

A CULTURE OF ORDER: DECORUM AND ELDRIDGE STREET SYNAGOGUE

RIV-ELLEN PRELL

Synagogues, like all public places, are situated in time and culture as well as space. We require then effective ways to decode or read the story of a synagogue that will fully account for what is being communicated by and through it not only as a building, but as a center of community and social relationships. In 1887 when this synagogue opened its doors, Europe's great capitals, including Berlin, Paris, Budapest and Prague, were also sites of beautiful and impressive new synagogues. If their synagogues spoke of Jews as cosmopolitan, urbane, optimistic and worthy of the citizenship, what can we say of a Lower East Side synagogue? Knowing that synagogues built in New York City just a few decades later did not look like the one built on Eldridge Street only makes the question of understanding the values coded by this public place even more tantalizing. We know that decoding the story of the Eldridge Street Synagogue requires us to understand those who led the congregation and helped to build this building through their financial gifts and loans, as well as those who came through its doors to worship here.

The founders of the synagogue have left us documents to help us decode the synagogue's story. The congregation's 1913 Constitution, adapted from the original 1887 document, offers a priceless window onto the world of the congregation. One of the keys to understanding that world is encapsulated in the word "order," which appears no fewer than ten times on a single page of the document. For example, the president's duties were defined by his responsibility to "maintain order and decorum." The duties of the trustees of the synagogue were in part defined by their responsibility to maintain order and decorum during what they describe as "the divine service." If the trustees "orders" were disobeyed congregants would be fined and reported to the president. Members were



The Constitution

"urgently requested" to maintain order and decorum by staying seated or refraining from conversation.

Kahal Adath Jeshurun's leaders, and those who wrote its constitution, prized an orderliness that required remaining seated during worship, being quiet, respecting a hierarchy of leadership and taking turns at speaking during business meetings. They wanted deferral to authority whether it was during prayer or discussions of dues. These behaviors were the sine qua non of order. Those who were disorderly could be fined and removed. Those who belonged were the ones who knew how to behave.

The pursuit of order was hardly unique to the Eldridge Street synagogue. Churches and synagogues alike focused



Sender Jarmulowsky, the first president at the Eldridge Street Synagogue, and all subsequent presidents, used the gavel to keep order during the congregational meetings.

on order, as did theaters and concert halls, and the dining tables of families and friends under the sway of new books on etiquette. What these various venues of public and private life had in common was a new cultural emphasis on control of behavior and life for those who aspired to be part of the middle class or to be perceived as thoroughly American.

THE PARADOX OF ORDER

The heavy hand of decorum, order and control was not the only claim on the immigrants and their children who lived on the Lower East Side. Their commitment to the exercise of democracy was equally, if not more compelling. Immigrant Jewish organizations, secular and religious, and large and small all had constitutions because they epitomized the

exercise of democracy. Rules were clearly articulated; rights and responsibilities were laid out formally. It is no surprise then that the Yiddish press of the period routinely carried articles about voting and democracy and took positions on the important events of the day. The left wing Yiddish press was, for example, a staunch supporter of suffrage. The conservative press opposed it vehemently. The emphasis on order seemed to contradict the free exercise of power embodied in democracy.

It is important then, to be alert to the anxieties embodied in the constitution. Legislating order suggests that it is difficult to achieve. Fining people for their failure to be orderly suggests that other values are at work, that the culture of those who attended the synagogue was not readily invested in the acceptance of the decrees of officers or styles of worship that prohibited talking during services.

What then is the purpose of demanding order? Does it reveal a community in transition from the Old World to the New World? Do we see an attempt to control new immigrants, and are more established immigrants afraid of the judgments of others?

WHY ORDER?

Many historians have focused on the importance of order in the late 19th and early 20th century American synagogues, fraternal associations, and women's organizations. Why was order a touchstone of Americanization? What was the America to which these men and women were acculturating? Why were they dogged by a yearning for order that seems, at least for this period, so often to have eluded them?

Immigrant European Jews hardly came from a world that could be characterized as a sea of chaos. Those from the Russian empire, which constituted a significant percentage of immigrants, as well as those from Eastern Europe, lived in societies undergoing changes associated with industrialization, urbanization, political transformation and anti-Semitism. At the same time, they lived in well established communities with strong Jewish communal relationships and extended families. In contrast to Western Europe, however, many Jews did not yet share the bourgeois sensibility that historians George Mosse, Robert Wiebe, and Lawrence Levine have characterized as "a search for order" in both Europe and the United States, albeit at different and overlapping periods. Traditional notions of order that characterized Jews of small towns and enclaves were

focused on Jewish law and commandments. The order of a new bourgeois class concentrated elsewhere. That demand for order was grounded in a culture and economy that linked the demands of the workplace to the demands for cultural constraint. From the smallest matter of the silverware used at a meal to the licensing of physicians, teachers, and lawyers by the state, the concern for order was marked by political and economic hierarchy, control over the body and appearance, and an emphasis on restraint.

When the synagogue of Eldridge Street opened in 1887, these cultural and economic issues were at the forefront of American society.

THE UNITED STATES AND ORDER

The members of Kahal Adath Jeshurun were part of the mass waves of immigration to the United States. Most, but not all, European Jews were preceded by immigrants from China, England, Scandinavia, Ireland and Scotland. Jews, as well as Southern and Eastern European and Irish immigrants came to newly burgeoning industrial cities, which offered work. At the same time the United States was being transformed from a rural to an urban nation, a Catholic and Jewish nation as well as a Protestant one. Urban centers drew not only immigrants but African Americans who fled a brutal, post Reconstructionist South. These groups challenged the nation that they found. They introduced new forms of music and recreation, practiced religion in new ways, spoke foreign languages, and had different ideas about politics, than many native born Americans. The elites among others fought back against a changing and pluralizing nation. Not only did they attempt to restrict immigration and create racist laws and religious barriers, they drew boundaries around what was culturally “acceptable” and what was “offensive.” The native born elites found difference threatening and frightening, and judged it as inferior. What was different to them was judged and labeled as “chaotic,” and “uncivilized.” Worship, or performances of theater, concerts, and operas that engaged people actively and robustly were judged ‘inferior’. In particular, they cajoled and shamed those who were different by asserting a single standard for what they would come to call proper behavior and “high” culture. They stood for “order”.

A CULTURE TO BE TAMED

The Yiddish theater, which flourished in the United States beginning in 1890 and with the closing of immigration was being eclipsed by the 1930s, provides a good example of how many groups of people from many parts of the world experienced culture. Audience members came to the theater in families. They brought food and ate it through the performance. They responded actively to the play, often speaking to characters, chastising villains and weeping over the lives of the virtuous. In some plays audience members loudly condemned the performers for smoking on the Sabbath, despite their presence in the theater on Friday night or Saturday afternoon.

Similar tales could be told about how audiences responded to Shakespeare in the United States and England in the 19th century, Italian-Americans to opera, or working men to vaudeville. Audiences typically sang and spoke along. They mixed food, fun and performances.



Worshippers required tickets for High Holiday services at the Eldridge Street Synagogue.

Worship and performance share many qualities. In cultures where audiences actively participate in the performances they watch, their prayer lives are not surprisingly interactive, audible, and animated. The demand for silence and order in the worship lives of congregants was directly tied to the demand for silence among theater goers.

How were immigrant and native-born audiences dissuaded from this deep engagement with what they saw and heard? By the end of the 19th century America's industrialists, bankers and wealthy classes had built museums, opera houses, and concert halls as shrines to a high culture. They regulated who could attend by the high price of tickets, and once audiences arrived they were greeted with posted rules and regulations. Conductors shushed audiences during performances. The Metropolitan Museum of Art opened its doors to working people and hired guards not only to protect the art but to monitor the clothing museum-goers might wear and the volume of the voices with which they were allowed to speak. Order came to mean constraint and control, and for those who aspired to join the middle class or to be true Americans, these manners and rules held sway.

The path to order is visible in the constitution and the beautiful building of the Eldridge Street Synagogue. We can hear the voices of a Protestant elite in the constitution constraining shul goers who were accustomed to non-unison prayer. We can see the anxiety of Americanized leaders who seeking the status of acculturation, sought to restrain the exuberance of members who disagreed with rules. And yet something doesn't quite add up that makes this story more interesting. What were the motivations of those framers of the synagogue constitution? They knew that those uptown Protestants would never see their constitution, let alone walk into their beautiful synagogue. It is useful to offer a range of possibilities for their motivations.

Did they feel the eyes of a more established and affluent community of German New York Jews upon them? Were they proving wrong those who saw Eastern European immigrants as incapable of becoming true Americans like they were?

Were they making a statement about Orthodox Judaism, which they assiduously guarded in their constitution as well? Were they suggesting that there was nothing incompatible between life in America and Orthodox Judaism, that the Old World could join its new counterpart?

Was the more affluent leadership imposing its will on the synagogue's more ordinary members, those without the money, those who could participate in a more marginal way, through asserting the importance of order within the synagogue itself?

Were the leaders simply trying to persuade themselves that the prying eyes of a shaming cultural elite would find them acceptable?

COMPLICATING THE STORY— A LIVING CULTURE

What is puzzling is that the codes we can see so thoroughly in place in architecture and constitution were not complete. They did not put an end to every custom from the Old World. They maintained what many American born Jews considered the most disorderly custom that was offensive to a Western sensibility, *Schnoddering*. The selling of Torah honors during services did not decrease until 1915. What do we make of this odd incompatibility between the orderly and the disorderly, the leveling of fines and an insistence on decorum with the linking of money and worship?



At the Eldridge Street Synagogue, aliyahs from schnoddering were entered into this binder. Courtesy of the American Jewish Historical Society

The best way to decode the complex story of the Eldridge Street Synagogue is precisely through focusing on, rather than reducing, these “contradictions,” and cultural rules and expectations. We see just how alive Judaism was for these men and women as it engaged and was engaged by the nation they entered. These congregants lived lives as Jews and American simultaneously. As Orthodox Jews they resisted the homogenizing demands of the United States, but they did it by bowing to the cultural expectations of a Protestant middle class which was ever on guard against Jewish unacceptability, poor manners, and unattractive differences. As they embraced a system that attempted to constrain and to control their behavior, they enforced those controls on one another in the entirely Jewish space of the synagogue. That outlook lived in microcosm as Jews managed other Jews through the power of the wealthy members and the insistence on decorum and order. They simply applied it within traditional Jewish practice. That interesting and complex mix reveals most importantly the lively culture and world of the synagogue.

WORKS ON WHICH THIS COMMENT DRAWS

- Richard Cohen I. “Urban Visibility and Biblical Visions.”
In David Biale ed. *Cultures of the Jews: A New History* 2002
- Lawrence Levine *Highbrow Lowbrow: the Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* 1988
- George Mosse *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe*. 1985
- Riv-Ellen Prell *Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender and the Anxiety of Assimilation*. 1999
- Robert Wiebe *The Search for Order: 1877-1920*, 1967

Related Works

- Jeffrey S. Gurock “A Stage in the Emergence of the Americanized Synagogue among East European Jews: 1890-1910.” In Jeffrey S. Gurock *American Jewish Orthodoxy in Historical Perspective* 1996
- Daniel Soyer *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880-1939* 1997