

**Sarah Imhoff.** *Masculinity and the Making of American Judaism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017. vii + 300 pp. \$38.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-02621-7.

**Reviewed by** Jennifer Caplan

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**Commissioned by** Katja Vehlow (University of South Carolina)

Sarah Imhoff's *Masculinity and the Making of American Judaism* is a long-awaited and much-needed addition to the fields of Jewish studies, American studies, and gender studies. The book situates American Jewish men in the larger American conversation about masculine identity, and highlights some of the unexpected and less well-known examples of the ways in which Jews impacted the broader American culture. To do this Imhoff focuses the book very narrowly on the years between 1900 and 1924, which is both a strength and a minor weakness of the book. The strength outweighs the weakness as the narrowness of the focus allows Imhoff to be hyperspecific in her case studies, and to control her variables extremely well. She notes that she is not trying to promote "a certain kind of Jewish masculinity," but instead "to show its development in the early twentieth century" (p. 23). She is also careful to point out that "this collection of chapters is not an exhaustive account of American Jewish masculinities, but it allows a view into how American Jews and non-Jews thought about the Jewish past, present, and future in the United States" (p. 24).

Her thesis postulates that religion (both Judaism and hegemonic American Christianity) impacted the development of Jewish masculinity in this period, and that this new Jewish masculinity helped shape American Judaism. This multidirec-

tional approach is one of Imhoff's strongest moves. Her analysis resists any temptation to become oversimplified or essentialized because it is always moving in at least two directions, and is constantly looking both outward and inward. Throughout she uses the term "acculturation" in lieu of the more commonly used "assimilation," signaling to the reader that she is not interested in retreading the standard lines about American Judaism. She begins the book with a realization that "Jewish masculinity is opaque even to those people we would imagine would know the most about it," in this case Jewish men (p. 1). In conversation with Jewish men's groups Imhoff visited, she discovered that no one seemed to really have a clear understanding of the relationship between Judaism, masculinity, and America. Because her analysis came, in part, from that realization, she kept her book constantly looking in all directions and resists the temptation to tell this as a linear story.

Toward that end she divides the book into three parts. Part 1 seeks to situate Judaism within its American context. Part 2, which is the largest section, spanning chapters 3 through 7, consists of case studies that depict healthy Jewish male bodies and their relationship to the land. Finally, part 3—chapters 7, 8, and 9—is the inverse of part 2. These chapters focus on cases of Jewish deviance,

abnormality, and criminality. The book as a whole tells a story in pieces, that when viewed from afar is singular, but when analyzed at the chapter level is actually a series of stories, all of which contribute to a larger and much more complex overall idea.

Part 1 of the book does most of the theoretical and methodological heavy lifting, and it is here that Imhoff sets up the scaffolding for the case study analysis to come. As she establishes Judaism within its larger American context she also sets her analysis within its larger theoretical context. Part 1 reads as very similar in some way to Tisa Wenger's *We Have a Religion* (2009), and although Imhoff engages with Wenger's work later in the book her initial framing of the conversation about how religion is viewed in an American (read: Christian) context might take on new and interesting dimensions when read with and through Wenger's work. It may also be fruitful to consider Imhoff's analysis alongside other books telling portions of the same story. She references Michael Kimmel's *Manhood in America* (1998), and rightly criticizes that book's lack of reference to Jews. Imhoff does not directly reference Eric Goldstein's *The Price of Whiteness* (2006), but her book is nevertheless in conversation with his as they are both focused on the formation of Jewish identity in the first third of the twentieth century, and both Imhoff and Goldstein acknowledge that theories of gender can never be fully separate from theories of race. Goldstein brings the "cult of true womanhood" (i.e., the idea of true American womanhood being based in the virtues of piety, purity, submission, and domesticity) to American Jews. He highlights the way in which Jewish women can never fully become perfect women, and Imhoff theorizes a sort of "cult of true manhood" using, among other things, Kimmel's tripartite definition of American manhood (self-controlled individualism, going West, and excluding others from true manhood) (p. 19). Instead of concluding that Jewish men were ultimately unable to claim a share of "true manhood," she notes that "true

manhood" is complicated, and that Jews both were and were not able to claim portions of it.

Part 2 contains perhaps the most fascinating and surprising portions of the book. Imhoff wisely places these case studies of robust, healthy, rugged Jews first, to show that any preconceived notions of Jewish masculinity the reader may have are oversimplified. The canard that so-called "muscular Christianity" (the nineteenth-century ideology that gave rise to the YMCA movement and that connected physical health, patriotism, and masculinity as Christian ideals) was in opposition to Jewish intellectualism falls away in the middle portion of Imhoff's analysis. By highlighting examples of robust and health-centered Jewish programs Imhoff deftly counters the stereotype of the bookish Jew without undermining her claim that her goal was not to establish any single normative understanding of American Jewish masculinity. In this period, she argues, universalism and reason were coded as masculine, and Jews depicted Judaism as rational above all else, and a therefore very masculine religion. Figures such as Kaufmann Kohler, she tells us, took this to its logical extreme, arguing that if Judaism was inherently rational and therefore masculine, then Christianity, with its focus on affect and emotion, was clearly the more feminine religion. All four chapters within part 2 are compelling, but chapter 3, which focuses on the Galveston movement, is a particular success. It is both the perfect length, and the right sort of exciting and engaging topic to be excerpted heavily in a variety of undergraduate courses.

Part 3 deals with "abnormal" and criminal depictions of Jewish men, focusing on Nathan Freudenthal Leopold Jr. and Richard Albert Loeb, Leo Frank, and Theodore Bingham. This section contains more of the expected representations of Jewish men from this time period, focusing on degeneracy, weakness, and aberrance. Even still, Imhoff does not allow these case studies to become tropes. It might have been interesting to see

more of the work contemporary Jews had done on Jewish criminality to complicate Jews' relationship to aberrance. Rudolf Wassermann's writings on Jewish criminality from the early 1900s, for example, would be interesting to read alongside Imhoff's conclusions.[1]

Despite being slightly less engaging than the preceding section, part 3 does set Imhoff up well for her conclusion, which takes abnormality as its jumping-off point. This allows her to use Jewish rhetorical techniques for distancing Judaism from Jews deemed aberrant (such as David Berkowitz) to further show all the ways in which Jews have had complex and often ambivalent feelings about the construction of Jewish masculinity. If there is any global criticism of the book it is that the chronologically narrow approach does limit the book's teachability and its utility in the undergraduate classroom. Graduate courses, however, will find this text an excellent addition to the canon of books on American Jewish identity, and Imhoff could not have picked a better or more important moment at which to present this research.

Note

[1]. See for example Rudolf Wassermann, "Ist die Kriminalität der Juden Rassenkriminalität?" *Zeitschrift für Demographie und Statistik der Juden* 7, no. 3 (1911): 36-39.

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