Introduction

*Judaism, America, Mobility*

In 1858, seventeen-year-old Edward Rosewater was learning the telegraph trade and roaming the Midwest trying to find a job. Born in Bukovan, Bohemia, but raised in Cleveland, Ohio, he now passed through Cincinnati, Oberlin, parts of Kentucky, and St. Louis in search of work before getting a job as a telegraph operator in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. He later relocated to Stevenson, Alabama; Nashville; and Washington, D.C., before finally settling in Omaha, Nebraska. As he moved in and out of places with and without Jewish communities, Rosewater’s religious life was flexible, to say the least. In his diary, he rarely mentioned Jewish holidays but described sending valentines and noted “Washington's Birth Day.” He attended church semi-regularly, including Methodist, Baptist, Catholic, and Episcopalian services as well as a Tennessee camp meeting, and he read the Book of Mormon, which he deemed “a big lot [of] trash.”

Rosewater remained close to his family, sending them money and letters, even as he had a variety of interactions with the non-Jews who surrounded him, ranging from fistfights to courtships. He rode trains and worked the telegraph on Saturdays, violating the Sabbath, and ate non-kosher food, including Alabama barbecue and pork rinds. And yet Rosewater’s diary does show evidence of traditional Jewish interests. He attended synagogue when in larger cities like Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Nashville, and interacted with some of America’s great rabbis. When Rabbi Bernard Illowy stopped in Nashville en route to a new position in New Orleans, Rosewater showed his son around, and later on, when visiting the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, he “found [rabbis Isaac Mayer] Wise & [Max] Lilienthal there. Introduced myself to Wise & showed them [the] Indian Gallery.”

It is unclear whether Rosewater prayed privately or read Jewish books, but he did find religious meaning in nature, history, and literature. He
wrote of Tennessee’s Nickajack Cave, “How great is God [. T]o look on & not feel how small we are would be impossible.” In 1861 he read *Pillar of Fire, or Israel in Bondage*, an 1859 novelization of the Hebrew Bible’s Exodus story, albeit one that was written by an Episcopalian minister. On the first day of 1861, on the cusp of the Civil War, he turned reflective, poignantly drawing on Jewish New Year’s imagery regarding the Book of Life to interpret the secular New Year: “oh what may this Book of my fate be destined to contain[.] The pages now blank may be filled with Descriptions horrible or at least strange.” That same year he fasted twice, once on the national day of fasting called by President Buchanan, January 4, and again on Yom Kippur. Rosewater would eventually achieve some renown as the man who telegraphed the Emancipation Proclamation and founded the *Omaha Bee* newspaper. He became the founding president of Omaha’s Hebrew Benevolent Society, and twenty years later he was described as having “a tender feeling towards his coreligionists, notwithstanding that he manifests no interest in congregational affairs.”

Throughout his travels Rosewater created religious life on his own, using sources that were Jewish, Christian, both, and neither.

Rosewater is hardly the typical starting point for a study of nineteenth-century American religion. He was not a minister, nor was he a faithful congregational member. He was a religiously promiscuous single male during a period renowned for its sectarianism, domestic piety, and feminization. And of course, he was a Jew in a time and place we think of as dominated by Protestantism. Rosewater does not fit any better within existing scholarship on American Judaism, however. He has little place within the mass of studies on post-1880 urban Jews or the small number of monographs that focus on nineteenth-century synagogues. And yet, why not start with Rosewater? This book argues that his case is not a peripheral one of religious deterioration through secularization, Protestantization, assimilation, or apathy. Rather, he is an exemplar of American religion, albeit not as it is typically understood. From his perspective, congregations, denominations, coherent ideologies, and singular identities are not obvious starting points, but rather are particular strategies of stability that coexist and compete with others within a nation overrun by mobile strangers.

There has been much talk in recent years of the “nones,” a growing category in national surveys of religious attitudes. These Americans de-
clare no formal religious affiliation while still admitting to some forms of religiosity. According to the 2012 Pew Research Center poll, more than two-thirds of nones believed in God and more than half prayed regularly; many also engage in other kinds of religious practices. Indeed, scholar Elizabeth Drescher found that nones embraced as spiritual practices “enjoying time with family,” “enjoying time with pets or other animals,” “enjoying time with friends,” and “preparing or sharing food.” While fearful religious leaders and pundits alike have described it as a new, postmodern phenomenon, this book argues that such eclecticism dates at least to Rosewater and is arguably the default setting of American religion.

Over three decades ago, Robert Orsi began to use the case of American Catholicism to develop the theory of “lived religion,” or “the creative working of real men and women—using inherited, improvised, contested and contradictory religious idioms—with the actual circumstances of their lives.” More recently, another prolific scholar of twentieth-century American Catholicism, Thomas Tweed, has argued that religions are “confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries.” This book builds on these groundbreaking studies, arguing for the importance of ethnicity, ritual, practice, and movement in a field long preoccupied with Protestantism, ministers, and institutions. In its focus on nineteenth-century Jews it also sheds new light, revealing these phenomena to be rooted in larger structures of race, economics, and the law, and dating to the beginnings of the nation. Although they were a tiny proportion of the population, Jews’ profound change in status upon migration to the United States and their ongoing struggles within it highlight in relief the subtle and often surprising power dynamics of the United States and their resultant religious orientations.

Jews first came to what became the United States in 1654 and established a community in New Amsterdam, which was followed soon after by Philadelphia, Savannah, Charleston, and Newport. American independence in 1776 began to transform these “port Jews,” oriented across the sea, into mobile Jews looking west, a process accelerated by a mass migration from German-speaking lands. Between 1820 and the Civil War, America’s Jewish population increased fifty-fold, from around
3,000 to 150,000, and it would expand again, to roughly 250,000, by 1877. These Jews arrived during the heyday of westward expansion and of Manifest Destiny, an ideology that argued for the United States’ inevitable—and divinely sanctioned—domination of the American continent.

As the title of Emanuel Leutze’s iconic mural announced from the walls of the U.S. Capitol Building: “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way.” This work, painted by a German immigrant during the first year of the Civil War, depicted the peaceful journey of diverse settlers bringing civilization and agriculture to an empty idyll. The painting is almost entirely empty of Native Americans, although included in the struggles and triumphs of the emigration it depicts are immigrants, farmers, adventurers, women, children, and a single freed African American man, added to the painting following Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. At the apex of the painting, a figure hoists an American flag, uniting the darkness of the East and the golden light of the great West. This vision of a benign and inclusive Manifest Destiny was authorized—and in this case, commissioned and displayed—by the American state, even as it obscured the violent crucibles of native displacement and racial capitalism in which it was forged.

The United States thus sacralized a politics of mobility that was not only triumphant or exploitative, but remarkably fluid and uncertain, especially for Jews. Jews and their fellow migrants came from places in Europe where religious identity was a bureaucratic category that determined one’s possibilities for residence, travel, economic opportunity, and religious life. In the United States, by contrast, such regulations were almost nonexistent for those who were determined to be white and male. These Americans could up and move at the drop of a hat. Their identity—and that of anyone they knew—could be a product of their own creation as much as a fact of personal history. “Freaks of fortune” could send them careening upward in wealth one day, while accidents, fraud, or poor luck could destroy it the next. Religious life was hardly immune from these realities. Without government-supported communities or reliable authorities, where could you procure kosher meat? Alone in the American wilderness, how could you find nine coreligionists for a *minyan* (prayer quorum)? Without identity documents, how could you really know that someone was Jewish? Indeed, the frontier
of this book’s title refers not only to western lands, in the deterministic formulation of Frederick Jackson Turner, or to the intense social worlds that developed upon them. Rather, it refers to what Jewish studies scholar Sander Gilman has described as “the conceptual and physical space where groups in motion meet, confront, alter, destroy, and build,” interactions that are profoundly shaped by economic and political realities. In the context of American state formation, and for a minority group in a new land, such frontiers were particularly intense and hardly restricted to the West.

To be sure, not everyone at the time saw mobility, the frontier, or even America as religious problems. For some, they offered a liberating path out of religious identity and practice. Still others believed that environmental factors were irrelevant to religious life. Radicals, both Reform and Orthodox, most of whom lived in eastern cities with large Jewish populations, claimed that “true Judaism” was already suitable to all locales. In 1848 Orthodox rabbi Abraham Rice referenced the sixteenth-century code of Jewish law, arguing, “if we all act according to our [Shulkhan Arukh], one Jew can live in one corner of the world + yet we have with him one rule + regulation.” While Rice insisted on the relentless observance of rooted halakhic (Jewish legal) practices no matter where or when, Reform rabbi David Einhorn believed that the purified religious spirit was the portable and exportable core of Judaism. In 1855, soon after arriving in the United States, he defined Judaism as “the covenant between God and man which is binding for all times, in all places and on all peoples.” Jewish universalism was not only historical and anthropological, but also geographical.

And yet for most Jews, the relationship between Judaism and American mobility was a fraught one that occasioned debate and inspired adaptations. These Jews did things like eat non-kosher beef but not pork, eschew congregational membership but live in a Jewish boardinghouse, or marry a non-Jewish woman but insist that their children were Jewish, halakhah be damned. They worked to create stable identities and lives on their own and through new institutions, ideologies, and movements, including congregations, denominations, and religious reform. And yet these forms, the usual terrain of American religious history, were only the most prominent among a wide array of religious strategies for grappling with mobility. Whether they embraced or rejected them, mobile
Jews were, in their own words, the “happy medium,” or the “modern-minded.” They were not eager assimilationists, not adamant reformers, and not staunch traditionalists, but rather ordinary Jews who were flexible, open-minded, and pragmatic.

They referred to themselves as Jews, Yehudim, and Hebrews, but most often as Israelites, invoking a noble lineage of biblical wanderers. For this book I have gathered hundreds of stories of such Jews, selecting them not because of their DNA or name alone, and not because they measured up against a normative standard of legal observance or congregational membership. Rather, in the absence of governmental classification, which made the United States so unique, I include as Jews those who situated themselves within Jewish community in some way, no matter how successful, consistent, or positive their experiences were. For this reason, I largely avoid quantitative data, seeking instead to maintain the lived complexity and ambivalence of individual Jewish lives. Evidence of their activities and ideas is scattered, but nonetheless surges forth from press sources, late-in-life memoirs, letters, and diaries; from minutes and press reports of the congregations and institutions in which they were founders, members, and troublemakers; and from articles and sermons where they were exhorted and cast as thorns in the sides of prominent leaders.

Indeed, that most Jews seemed to be like Edward Rosewater concerned American Jewish leaders, including congregational presidents, local religious functionaries, and big-city rabbis, including the most famous American Jewish figures of this period, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise and Isaac Leeser. These two men loom large in studies of nineteenth-century American Judaism as the prime movers and shakers behind Reform and Orthodoxy, respectively. They were important figures with many disagreements, to be sure, but both were also profoundly shaped by the mobility that surrounded them. Leeser had immigrated to Richmond, Virginia, from Westphalia in 1824 at age eighteen and eventually become a hazan, a non-rabbinic religious functionary, in Philadelphia. In 1843 he founded America’s first lasting Jewish periodical, the Occident and American Jewish Advocate, which he edited until his death in 1868. Wise, more than a decade younger than Leeser, had arrived from Bohemia in 1846 and, after a tumultuous tenure at a congregation in Albany, New York, settled in Cincinnati in 1854. There he founded the
Israelite and remained an active figure in American Jewish life until his death in 1900. Leeser and Wise were particularly important leaders and thinkers because they traveled continuously and maintained correspondence throughout the continent, keeping their ears close to the ground of American Jewish life. Disconcerted by what they saw as the chaos of idiosyncratic local Jewish institutions and practices, they became fierce advocates of congregations, of moderating ideologies, and of a national Jewish “union.” They continually chastised but also solicited a mass of misbehaving Jews who created their own religious lives through unauthorized markets and networks of people, objects, and ideas. More than a “creative working of . . . idioms” or an “organic-cultural flow,” as Orsi or Tweed would have it, religion for these Jews—perpetually on one frontier or another—was a mobile assemblage of resources for living.

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In this account, mobility is central, not only as an aggregate of individual experiences but as a shared milieu and mentalité of the frontier. It was produced by a constellation of legal, geographic, and economic factors and resulted in unprecedented anonymity, isolation, uncertainty, and scarcity. While much of the material for this study comes from small-town communities and individual migrants in the antebellum South and West, it includes Jews from all regions across six decades and those who moved constantly as well as those who moved rarely. Few American Jews, diverse though they were, were immune from the dramatic effects of mobility on their families and communities. What follows is a portrait of these Jews and the range of new religious possibilities they encountered and created in what I take to be American Judaism’s formative era, the short nineteenth century.

Part 1 of this book begins by laying out the United States’ political and legal contexts, which enabled an unfettered Jewish mobility unknown in Europe, but premised on individualism and the invisibility of religious difference (chapter 1). It then explores the costs and benefits of the new social world it fostered for Jewish immigrants and their coreligionists reared in eastern cities (chapter 2). Mobility fueled the desire for stable social life but also complicated its institutionalization, especially in congregations. Part 2 explores the consequences of mobility in distinct but intersecting spheres of religious life—family and the life cycle (chapter
3), and material culture and popular theology (chapter 4). It shows how ordinary Jews sought to create stable lives and identities within and outside nascent institutions and the strictures of Jewish law. These Jews—reformers and traditionalists alike—did not assimilate but developed new, more expansive standards of Jewish authenticity on the road, in the market, and in relationship to the American state.

Part 3 turns to Wise, Leeser, and their allies who sought to order the diversity and eclecticism of American Jews on a national scale. Reconciling Judaism and unfettered mobility, they argued, required standardization and formalization, both institutionally (chapter 5) and ideologically (chapter 6). Although these leaders failed in their grandest projects, they succeeded in establishing the contours of an enduring and pervasive mobile infrastructure and mobile imaginary. The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the International Order of B’nai B’rith, and Reform Judaism were all by-products and accelerants of the communications technologies, social sciences, and imperial formations of these broader systems, all of which sought to make Judaism compatible with American mobility.

In a Thanksgiving sermon in 1845, Isaac Leeser outlined his vision for Judaism in the United States:

This will, indeed, become a country where the Jew will have his home, where he may travel through its length and its breadth, and find brothers with whom he can worship, of whose food he may partake, and with whom he has the same hopes, with whom he has one God and Father.  

Leeser’s description shows that mobility was central to the possibilities and challenges of the United States for Jews, perpetual exiles with a newfound manifest destiny. Seen from this angle, it is clear that in the nineteenth century, as today, American religion was not settled and was not restricted to the realm of belief or the walls of congregational worship spaces. Rather, as Leeser knew all too well, it was confusing, embodied, and, increasingly, created on the road. It is true that in this context many elements of Jewish life were cast aside and that those who moved tended to be those who were undisturbed by that prospect. But to understand American Judaism, we need to move beyond such binary understandings of Jews as Reform or Orthodox, observant or
non-observant, good or bad. The same holds for American religion more broadly. Though our subject is a diverse and unwieldy one, if historians are going to nominate an archetypal religious American, perhaps we should set aside the raucous evangelical preacher, the pious Christian mother, and the fervent Mormon pioneer. Maybe we should look instead to the mobile Jew, selectively revealing, expressing, and creating religion as he goes.