Introduction

What finer tribute to Salo W. Baron than the publication of lectures delivered in his honor at The Jewish Museum over the last ten years? One of those lectures, delivered by Arthur Hertzberg in honor of Baron’s centennial, takes up a question that all the contributors to this volume must address in one way or another. What is the secret of Jewish survival and what can be learned from it?

No one can command Baron’s magisterial view of Jewish history. Born and raised in Tarnów (in the Galician part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and in Poland today), Baron was schooled in Vienna, where he earned three doctorates (philosophy, political science, and law) and rabbinical ordination. He came to the United States at the invitation of Stephen S. Wise, a leading Reform rabbi and Zionist leader, and joined the Columbia University faculty in 1930. His career spanned the better part of the twentieth century. Interviewed by Joseph Berger for the New York Times on his ninetieth birthday in 1985, just four years before he died, Baron stated his intention of completing volumes nineteen, twenty, and twenty-one of his life’s work, A Social and Religious History of the Jews, adding “with a sly smile, ‘I’m an optimist from birth.’”

That optimism informed his work as a historian. Jewish history was not to be “lachrymose history,” a chronicle of persecution and poverty. It was not to be an anti-Semitic history, determined primarily by negative external forces. Jewish historical agency was to be located somewhere else, somewhere positive, in the moral content of Jewish history, in the commitment to collective continuity, in creative responses to predicaments, and in the many and diverse ways of being Jewish—in a word, in “the autonomous development of Jewish culture.” So durable was Baron’s optimism that not even the Holocaust, in which his own parents and a sister perished, could shake it, though he did of course recognize the precariousness of Jewish survival, which he considered the price of being different.

Hertzberg, who enjoyed a long and warm relationship with Baron and officiated at his funeral, the circumstances of which he describes in his essay for this book, offers an intimate portrait of the man and the scholar. Hertzberg is puzzled by two things. First, why, considering how much Baron wrote, did he never really explain how he understood what was involved in the writing of modern Jewish history? Second, why did Baron allow what little he did have to say on this topic in 1937 go unrevised in the second edition of The Social and Religious History of the Jews (1952-1993). The answer, according to Hertzberg, lies in Baron’s conviction that ethics, creativity, and continuity are at the heart of Jewish history, no matter how consequential the turning points, catastrophes, dispersals, and revolutions. None of these events should be allowed to determine the writing of modern Jewish history or overshadow the ordinary flow of life as an historical subject. For Baron, the great lesson of history is that Jewish survival, in the past and now, depends on respect for tradition (the continuity of values and practices) and a commitment to community—in a word, to continuity despite disruption.

It follows that one of the greatest challenges to Jewish collective survival, in Baron’s view, was Emancipation. While full citizenship and the integration of Jews into the larger society was a major gain, it came at a price: the dissolution of autonomous Jewish
community life and the potential for disappearance by assimilation. The Jewish sitters in the early American portraits discussed by Jonathan Sarna in this volume would seem to be a test case. Why, asks Sarna, do these portraits display no indication whatsoever that their sitters are Jewish? Would these sitters have found this absence remarkable? After all, Emancipation and religious liberty meant that Jews were no longer compelled by outside forces or their own communities to mark their difference, whether by a special hat or badge or self-imposed costume; they could dress as they pleased and in ways that identified them with others of their class and social standing, Jewish or not. Portraits of Christians during this period were similarly devoid of signs of their religious affiliation. Indeed, those who painted Christian portraits also painted Jewish ones and they did so according to the rules of a genre whose iconography marked social rather than religious distinction.

For indications of the sitter’s Jewishness, Sarna looks outside the paintings' frames to the synagogue, which controlled every aspect of Jewish religious life at the time. Taking the synagogue as a metaphor for the sitters, he suggests that while the exteriors of early American synagogues were indistinguishable from those of Protestant churches, their interiors were richly Jewish in every way, from the lavish fittings to the liturgy. In a word, in an act of compartmentalization, these early American Jews were worldly on the outside and Jewish on the inside. But, were their lives so tightly compartmentalized? After all, it was not uncommon for Christian travelers to visit synagogues and for Christian dignitaries to participate in the dedication of synagogues. Rachel Wischnitzer, in her history of the American synagogue, even notes “a seat ‘set apart for strangers or Christians,’” As for the synagogues themselves, they were designed by Christian architects and the very best ones at that. Nor was it uncommon among Jews of standing to receive Christian guests in their homes. Indeed such intermingling could lead to intermarriage, as in the case of Phila Franks, daughter of Abigail Franks, subject of one Sarna's portraits.

As Max Weinreich so felicitously stated in his history of Ashkenaz, what Jews wanted was not isolation from Christians but insulation from Christianity. What this meant for the emergence of Yiddish as a language—how else could Jewish languages as we know them have arisen but for a symbiotic relationship between Jews and Christians?—is one thing. What it meant in the context of the United States is another. Jews were allowed to practice their religion, and the Jews in the portraits that are Sarna's subject had their own ways of managing the expression of their religious faith. It is, after all, a hallmark of modernity to think of “religion” as something that can be disentangled from a total way of life, so that one might hold fast to one’s religious faith and practice, while participating in the larger society in ways that do not necessarily distinguish one as a Jew.

To say that these Jews were latter-day Marranos would suggest that they were Christians in public and Jews in secret, which they were not. To say that they were assimilated, while not untrue, would also miss the mark. Assimilation, which has been accorded such great importance in modern Jewish history, is inadequate to the task because it explains too much and too little. We would, in Baron’s terms, be giving this one factor too much weight. There is another possibility, what might be called distinction without difference, which is precisely why what is “Jewish” about a portrait of this kind cannot be seen on its face. Indeed, this seeming paradox is what distinguishes these early American Jews, both Sephardic and Central European, from the more assertive styles of Jewish visibility we came to expect in the latter half of the twentieth century. Distinction without difference is what makes someone Jewish who looks no different from Christians of his class, whose
table is as elegant (if invisibly kosher) as his Christian neighbor’s, and whose artistic and musical tastes are equal to his if not better. True, the sitters for these portraits were Jews in terms of religious observance in their synagogues and homes. But, it could be said, they were also Jews precisely in regard to practices that were, on their face, no different from those of their Christian neighbors. Consider Jewish cookbooks from the early nineteenth century, which do no necessarily announce themselves as Jewish, but which provide instructions for kosher, invisibly Jewish, cuisine. Consider the role of classical music in the self-definition of German Jews: ethnomusicologist Philip Bohlmans has argued that classical music is the “ethnic music” of Central European Jews. Consider as well the benevolent fairs organized by Jewish women that I discuss in my essay in this volume.

The title of my essay, “The Moral Sublime,” refers to the particular way in which the moral and the aesthetic converged in collective philanthropic efforts, most dramatically during the Civil War. Women organized large sanitary fairs as a way of raising money that would go towards improving the medical care of wounded soldiers, who were dying unnecessarily because of unhygienic conditions on the battlefield. After attending a sanitary fair, a reporter of the period was moved to write:

When duty and pleasure go hand in hand in accomplishing so grand an object as that now before us, there is a moral sublimity in it that challenges the admiration of nations, and does more in establishing the righteousness of a cause than any battle that has been fought and won by our brave soldiers since the opening of the war. All politics, creeds, religions and nationalities are forgotten, and the great people, whether as individuals, they believe in its conduct or not, view in their efforts to give that which ameliorate the horrors and suffering of the occasion, and stamp our city and our country as the most enlightened, liberal, and humane of any of which we have recorded since the creation of the world.

Jews were not only active participants in these efforts but also learned from them how to organize mammoth fairs of their own to support Jewish orphanages, hospitals, schools, synagogues, and other institutions.

If the Jewish fairs were largely indistinguishable from those organized by Christian women, what made them Jewish? How was the strategy of distinction without difference deployed here to specifically Jewish ends? First, philanthropy put a moral and ethical model of Judaism into practice and structured the relationship of well-established German Jews to their less fortunate, more recently arrived, and more visibly Jewish Eastern European coreligionists. Second, spectacular fundraising events required a display of solidarity within an otherwise fractious Jewish community, with its many competing groups and institutions. Third, these events were prime occasions for demonstrating Jewish self-sufficiency and public spiritedness. Finally, these fairs modeled an inclusive public sphere, with place for men and women, young and old, rich and poor (albeit as the beneficiaries of benevolence), and Jews and Christians. The fairs were widely covered in both the Jewish and the general press, which considered it their civic duty to provide publicity that would raise fair attendance. There was nothing hidden about the Jewish nature of these events, which were organized by Jews on behalf of Jewish causes. As the nineteenth century wore on, holidays that German Jews once celebrated primarily in the home came increasingly to be the focus of large public events requiring the largest spaces in the city, such as the academy of music, opera house, or armory. Hanukkah pageants and Jewish benevolent fairs were timed to coincide with
Hanukkah and the Christmas shopping season, while Purim balls combined holiday celebration with social and charitable goals. The organization of religious observance and social life around philanthropy was guided by the desire to create and demonstrate Jewish solidarity, on the one hand, and social integration, on the other. These desires were not necessarily in conflict or compartmentalized. On the contrary, the fairs attempted to harmonize them and to do so in public and in ways consistent with the sensibility of their participants.

No one could be further from the New York Jews who ran the benevolent fairs than the “Jewish mestizos” who are the subject of Ariel Segal’s essay. While most of the essays in this volume are concerned with mainstream Jewry and normative Judaism, Segal goes to Iquitos, an isolated city in the Peruvian rain forest, in search of an answer to “the eternal question of what it is to be a Jew.” During the 1880s rubber boom, Jewish men from North Africa came to this city, accessible then only by river boat. In time, they intermarried with indigenous women. When the rubber industry collapsed just before World War 1, many of the men left, in some cases leaving their families behind. The Israelite Society of Iquitos, which was formed in 1909, declined, although a Jewish cemetery survived. There was no synagogue or rabbi, contact with the Jews of Lima was intermittent, and the community became increasingly isolated.

By all rights, these “Jews” should have been absorbed into the surrounding society and disappeared. But, they did not. Instead they created an astonishingly syncretic culture made up of Jewish, indigenous, and Catholic elements. Thus, they observed the Jewish Sabbath, but many also attended church, and a tombstone in the Jewish cemetery bears a Star of David, but also a cross. In these and other ways, the “Jewish mestizos” of Iquitos remembered their Jewish ancestors. Above all, they felt Jewish. Thanks to improved communication after World War 2, Iquitos became less isolated and, during the early 1990s, a Lima rabbi made an effort to bring these Amazonian Jews into the Jewish mainstream. As a result, they revived the [Israelite Society of Iquitos] and became interested in formal conversion to Judaism and immigration to Israel. By the time Segal, a Venezuelan Jew and historian, arrived there in 1995, there were about one hundred fifty Jewish descendants in Iquitos, a city of four hundred thousand. They had become, in Segal’s terms, “obsessed” with being Jewish, and he became obsessed with them.

“They know how to maneuver among contradictions,” Segal writes, even better than we do. But, as he is quick to note, what appears inconsistent and contradictory to him may not appear so to them. Thanks to the postmodern sensibility that Segal brought to these Amazonian Jews, they appeared to him as postmodern avant la lettre. But their attraction to him was of a completely different order. He was their ticket to normative Judaism; they wanted him to teach them Hebrew and liturgy. At first, Segal was reluctant to interfere with their modus vivendi. He wanted to know them as they knew themselves. What did it feel like to be an Amazonian Jew from the inside? How could a way of life that seemed so obviously syncretic, even surrealistic, to Segal be experienced as whole and unsurprising by these accidental Jews? Gradually, Segal’s distanced scholarly stance gave way to a deeply personal engagement.

[No other essay in this volume approaches the question of what it means to be a Jew from a limit case as extreme as the Iquitos, not even those that find in Marranism, a model of Jewish survival, as does Segal himself, but with a difference. The Jewish mestizos prompt him to formulate an expanded notion of Marranism, one that is not confined to a particular historical episode, but indexes a wider phenomenon, found in periods and]
places other than the Iberian Middle Ages. More precisely, Segal proposes that Marranism arises not only from forced conversion (and the secret practice of Judaism), but also from “the natural assimilation of a religious system that coexists with a group’s original Jewish heritage without eclipsing it.” This is true not only for his Jewish mestizos, but also, as Segal points out, for the Dohme Jews of Turkey and the Bene Israel of India, among others. What Segal finds so attractive in Marranism, as he conceives it, is the idea of a dual identity, with Judaism the dominant point of reference, persisting under the most improbable of conditions—in this case, the splendid isolation of a relatively homogeneous and poor city in the Peruvian Amazon, where people who are proud of their ancestry intermarry and syncretize the multiple threads of their heritage.

Far from the Amazonian rainforest, Meyer Schapiro, the subject of Donald Kuspit’s essay, also found the idea of “maneuvering among contradictions” useful as a way of understanding the Jew, as well as the creative artist. A distinguished art historian who wrote about Romanesque as well as modern art, Schapiro was born in 1904 in Siauliai (in Lithuania today) and immigrated to the United States as a young child. He received his doctorate in art history from Columbia University and joined the Columbia faculty in 1928. While Schapiro was unequivocally Jewish, he rarely mentioned Jews in his work. Exceptions include a laudatory essay on Marc Chagall’s Bible paintings and a critical assessment of Bernard Berenson, the great connoisseur of Italian Renaissance art, who converted from Judaism to Christianity and had nothing good to say about Jews and their artistic capacities. Berenson became Schapiro’s Other. A man of questionable provenance himself, Berenson became the great authenticator of artists whose provenance was questionable.

Given the absence of Jewish references in his writing, what makes Schapiro’s work Jewish? Kuspit suggests that the reason that the Jewishness of Schapiro’s writing is not immediately evident on its surface is “perhaps because it is deep.” Accordingly, Kuspit plumbs the “Jewish unconscious” in Schapiro’s work, which he locates in a particular disposition arising from the alienation built into Jewish existence. It is not Jewish solidarity—and certainly not subservience to orthodoxies of any kind, including Jewish ones—that captures Schapiro’s imagination, but the dissidence of a Jewish minority in a Christian world. This disposition is marked by “creative survival against all odds,” heterodoxy, and an ability to hold contradictions in suspension. To characterize this condition as alienation is to index the failure of modernity to alter the fundamentals of the Jewish condition, while valorizing the Jewish predicament and identifying it with the situation of the artist and modernity itself.

Not only have Jews played a signal role in making art modern, but also their artistic engagements have been important in making Jews modern. In Kuspit’s reading of Schapiro, "to be modern is to be alienated from one's received identity." Qualities that might otherwise be considered deficits become assets from the perspective of modern art. They come to define not only the creative artist, but also the kind of art history that Schapiro himself practiced and the place of Jews within it. Schapiro was not alone in this approach. In a lecture delivered at The Jewish Museum and published in Commentary in 1966, art critic Harold Rosenberg argued that Jews have played a central role in creating “a genuine American art” precisely because they created it as individuals, not as representatives of a particular group. The result is “Jewish creation in art,” which, while “not a Jewish art, is a profound Jewish expression.” What matters to Rosenberg is that “while Jewish artists have not been creating as Jews, they have not been working as non-
Jews either. Their art has been the close expression of themselves as they are, including the fact that they are Jews, each in his individual degree.”

Such understandings are part of a long history of creatively imagining what it means to be a Jew. That history includes the changing relationship of American Jews to their European past, the subject of Susannah Heschel’s essay in this volume. Was America the Promised Land, “whose democratic principles embodied the true moral essence of Judaism,” or an assimilationist threat? Was Europe a place of persecution, stifling Orthodoxy, and subservience to Christianity, or a source of authentic Judaism? How was one imagined in terms of the other?

Heschel, like others in this volume, challenges assumptions about assimilation as a road leading inevitably to disappearance. Following Baron, she takes inspiration from the Marranos. Once in New Amsterdam, the Dutch Marranos who fled Brazil in 1654 persisted in private Jewish observance, not because they were forced to do so secretly, but because private observance had become their tradition. Their conversion to Christianity had prepared the way for them to hold high office in European civil society, the military, and the church, which, according to Heschel, "accustomed them to positions of honor and authority, not subservience." Following from this, they were prepared to stand up for their rights. Coming early in the history of Jewish life in America, these New World Marranos, Heschel writes, “set a pattern of political and cultural self-assertion” that subsequent generations of Jews, no matter where they came from, would follow, a pattern that was stronger in the United States than in Europe.

For Heschel, nineteenth-century Protestant America held out hope for the creation of a liberal Judaism that was informed by democratic principles and less vulnerable to anti-Semitism. One reason was the relative lack of Christian interest in formal theology and therefore less Christian inclination to articulate theological anti-Judaism. While there were other reasons for Protestant religious tolerance, Heschel stresses the important role that Judaism played in prompting considerations of religious pluralism. How Jews responded to these circumstances, whether Reform rabbis in the nineteenth century or, in the twentieth century, Reconstructionists, American Zionists, secular Jews, and intellectuals, reveals a richness of possibilities for imagining American Judaism that cannot be reduced to the simple binary vision of America as either Promised Land or land of assimilation. Above all, for Heschel, it is the legacy of assertiveness, established by the New Amsterdam Marranos, that holds the key to such momentous developments in Jewish life as the ordination of women, the enduring importance of social justice, and above all what she calls “a uniquely multiform Judaism” within a multicultural and postmodern America. This development warrants attention from Europe and Israel, given the increasingly important role of the Muslim and Arab world, in addition to the Christian one, in how Jews see themselves and those around them. This essay, as with the volume as a whole, affirms not only Baron’s vision of the great variety of Jewish experience, but also his conviction that Jewish pluralism—the many ways of being Jewish—may well be the key to Jewish survival.

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May 3, 2005
3 Sarna is referring to the eighty-seven early American Jewish portraits in *Facing the New World: Jewish Portraits in Colonial and Federal America*, an exhibition at The Jewish Museum (September 21, 1997 to January 11, 1998), the topic of his Salo Baron Memorial Lecture.
7 "The Great Metropolitan Sanitary Fair," *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, April 23, 1864, p.66
10 Harold Rosenberg, “Is There a Jewish Art?”, *Commentary* 42 (July 1966), p. 60.