

**Todd Endelman, *Broadening Jewish History. Towards a Social History of Ordinary Jews* (Oxford; Portland, Or.: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011), pp. 368.**

by *Barbara Armani*

The title of the latest book by Todd Endelman - *Broadening Jewish History. Towards a Social History of Ordinary Jews* - is as ambitious as it is misleading. The volume is in fact a collection of essays previously published in other venues, and – as we shall see – the author does not concentrate on “ordinary Jews” as much as the title would suggest. The author states that he will attempt a comparative survey of the Jewish condition in the post-emancipation period, yet the focus of the comparison is centered, with the exception of the chapter on the Jews of Warsaw, on the English and German cases. This results in a rather schematic representation of the nuanced dynamics of integration for the Jewish communities in the wider European context.

The first part of the book is devoted to a reassessment of the historiography; the author identifies and critically discusses the cultural and political influences that have left a mark on the contents and methods of research dedicated to post-emancipation Jewish studies (Chapters 1-5). The following chapters (5-14), offer the results of research conducted mostly on the biographies of exceptional Jews (in no way “ordinary Jews” as the title of the book would suggest), such as Benjamin Disraeli or the banker Jacob Rey – also known as the “Jew King”, and to the description of the non-linear paths in and out of Judaism of great dynasties of the Jewish bourgeoisies such as the families of Edwin Montague or Adolphe Frankau.

The biographical key is used as a magnifying glass that allows the scholar to analyze the integration process, examining the many challenges brought about by emancipation between XVIIIth and the XIXth centuries. It is methodological option that the author justifies in consideration of the lack of data on community life: «In the case of liberal states like England and France” - Endelman writes – “where no church or government agency gathered data on conversions and intermarriage, historians must reconstruct the course of radical assimilation on the basis of so-called anecdotal evidence [...] this method, of course, can not disclose the extent of radical assimilation in a community, but can provided for a wealth of detail about the road to conversion, the concrete circumstances in which it occurred, and the success of former Jews and their descendants” (p. 248). Endelman’s emphasis on the lack of sources useful to reconstruct the social practices of the minority (in its communal dimension) does not seem, however, entirely justified. To prove this are the numerous studies of the last two decades - contemporary to the article collected in the volume in question - on the life of Jewish communities in

nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>1</sup> The lack of sources thus appears intertwined, in the works of Endelman, to a precise methodological choice whose implications deserve attention.

The adoption of a largely biographical approach to the study of Jewish history, even though it is certainly a fundamental element, tends to isolate two opposing models of Jewishness 1) a ductile and secularized identity that shifts and changes its contours according to the varied pathways chosen by single individuals, and in which it is quite hard to recognize the sense of an attachment to the Jewish collective 2) or, juxtaposed to the first model, a rigid identity, expressing behavioral models centered uniquely on religious beliefs and group solidarity.

In Endelman's book it seems that these two models are simultaneously present. Although the author will side in favor of a history of what ordinary Jews 'do' and not just what the cultural elites 'think', in his account the daily lives of ordinary Jews, poor or not, remains in the background. Endelman is concerned, in fact, with the way in which Jewish identity is transformed to become sometimes evanescent. He interrogates his sources to understand the reasons why several Jews tended to loosen their ties with religious tradition and with the community of origin until they were finally absorbed, through the practice of conversion, the culture of the majority. At the core of his analysis are the processes of radical assimilation, that is the choices of a minority of Jews who decided to abandon the religion of their fathers and embrace another faith (as well as another view of the world). Thus he leaves to the margins the paths of those who chose to remain Jews accepting a constant confrontation with Christian and secular cultures. Everyday practices, social networks, marital strategies, educational and professional qualifications of the peculiar figures studied by Endelman may be emblematic of complex social processes, yet they do not allow to fully grasp the relevance nor the forms of the collective life of a social community.

Nonetheless the entire volume revolves around an implicit and yet pivotal question: was there, in modern Europe, a collective dimension of Judaism? A 'difference' consciously sought and perceived as a sign of belonging to a common and specific tradition? Endelman's enquiry, focusing on the theme of apostasy, tends to highlight the elements of fragility in the social and cultural identities of emancipated Jews.

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<sup>1</sup> Such as, for example, *Assimilation and Community. The Jews in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, eds. J. Frankel and S. Zipperstein, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); M. Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class*, (New York; Oxford University Press, 1991); P. Hyman, *The Emancipation of the Jews of Alsace: Acculturation and Tradition in Nineteenth Century*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); N.L. Green, *The Pletzl of Paris. Jewish immigrant workers in the "belle époque"* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986).

The existence of a community whose boundaries are well defined is even more visible – according to Endelman - in Central Europe, where the Jews who were without confession or who had been baptized maintained strong personal and social relations with the community of origin. In such contexts the choice of abandoning Judaism stems, according to the author, from the discomfort produced by more or less open forms of rejection and discrimination. This thesis is justified by making use of a rigid opposition between the German model and the British one. The lowest conversion rate is made to be directly proportional to the degree of tolerance exhibited by the majority towards the minority. Unlike the German one, - notes Endelman - English anti-Semitism «was, more often than not social rather than political or occupational [...] it did not breed political parties and pressure groups, or become a permanent feature of political thinking»(p. 108). Such a view tends to emphasize the push towards conversion generated by German anti-Semitism, while disregarding to a large extent, the successes of the German-Jewish encounter.<sup>2</sup>

The value of the wide and rich portraits of Jewish family histories offered in many essays that make up this book is undeniable. Yet the principal interest of the book lies in the discussion of some theoretical and methodological paradigms which have influenced the way Jewish history has been conceived and written. Two, among many others, are the elements which I think deserve to be mentioned in particular:

1) the insistence on the inadequacy of definitions and classifications developed by liberal cultures to cope with the peculiarities of the Jewish condition. Endelman highlights the problematic nature of the well known paradigm centered on the public/private dichotomy, the disavowal of the social and ethno-cultural dimension of Jewishness (which is assigned a purely religious connotation), as well as the excessive trust in the transformative potency of laws and education. 2) The open and determined critique of a historiography celebrating the virtues of diaspora. Endelman stigmatizes as “diaspora legitimization” the tendency to over-emphasize the resilience and creativity of Jewish communities in post-emancipation societies. Such a view of the past would, according to him, be the result of a convergence, it is unclear how self-conscious, of an anti-Zionist attitude and the emergence, in American academic circles, of a new and captivating social historiography. His attack is a harsh and direct one: “The classic Zionist interpretation, with its pessimistic perspective on the health of diaspora communities was more or less dead in academic circles in the 1980s [...] the desire to celebrate diaspora, to celebrate the tenacity of diaspora communities, led historians to underestimate the demographic losses they sustained in the modern period. Many quantitative studies masked their extent by examining disaffiliation in the aggregate” (p. 62)

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<sup>2</sup> See for example D. Sorkin *The Transformation of the German Jewry, 1780-1840*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

Endelman's conclusions are even more radical, exhibiting a drastic rejection of the suggestions offered by cultural studies. He denies that historians attentive to the linguistic turn or other culturalist approaches may bring any new and relevant input to the history of modern Judaism. A history that, according to him, must be studied as the story of individuals in flesh and blood.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Such a critique concerns studies of the 80's such as M. L. Rozenblit, *The Jews of Vienna, 1867 – 1914* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983); D. Hertz, *The seductive conversion in Berlin, 1770-1809*, in *Jewish Apostasy in The Modern World*, ed. T. M. Endelman (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1987).