

Jewish Sunday Schools: Teaching Religion in Nineteenth-Century America

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Laura Yares's *Jewish Sunday Schools* is a complex survey of Jewish immigrant religious education that notes its influence on society.

The book details the concerns of early nineteenth-century Jewish American communities regarding the religious education of their children. At the time, Christian Sunday schools were prominent, and attempts were made by “predatory missionaries” to convert Jewish youth. Thus Philadelphia philanthropist Rebecca Gratz founded the first Hebrew Sunday School in 1838. Open to both boys and girls, the school offered “Jewish catechisms, prayers in English, and simple home rituals for celebrating the Jewish holidays.”

Gratz's initial establishment developed into a national network run primarily by women. The schools adapted the Christian model to include biblical readings and morality tales, along with the winning of small prizes. Though they were unpaid, the volunteer women teachers often enjoyed developing their intellectual and creative talents herein.

As the century progressed, the schools became more sophisticated. Books, magazines, and visual aids enhanced the classroom experience, with pricier or “frivolous” prizes for attendance and lessons learned. Confirmation ceremonies were often lavish affairs, with communities uniting in a celebration of religious, cultural, and commercial pride.

The book also explores the impact of increased Russian and Eastern European immigration. By the late 1800s, numerous Jewish Sunday school facilities had expanded to provide English classes, vocational training, kindergartens, and instruction in hygiene and housekeeping to the vast influx of new arrivals. The programs' successes, however, led to their eventual redirection. Rabbis and patriarchal influences expressed increasing disapproval toward the “feminized” core of the Sunday schools, urging the women teachers to pursue a more “proper sphere of influence,” like domestic life and raising devout children.

Jewish Sunday Schools is an engrossing, cohesive history of the unsung, integral role of women in American Jewish religious education.

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