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Review:

Jewish Sanctuary in the Atlantic World: A Social and Architectural History, Barry Stiefel with David Rittenberg

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Jewish Sanctuary in the Atlantic World: A Social and Architectural History, Barry Stiefel with David Rittenberg (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), ISBN 978-1-61117-320-8, pp. 352, \$59.95.

Barry Stiefel's *Jewish Sanctuary in the Atlantic World: A Social and Architectural History* uses synagogues to provide an innovative new approach to the history of Jews in the "Atlantic World". Stiefel focuses on Jewish purpose-built houses of worship constructed between 1636 and 1822 along the Atlantic Rim in Europe, Northern Africa, and the Americas. Although a conservationist by training, Stiefel moves beyond the details of individual buildings to theorize how early Atlantic World synagogues reflect a desire to provide an "intangible, transportable, 'sanctuary' for postexilic Sephardim" (p. 5). Throughout the book, Stiefel examines how synagogues were both a sacred place and a haven for a people who "lived in motion, traveling between continents, nations, and ports" (p. 213).

Stiefel's organization is roughly chronological and traces the origins and transformation of these synagogues. Over time, modest buildings became grander and more impressive and, for Stiefel, this change reveals the impact of Jews' increasing prosperity and their acceptance by non-Jewish society. Chapter One reaches back into antiquity to think about the origins of the Western Sephardi architectural style and its most common features. In Chapter Two, Stiefel reveals how the Inquisition and the early experience of the *converso* diaspora in the Spanish and Portuguese empires helped shape the use and modest style of early synagogues in the Atlantic World.

In the third chapter, Stiefel turns to the experience of Jews under Protestant rule in Amsterdam and the (primarily Dutch) colonies prior to 1675. Here he addresses how the opportunities to worship openly transformed Jews' use of space. Chapter Four looks at how synagogue construction became increasingly grand during the era of great prosperity between 1675 and 1775. The era begins with the construction of the Esnoga in Amsterdam – the largest synagogue in Europe at the time – and includes the construction of London's Bevis Marks as well as numerous structures in both the British and Dutch colonies. Stiefel concludes this chronological narrative in Chapter Five by turning to the synagogues built in Protestant countries and colonies after 1775. Here he investigates the impact of Jewish emancipation on synagogue design. As American Jews

began to feel a deeper sense of belonging, their use and construction of religious architecture changed.

Stiefel breaks from this chronological narrative in the book's final chapter in order to address how synagogues were impacted by cultural interactions between Jews and "Non-Caucasians" in the Atlantic World. He pays particular attention to Darkhe Yescharim, the short-lived Afro-Jewish congregation in Surinam.

Stiefel's book is filled with many surprises and nuances. This includes his contextualization of Darkhe Yescharim within the history of multi-racial Jews in the region. Equally interesting and unique is Stiefel's attention to the synagogues of Gibraltar, structures usually ignored in synagogue histories. Stiefel's reach is impressive: rather than using Amsterdam's Esnoga or London's Bevis Marks as metonyms for Dutch and British Jewish architecture, he balances this story with attention to other Dutch and British structures and congregations. Some of the book's greatest contributions include the Survey of Atlantic World Synagogues in the Appendix and Stiefel's overview of key structural elements of the synagogues in Chapter One. These two components alone will make his work a necessary resource manual for anyone interested (*inter alia*) in Dutch and British synagogues. The rich and extensive illustrations are well chosen and add to the volume's utility.

Despite these contributions, readers of *Jewish Historical Studies* may be disappointed that England in general and London in particular receive little space in *Jewish Sanctuary in the Atlantic World*, particularly given Samuel Gruber's suggestion in his foreword that Bevis Marks was one of only two key models for early American synagogues. Readers of this book may also be frustrated by Stiefel's tendency to bury his argument. Stiefel tends to forget to establish a common ground for readers in which he explains how his argument differs from previous histories of Atlantic World synagogues. Likewise, rather than calling attention to what is innovative about rethinking the history of Jewish expulsion and exploration through the spatial theme of "sanctuary", Stiefel repeats for many pages the traditional version of this history in a way that will seem unnecessarily familiar to readers who are well read in the history of the era. This is a shame: Stiefel's approach is unusual and deserves more of a spotlight.

Stiefel's desire to synthesize also leads to some over-generalizations. Although 1675–1775 was an era of great prosperity, it was also a period of enormous poverty in many of the congregations he addresses. Eventually, poor congregants greatly outnumbered the wealthy. The plantation crisis

that began in the 1750s and peaked in the early 1770s also occurred in this era. Over-generalization also bolsters Stiefel's optimistic narrative structure. Jews in the Atlantic World experienced a harsh backlash from non-Jews in response to emancipation beginning in the 1790s. Differences that were once understood as "cultural" or "religious" were increasingly ascribed to Jews' racial differences as a Semitic people. This shift seems to complicate Stiefel's desire to see Jews as more included within non-Jewish society by the end of the era he covers and his relegation of "Non-Caucasians" to the final chapter. In many ways these problems with Stiefel's work, however, are only apparent because of the important scholarship on charity, antisemitism, emancipation, and inclusion done by Tirtsah Levie Bernfeld, Julia Lieberman, Stephen Silverstein, and Heather S. Nathans since Stiefel's volume appeared in 2014.

These laments aside, Stiefel is careful about defining architectural terms for non-specialists. Readers of *Jewish Historical Studies* who tend to focus solely on the United Kingdom will appreciate how Stiefel situates British Jewish architectural history in a larger context. Similarly, scholars who tend to focus on texts rather than buildings will find that Stiefel's book provides an important introduction to how and why buildings are key to Jewish history. This book would be a wonderful introduction for students wanting to learn more about religious architecture or Jews in the Atlantic World, as it covers a large amount of basic historical background information. Given the paucity of comparative analyses of Atlantic World architecture, this book fills an important niche.

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