

Response: Jewish Merchants

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What I've prepared to say today pertains primarily to the Zachary Barowitz and to the Sara Miller Arnon and Julie Miller Soros papers—I'll try as best I can to offer some off the cuff, improvisatory remarks on Phyllis Graber Jensen's paper as well. The focus on Jewish merchants ensures a few common themes or motifs. For our purposes, I suppose it's worth asking how much of what happens with Jewish merchants in Maine is pertinent to the story of Jewish retailers elsewhere in the U.S. What is particular to the Jewish experience in rural New England? In small town America? In the Diaspora in general? I'd like to thank Zachary for that wonderful quotation from the *Pawnbroker*. The Jewish mercantile heritage goes back far and was neither the result of a genetic predisposition nor of a gift from God. This heritage derives from the combination of two historical patterns, one of which is specific to in Jewish life and the other of which is common to all civilizations—anti-Jewish prejudice and a scarcity of resources. We know better than to fall into the trap of waxing nostalgic about the days when all Jews could do was walk around the countryside selling things out of sacks they carried on their backs. The same thing goes for our fond memories of brick and mortar Jewish retailers. Those were also the days when Jews couldn't go to Ivy League colleges or, in some communities, practice medicine. Selling furniture and surplus clothing served them well while they bided their time.

I am afraid that must admit to having fallen somewhat short of identifying a uniquely rural New England Jewish experience in my own recent oral historical study of the topic. The patterns that emerged from the stories I collected—the emphasis on Yankee “stick-to-it-iveness,” the endorsements of upcountry frugality, even the high value placed on the small town democracy that we commonly associate with the Puritan founders of this region—aren't

sufficiently distinct from the patterns we might note in connection with Jewish life elsewhere in small town America. So if it's difficult to identify what would be unique to the *regional* Jewish experience in this part of the country, we'd probably be stretching things to go looking for some way in which the *Maine* Jewish experience is, well, especially *Maineish* as well as Jewish.

Instead, what I'm seeing in these papers is some strong evidence that the patterns of Jewish life in Maine pretty closely resemble the patterns of Jewish life in small town America and, for that matter, many of the same patterns that we ordinarily identify with the Jewish experience throughout the United States.

What are these patterns? At the risk of telling you what you already know, I'll dip into both papers in order to name the three that stand out for me. For what it's worth, it's the third one that I find the most intriguing. So, 1) Jewish retailers experienced a "Golden Age" during the period between World War One and, in some communities, the 1970s. German Jews had come first, in the mid-19th century, and had paved a way for their East European successors. While in the South these Jewish retailers served a population comprised largely of black sharecroppers and the like, here in places like Maine, they served the needs of humble Yankee farmers and, more important, immigrant factory workers and farmhands from places like Poland and Quebec, as Phyllis suggests in her paper. Starting in the early 1960s and into the 1970s, these Jewish retailers and the neighborhoods where they sold their goods and housed their families began to experience what Zachary refers to as "simpl[e] attrition." The unusual thing, however, was that—as attrition goes—this was not necessarily a bad thing. These Jewish retailers "wandered away," to quote Zachary again, "when they got the opportunity." While the coming of shopping malls had and continues to have a devastating effect on downtown businesses, Jews whose families had once settled in these small towns found another way to

prosper. The conditions of their lives might be said to have improved, economically and socially, at least. Now their kids *could* attend Ivy League schools. Now an “exclusive” neighborhood, as reluctant as we might be to admit it, was one that kept people of color from moving into it. As lively as these Jewish retailing neighborhoods once were, the benefits of being able to leave them far outweighed the advantages to be gained by staying put.

2) Jews thrived in these mercantile districts not because they were superior salesmen but because they had strong ties to people who lived outside of those neighborhoods and, indeed, in distant cities and towns. Sometimes, as we heard in Lee Shai Weissbach’s talk earlier today, Jewish retailers sought to increase their cache by symbolically invoking “New York” or “Paris” on the marquees that decorated their stores. More important, as Jews who knew other Jews in other far-flung places, they could develop strong inventories of affordable goods, and they could borrow money when they needed to borrow it. Moreover, their ties to people outside their own communities were hardly restricted to fellow Jews. As Sara Miller Arnon and Julie Miller Soros show in their paper, the Jewish retailers of Waterville and, in particular, the members of the Levine family, forged strong ties to Colby College itself. Now Colby is, of course, a Waterville institution. But the students who attend it aren’t all Mainers, and like any other elite small liberal arts college, it is a piece of the larger world of educated achievers. Jewish retailers often did well because in small towns because they themselves weren’t wholeheartedly small town people. Mid-twentieth century small town Jews, whether in Maine or in New Hampshire or in Ohio, often had more in common with their fellow Jews elsewhere in the nation than they had with their immediate rural neighbors. As these papers all attest so persuasively, the Jewish retailers’ commitment to local communities is unquestionable. At the same time, a strong contributing factor behind their having been able to honor the commitments they had made to their small

town neighbors was the relative ease with which so many of them were able, through familial and ethnic ties to other Jews and through business ties to gentiles and Jews alike *outside* their communities, to maintain their own economic equilibrium.

3) Jewish retailers went out of their way in order to accommodate the needs and interests of their customers. In some cases, as we hear about in Sarah's and Julie's paper, a shared linguistic background made the retailers' efforts to meet customers halfway just a bit easier. It helped, in other words, that many East European Jews were familiar with the same Polish that was spoken in the immigrant communities to whom they sold their goods. Sarah's and Julie's paper also tells about Sarah Levine, the landlady who "would walk around the neighborhood stopping to talk with the mothers and children and getting to know them." To quote Phyllis, "effort was the key ingredient to success." Even when the storeowners were arguing the virtues of J.J Nissen bread, or switching the labels on the shirts they were selling to the prison, they were willing to do whatever it took to maintain a strong customer base among their gentile hosts. Now one argument might be that such practices simply constitute sound business sense. The customer is always right and must be convinced that you really believe this to be the case. My sense, however, not just from these papers today but from the stories I heard from people as I prepared my oral history of rural New England Jews, is that these acts of accommodation were often dictated by the pressure that Jews felt on the basis of their identity as members of a historically oppressed minority.

I say this on the basis of several stories I collected in which a given Jewish retailer (or itinerant peddler, or cattle merchant) went to inordinate lengths to extend credit for people who couldn't pay their bills. This sort of practice isn't equivalent in my mind to mere obsequiousness. Jewish retailers had sound and justifiable reasons for ingratiating themselves to

their customers. For economic reasons, primarily, they had chosen to settle in places where their presence often represented the only “outside” incursion into Yankee territory. For the Jews of Maine and other rural New England states or sub-regions, making some sort of common cause with immigrant factory workers was a survival strategy. As was often the case for Southern Jewish retailers who sold goods to black sharecroppers, there was an advantage to be gained by *not* being a member of the ruling elite, by being someone who was almost as much of an outsider as you were. At the same time, and as the Southern experience also teaches us, Jewish retailers could also understand and appreciate the advantages of being quasi insiders, at least in financial terms. Their efforts to endear themselves to their surrounding communities often took the form of philanthropic activities (including generous donations made to Christian churches of various denominations), involvement in school committees, and various civic affiliations.

What remains an open question is the degree to which such efforts to fit in and avoid offense were merely acts of assimilation or whether it was still possible for Jews in small communities like the ones in Maine about which we’ve been hearing today to retain an autonomous identity and strong sense of themselves as Jews. Life in America and adaptation to American culture (whatever that was) already demanded quite a bit from these immigrants and their children—the relinquishment of linguistic difference, of distinctive clothing, of traditional foodways. The rewards that followed from these families’ choice to live in the State of Maine—reduced exposure to the pressures of urban life, less competition from other retailers—were often balanced out by the extra work necessitated by their relative isolation.