

Marc Saperstein. *Jewish Preaching in Times of War 1800-2001*. Oxford and Portland, Oregon: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008. 619 pages, \$69.95.

Students preparing for Christian ministry will have higher priorities than reading this book but students and scholars of the history of preaching will find it invaluable. The footnotes and introductions that comprise nearly half of the book are a scholarly tour de force and the seventy-two page Introduction to the book as a whole is a riveting overview of elements of the history of Jewish preaching in America and Great Britain and a stunning example of the use of sermons as data in a broader history of the intersection between religious groups and civic life.

A Critical Edition of Sermons

Marc Saperstein, formerly professor at Harvard Divinity School, at Washington University, St. Louis and at George Washington University, currently Principal of the Leo Baeck School in London, and author of five books including Jewish Preaching 1200-1800, has here set the bar high for any publication of a modern critical edition of sermons.

He not only provides a biography of each preacher, identifies the general historical context and analyzes the structure of each sermon, supplies the sources of quotations from sacred and secular literature, explains archaic words, identifies events to which the preacher only alludes, points out a preacher's factual errors and a sermon's internal contradictions, notes discrepancies between the preacher's own manuscript and versions of the sermon later published in pamphlets or quoted in newspapers but he also provides vertical and historical comparisons with other sermons by the same rabbi at different times, and with contemporary sermons by Jews and Christians alike in the same country, allied countries and even "enemy" nations.

Some Aspects of the History of Jewish Preaching

In the 200 years covered by this book, Jewish preaching has changed in innumerable ways. Some of the sermons collected here were delivered on days of national fasting or thanksgiving proclaimed by the state on which clergy of all faiths were expected to gather their congregations and address the crisis or the victory at hand. Some of the sermons collected here were delivered in a language other than English. Some of the sermons are an hour or more in length. Some were published (in English translations) and circulated widely. Some were quoted in newspapers. Some preachers were subject to censorship by their congregations or had to fight or flee such censorship. Most of the sermons collected here rely little on scriptural exegesis or exposition of Jewish law (those approaches were employed on other occasions) but rather on more general understandings of Providence or mission. Some of the sermons are pastoral, many are patriotic, fewer than you'd expect were prophetic.

Sermons as Data in Social and Intellectual History

The sermons document broad social and intellectual shifts in America and Great Britain during those 200 years. For example:

- immigrant Jews and their rabbis felt pressure to demonstrate loyalty to their adopted countries;
- in the face of world wars, many lost faith that industrialization would inevitably lead to peace and prosperity;

-some rabbis who had become outspoken pacifists felt forced to surrender their pacifist ideals in the face of the Nazi threat.

Of Note

There are a few unintended ironies e.g. when a preacher damns another nation for a sin of which his own is also guilty or when a preacher heralds the overthrow of a despot whom we now know was only replaced by a dictator of another stripe.

There are a few passages that though written decades ago might have been spoken today:

“Be it made very clear that the destruction of the Capitol by shot and shell of invading foe [would] not [be] as grave as the conscious, willing surrender of the capital, keystone principles of our democracy.”

(Stephen S. Wise, New York, 1917, p. 352)

There are a few exegetical and rhetorical gems. For example:

“Among the Biblical rules of conscription, exemption from army service is granted to betrothed and newly-wed men (Deut. 20:7, 24:5)... [so that the man may] rejoice his wife.... This duty is considered as a national and not just a personal obligation... You perform a greater service to your nation... by having a stable home than by joining the army...”

(Immanuel Jakobovitz, London, 1982, 56 days after the Falklands War, p. 523)

“...the whole civilized world has been converted into a vast munitions factory... The Eternal God of Righteousness has been pushed, as it were, from His high and exalted throne, and thereon, in this age of madness, has been placed... a national deity, in whose nostrils the smoke from the chimneys of the munitions factories must form a sweet savor indeed.”

(J. Leonard Levy, Pittsburgh, 1916, p. 326)

“If the government may conscript the worker in time of war, the worker may conscript the government in time of peace...”

(Stephen S. Wise, New York, 1917, p. 355)

On Piety and Patriotism

During the recent presidential campaign a renowned preacher was vilified for his criticism of U.S. government policies. In contrast, I was disturbed by those Jewish and Christian preachers who used their sermons to *defend* belligerent governmental policies e.g. the U.S. slaughter of “the indigenous inhabitants of the land more savage than the beasts of their forests” (p. 142); Great Britain in the Indian “Mutiny” (p. 125ff) and in the Boer War (p. 287); the institution of slavery (“The man-servants and the maid-servants that Thou has given unto us...” p. 162); the Confederacy (“Who can read the reports of the battles of Bethel, Bull Run, Manassas Plains... without being convinced that God

gave us the victory, and that to him we should render thanksgiving for the glorious triumph of our arms” p. 156 note 42) and the U.S. war against Spain (“It is God’s will, not ours, that our army is mobilized, and that our navy stands ready to belch forth death and destruction upon Havana and its people... It is God, who has willed this armed conflict, it is He, who engages in it; we are but the weapons in his employ, and are but carrying out the will of the Commander of all Commanders, of the Ruler of Rulers of the King of Kings,” p. 272). Some of the preachers represented in this book believed that piety demanded loyalty to the government, right or wrong. Rabbi Roland Gittelsohn, for one, soundly rejected that notion:

“I love my nation. I love it enough to have volunteered for duty as a chaplain...But my government has lied to me and the world, and that’s a moral issue....I won’t hold my government always right, any more than I honestly believe that my children or my wife or I myself can always be right. There are times when honest, even trenchant complaint is the most genuine token of love.” (Boston, 1965, p. 504-5)

Most of the wars these sermons address ended long ago but the connections and the conflicts between piety and patriotism know no end.

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