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Review:

Jewish Emancipation: A History across Five Centuries,
David Sorkin

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REVIEWS

Jewish Emancipation: A History across Five Centuries, David Sorkin
(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), ISBN
97780691164946, pp. 528, \$35.00, £28.00.

David Sorkin's far-ranging study of "emancipation and civil rights" offers new and important scholarship on a topic that has been somewhat out of vogue for the last two decades and argues for shifts in our understanding of Jewish emancipation. Sorkin, the Lucy G. Moses Professor of Jewish History at Yale University, wants to redirect modern Jewish historical writing back to a longer view of the previous five hundred years, and away from the current emphasis on the Holocaust and the founding of Israel, which he argues "are part and parcel of the long history of Jewish emancipation" (p. 2). The text, covering five hundred years and a wide geographic range, highlights Sorkin's capacious consideration of scholarship. Sorkin's model of "into estates" and "out of estates" clearly points to the role of corporate society in host countries and within the Jewish community, but never conveys a clear definition to help readers understand the nuances he seeks to share. Drawing on sources in English, German, Hebrew, and French, Sorkin's encyclopaedic study traces patterns of emancipation and offers challenges to traditional scholarship on the topic.

Sorkin reformulates the traditional chronology of emancipation, whose beginning he dates to the 1550s. He suggests that emancipation was not linear, is an ongoing process in the twenty-first century, and has been fraught with ambiguity. Jews have gained rights, experienced limitations of those rights, and sometimes lost and regained those rights. Sorkin's vast overview offers important observations about the emergence of the three regions. In the sixteenth century, as expulsion ended, Jews received invitations to return to cities in the West. Rulers welcomed Jews and supported their establishment of merchant colonies, and granted significant privileges, including occupational and communal autonomy (p. 17). This transition to equality was distinct from many other Jewish communities (p. 33). Jews gained many of the same privileges as Christian burghers thanks to opportunities granted by local magnates (p. 41). However, the partitioning of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the

end of the eighteenth century undermined these reforms and openings. The Jews of Central Europe may have benefited from greater toleration than their Western co-religionists, but lacked equal civil rights (p. 51).

Typically, well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, religion constituted the basis for inclusion – or exclusion. Sorkin focuses his attention on Europe, but considers emancipation and the attainment of civil and political rights in North Africa, the Middle East, the United States, and Israel. He rejects the typical East–West binary discussion of emancipation in favour of analysis of “regions of emancipation”, Western, Central, and Eastern Europe.

Overall, Sorkin contends that two key models of citizenship emerged. Some Jews lived through reform and gained incremental rights – as occurred in the Habsburg Empire. Others experienced revolution and unconditional emancipation – the model in France (pp. 8, 355). By 1740, European governments had begun passing laws that decreased discriminatory policies. While Jews were beneficiaries, they lagged behind Christians in significant ways (p. 61). Some commentators, Christian Wilhelm von Dohm, for example, argued in favour of full emancipation, assuming it would lead to regeneration. Others such as Joseph II granted conditional rights and maintained many restrictions (p. 63). Implementation of equality in France was hardly linear, and Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews received different treatment. France exemplified the general Western European pattern of a peaceful extension of rights. While settlement and resettlement typically brought civic rights, communal “campaigning” was necessary to gain political rights (p. 97). Nonetheless, Napoleon returned to the pattern of conditional rights (p. 127). Regions that accepted revolutionary ideals advanced rights; those areas that rejected them tended to limit or eliminate Jewish rights (p. 101).

Sorkin not only argues for two models of citizenship, he also identifies three key regions within Europe and a fourth in the Ottoman Empire. In Western Europe, Jews gained civil rights as a result of settlement, and sought political rights (p. 9), and from the eighteenth century, gained some improvements in their status. Then the French Revolution led to a shift in ideology from regeneration to universal rights.

In Central Europe, emancipation involved acquisition of civil and political rights, and the movement of Jews in and out of estates played a key role. Extension of rights took place during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and depended on “regeneration” (pp. 10, 108). In Eastern Europe, unlike Western and Central Europe, with large numbers

of Jews and a protracted process, Jews gained political rights before civil rights (p. 10). The late eighteenth-century partition of Poland left a once unified Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth under three separate powers – Russia, Habsburg/Galicia, and Prussia – and led to different experiences of emancipation (p. 80). For a brief period, under Joseph II and Catherine II, Russian and Galician Jews did gain rights (p. 90). With the second (1793) and third (1795) partitions of Poland, Prussia sought to integrate Jews. In the process, Jews experienced extensive restrictions and lost communal autonomy (pp. 129, 130). Russia, in contrast, did not eliminate autonomous Jewish government, but implemented occupational and residential restrictions (p. 133). As Sorkin notes, many governments responded to the French Revolution with policies that undermined the “ideal of parity” (p. 136).

During the nineteenth century, Sorkin contends that the 1815 Congress of Vienna reinforced the model of three regions of emancipation (p. 141). Western European Jews retained their rights, and the diplomats involved with the emergence of new states insisted on equality regardless of religion. The process of attaining full rights had a range of meanings. In England, it was a matter of access to offices, and initially only a minority of Jews sought these rights. As England removed religious disabilities, first for dissenting Protestants (1828) and Catholics (1829), elite Jews created alliances in an effort to gain equal rights (pp. 210–11). In France, with the fall of Napoleon, Jews sought to have the restrictive “Infamous Decrees” of 1808 overturned.

In Eastern Europe, the partitioning powers of the Congress of Vienna left “legal arrangements” intact; this was not the case for the Italian and German states, where local versus states’ rights led to wide differences among residents (pp. 141, 161). While the revolutions of 1848 ultimately failed to bring sustained emancipation to Central Europe’s Jews (p. 162), the creation of the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary in 1867 and the unification of Germany and Italy, with the development of “civil societies and constitutional monarchies”, were crucial to Jewish emancipation in Central Europe (p. 172). Yet even with increased rights Jews’ status remained complicated, particularly in Germany, with its dual system of federal and state constitutions. The federal constitution granted Jews equality, while individual states could – and did – restrict rights through their state constitutions (p. 187). Nevertheless, the process of emancipation continued to unfold, and Jewish leaders remained active in seeking the end of discriminatory policies (p. 188).

In Russia, during the nineteenth century, the tsars promoted economic development, but guarded their power, so their reform was subject to revocation. Further, they distinguished between rights and privileges; they granted privileges to Jews who could be of benefit to the state (p. 189). Russia and the Kingdom of Poland extended privileges in return for regeneration, and used conscription and education to promote those goals. For Alexander II of Russia, privileges led to integration “into estates”, and the favouring of urban residents. By the 1860s, Jews in Russia and the Kingdom of Poland had gained “forms of equality”, which led to optimism until changes that emerged in the 1880s (pp. 200–01). By the end of the nineteenth century, Russian tsars began looking inward and ended privileges that Jews had acquired. As political antisemitism emerged, policies towards Jews began diverging from others (p. 202). The state failed to intervene in pogroms, and reversed integration in favour of “residential concentration” and educational and occupational restrictions (pp. 202–3). The resulting poverty led millions to emigrate (p. 209). In 1917, with the abdication of the tsar, Jews finally received civil rights (p. 208). The Kingdom of Poland followed a different pattern in the 1880s, and Jews did not lose significant rights.

In the fourth region, Jews living in Ottoman lands gained rights as diverse members of a minority community. As a process, however, Sorkin contests the idea that a clear line of division existed between “privileges in corporate society and rights in civil society” (p. 5). For much of the eighteenth century, Jews in the Ottoman Empire were part of a policy of minority rights and benefited from toleration (p. 263). However, as Sorkin notes, “the structure of carefully managed vertical relations” broke down in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. “Turkification” ended the advantages of the “Capitulations” treaties that granted rights and privileges to foreigners living in the Ottoman Empire; Jews then came under the Ottoman judicial system (p. 269).

New attitudes emerged in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, especially as many came to see Jews as a nation, rather than a religion (p. 250). At the same time, the range of Jewish politics widened and generated supporters of Jewish nationhood (p. 256). Critics of emancipation noted its negative impact on Judaism and Jewish communities; some believed it generated antisemitism. Jews too questioned the value of emancipation. Many Orthodox Jews believed emancipation and secular interests were detrimental to traditional Judaism. Others favoured programmes of national minority rights within the diaspora, and still

others promoted Zionism and self-realization in a Jewish homeland. Each of these approaches considered emancipation a failure (pp. 250, 251). The many Jews who migrated to North America were responding to the growth of antisemitism, and developed social welfare and civil defence organizations that supported communal solidarity and worked to “protect equality” (p. 249).

Observers of Jewish life had divergent views of emancipation, seeing it either as a benefit or a liability. For those favouring the end of restrictions, emancipation meant an end to persecution and the growth of opportunities. Detractors believed that assimilation and the dissolution of communal autonomy would destroy Jewish cultural and religious life (pp. 3–4). Further, in the second half of the twentieth century, in the wake of the Holocaust, many concluded that emancipation had played a role in increasing racial antisemitism. Sorkin argues that rather than see emancipation as a “triumph” or a “tragedy”, it is crucial to analyse its “inherent ambiguities” (p. 4). He stresses that emancipation did not occur in a vacuum, and we must place the myriad forms of emancipation in their relevant contexts; the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries were not “precursors”, but were integral components of emancipation (p. 6).

The First World War, however, reordered Europe. Four empires fell, and the peace process that unfolded from the Treaty of Versailles was short-lived. Minority rights were a key issue in that settlement, although the signatories often promoted nationalist policies that “subverted the Minority Rights Treaties” (p. 288). In many cases this led to discrimination against Jews, especially in Central and Eastern Europe – a harbinger of racial discrimination and the reversal of emancipation in Germany and beyond. In the aftermath of the Second World War, Jews often regained citizenship quickly, but restitution of property and reparations were far more fraught (p. 309). Postwar policies depended in part on the version of history countries promoted, and the ways they understood the experiences of Jews – as specifically targeted victims or part of more general suffering (p. 309). Thus, Sorkin suggests that the process of emancipation continued into the twenty-first century. Jews in Central and Eastern Europe had a protracted process to restore and retain rights (p. 318–19). Elsewhere, changes in the status of countries in the Middle East and North Africa, and especially decolonization and Zionism, left Jewish residents in a complicated position. Political tensions led Jews to emigrate from these regions, and by the mid-1960s, few Jews remained in North Africa or the Middle East, ending a nearly thousand-year period

of Jewish life as a protected minority (pp. 320–21, 332). From the end of the nineteenth century, Palestine, and later Israel (after 1948), gained a significant new population of Jews and a complicated relationship with Palestinian Christians and Muslims; the new state of Israel struggled with definitions of citizenship. Israel’s Law of Return (July 1950) enabled any Jew to gain citizenship, and non-Jews could become citizens through residence or naturalization (p. 334). Differing forms of Zionism, ethnic origins, and levels of Jewish observance further complicated the politics of the new nation and led to “a system of stratification”, resulting in unequal status among its diverse citizens (p. 345).

According to Sorkin, “at all points”, wherever Jews lived, they played an active role in efforts to gain equality, and established a wide range of organizations to promote and retain rights (p. 356). Yet, this reality is underappreciated, in part because of the claim that the modern state needed emancipation as much as Jews did – a view that understates the role of Jewish agency. Because emancipation has received limited recent attention, our understanding does not reflect the ways recent scholarship has altered perceptions of modern Jewish history. While emancipation has a range of meanings, Sorkin notes that for Jews, “the release from persecution or disabilities” as followers of a dissenting religion has been most salient (p. 1). Recognition of Judaism was a vital component of Jewish equality (p. 355), and the notion of Jews gaining rights as a “nation” or “race” did not emerge until the twentieth century (p. 2). Most standard works focused on a particular locale. In response, Sorkin’s study is explicitly comparative and transnational. Sorkin’s complex analysis may be daunting to those who are less well-read in Jewish history, and the book’s range means that some areas, understandably, receive less attention or greater generalization. However, Sorkin’s impressive contextualization challenges more linear and binary models of emancipation, shows the complexity of emancipation over time and place, and will generate important scholarly discussion for years to come.

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