jewish youth to participate in typical American activities, but to do so ?in a Jewish environment? (p. 213). While Jewish girls had non-Jewish classmates, friends, and co-workers, they rarely dated them; at the turn of the century, only two percent intermarried, and by the 1940s only three percent. It seems that Jewish youth accepted this priority and while factors such as class, education, and ethnicity affected socializing and marriage choices, religion was the crucial one (pp. 219?20). To encourage endogamy, the Jewish community supported activities that helped young men and women meet. These activities tended to combine tradition and modernity; they were exclusively Jewish, but often unchaperoned (pp. 221?2). Though limited to co-religionists, Jews? courtship patterns were otherwise quite similar to those of Americans of their class (p. 223). For example, Jewish youth exchanged love letters, following the pattern common in the US at the time (p. 224). Though highly personal, the letters were reflective of ?new romantic ideals forming around courtship and marriage at the turn of the century? (p. 225). Class, education, and family background played key role in life choices; Jewish adolescents often chose to embrace, rather than reject tradition and parents? lives (p. 232).

Overall, this is an excellent book. It covers girls and women who tend to get less attention generally, and focuses a good deal on non-immigrants, a welcome addition to other studies. The text is more thematic than chronological, and, as a result, tends not to emphasize change over time. The majority of the topics relate to education in one way or another?formal, informal, or religious. Perhaps a more condensed look at education might have enabled Klapper to offer more consideration of specific clubs, work, and social life. Her treatment of them leads the reader to want to know more. Further, these arenas would provide additional insight into class, gender, economics, and family relations.

Klapper?s book deepens our understanding of the lives of Jewish adolescents and their relationship to the development of a larger American Jewish culture. She argues convincingly that Jewish adolescents shared common traits regardless of era. Among these were a drive to stand out; many young women wanted to be extraordinary without abandoning aspects of tradition they valued (pp. 34, 35). Religion was important, played a critical role in the formation of girls? Jewish identity, and tended to reinforce family relationships, even among families who were not ritually observant. Her attention to class adds nuance to our understanding of acculturation and her study offers an important contribution to both Jewish and American history.

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