

## In Memoriam

Dianne Ashton (1949–2022):

American Jewish History and Lived Religion

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Historian Dianne Ashton passed away on January 13, 2022. From 1987 until a few months before her death, Ashton was professor of World Religions at Rowan University. Located in Glassboro, New Jersey, Rowan University is part of a constellation of colleges and universities that orbit the Philadelphia area. Ashton directed various academic centers at Rowan and served a term as editor of *American Jewish History* (AJH). Greater Philadelphia is likely home to more scholars of American Jewish history than any other region in the United States, and Dianne loomed large in our unofficial circle. As editor of AJH, she encouraged new scholarship that moved the field forward, but also urged us to reflect on the historical legacies of the field, introducing “signpost” articles that invited contemporary reflection on work from the Journal’s archives. The paths she trailblazed raised new standards for the field of American Jewish Studies and yielded new possibilities for Jewish education.

Among her considerable scholarly output, Dianne produced three essential works on American Jewish history.<sup>1</sup> Each deepened our understanding of “lived religion.”<sup>2</sup> By that, I mean an awareness that Jewish life extends far beyond the synagogue: more multidimensional than the versions of prayer books used in those sanctuaries, and less cerebral than the sermons delivered from pulpits.<sup>3</sup> Jewish life and culture can be found in home décor, on bookshelves, and the various offerings delivered by social service agencies.

Ashton’s first book was an important volume that collected sources about Jewish women’s experiences in the United States. Coedited with

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1. In addition to these, Ashton published many articles and another important book not covered in this essay. See Dianne Ashton, *Jewish Life in Philadelphia* (University Park: The Pennsylvania History Association, 1998).

2. On the term, see Robert Orsi, “Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion,” in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 3–21.

3. For the most recent argument for the use of this wider scholarly lens, see Rachel B. Gross, *Beyond the Synagogue: Jewish Nostalgia as Religious Practice* (New York: New York University Press, 2021).

Ellen Umansky, *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality* appeared in 1992, in what might be considered the early years of women's studies in Jewish studies. The volume is filled with poetry, ethical wills, and other materials that had been available to scholars but overlooked as key sources to everyday "personal religion."<sup>4</sup>

That sourcebook anticipated Ashton's biography of Rebecca Gratz. Gratz was the focus of her doctoral work at Temple University. But Ashton reworked the published version, insistent that a book on Gratz would need to measure up, in heft and depth, to biographies of Jewish men. Before Emma Lazarus and Henrietta Szold, Gratz was, in Ashton's words, the "foremost American Jewish woman of the nineteenth century."<sup>5</sup> Gratz was one of Philadelphia's leading philanthropists—Jewish or otherwise—and used her resources, knowledge, and influence to establish the first Jewish Sunday school in the United States. Then Gratz urged Jewish women in other American locales to start schools like the one Gratz had founded in Philadelphia in 1838.

Ashton's biography made the case that Rebecca Gratz's life was emblematic of the broader sensibilities that spurred Jewish women to improve institutions of Jewish education and social welfare. The bylaws of the organizations Rebecca Gratz established read like synagogue constitutions. It exercised top-down leadership and enforced penalties to staff who broke protocol and lay leaders who did not abide by their responsibilities. These strong guidelines spoke to the importance of her work. At the same time, Gratz was determined to keep women in charge and free of the overly dramatic battles between rabbis and laymen that took place quite frequently in synagogue politics.<sup>6</sup>

"Lived religion" was also the driving force of Ashton's final major work: *A History of Hanukkah in America*. Published in 2013, Ashton's brilliant monograph studied Hanukkah as a window into American Jewish life. As in the case with Rebecca Gratz, Ashton's pivotal period for this work was the 1800s (although she ably moved her narrative through the twentieth century).<sup>7</sup> In certain times, Jews saw within Hanukkah an opportunity to summon young people back to their Jewish roots and culture. For some it was symbolic of a Zionist cause. For oth-

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4. See Ellen M. Umansky and Dianne Ashton, *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality: A Sourcebook* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 116.

5. Dianne Ashton, *Rebecca Gratz: Women and Judaism in Antebellum America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 13.

6. See Zev Eleff, *Who Rules the Synagogue: Religious Authority and the Formation of American Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 24.

7. See, in particular, Dianne Ashton, *Hanukkah in America: A History* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 39–73.

ers, Hanukkah helped them construct a Jewish view of immigration and minority rights. Ashton traced the rise of this "minor" Jewish holiday alongside Christmas, showing how these connections poured even more importance into Hanukkah rituals.

Ashton enjoyed sharing her work-in-progress with her undergraduates at Rowan, where she taught religious studies classes. One of her favorite courses to teach was a seminar on American holidays. She challenged her students to think about how Americans of all kinds made meaning of their religious (and federal) holidays. No doubt, these occasions are times for prayer, ritual, and family, but Ashton taught them that holidays are also how Americans mark time and coalesce their traditional faith with modern day concerns.

Ashton's efforts have paved the way for a new iteration of research that has used the lens of lived religion to deepen historical understanding of the crucial nineteenth century. Among these works, I count, for brevity's sake, Cornelia Wilhelm's reconsideration of B'nai B'rith's contribution to religious life and Shari Rabin's important work on "mobility" as a shaping force on American Judaism.<sup>8</sup> Personally, I am indebted to Ashton's research, particularly in a forthcoming chapter on Purim balls in the post-Civil War era.<sup>9</sup>

Ashton's leadership in elevating lived religion within American Jewish history has another practical output. Upon moving to Philadelphia in September 2021, I eagerly called Dianne. We were planning an ambitious project to collect and digitize Rebecca Gratz's letters. We shared a vision, first articulated by Ashton, that Gratz's letters were a window into lived religion, and they ought to be made available to educators and anyone looking to teach about the complexities of American life. Recently retired, Dianne's hope was to annotate some 900 correspondences, to ensure that an emerging generation of young women could learn from Gratz's life and explore new possibilities of leadership and culture. The project will now move forward in Dianne's name, to memorialize her life and scholarship. At its core, it will be part of a much larger legacy, a bottom-up focus on the everyday, "lived" adventures of Jews and Judaism in the United States.

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8. See Cornelia Wilhelm, *The Independent Orders of B'nai B'rith and True Sisters: Pioneers of a New Jewish Identity, 1843-1913* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011); and Shari Rabin, *Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

9. See Zev Eleff, "The Great Nineteenth Century Purim Revival," in *Yearning to Breathe Free: Jews in Gilded-Age America*, eds. Adam D. Mendelsohn and Jonathan D. Sarna (Princeton: Princeton University Library, 2022), 483-508.