

We were recently honored to have a wonderful scholar in residence, Steven R Weisman, who shared stories and wisdom based on his book “Chosen Wars” and his years of experience as a political and economics journalist for the New York Times. Thanks to the Grossman fund we were able to bring in a speaker of such caliber and I was particularly fascinated by his discussions of his book, which describes the founding years of American Judaism in the 19th Century. He painted a fascinating picture of a turbulent era in which Judaism was faced with the need to adapt to a dizzying array of cultural and practical changes in their lives and how different movements of Judaism in America struggled, adapted, and innovated in reaction to those challenges. It was a history in which arguments over music in temple went to secular court (who said it was none of their business!) and in which debates over theology led to recriminations and in some cases even physical violence.

There are many important lessons to learn from this history. One is a lesson which Steven Weisman himself focused on in his talks. As we again live through turbulent times in which there is great debate over morality and culture in both the secular and religious world, it is important to see that while turbulence and argument is unpleasant to live through it can lead to greater understanding, wisdom and innovation. It is easy and understandable to feel that when we are living through turbulent times that this is all bad but American Jewish history shows that debate and struggle not only brings challenges but also creativity and dynamism which, Weisman argues, has been both the hallmark and the greatest strength of American Judaism of all streams. Or in Weisman’s words: “Jews did more than outwit the pessimists and survive. . . . They effectively redefined what it is to be a Jew, and what the purpose of a Jew in America should be.”

But there is another lesson that is equally important. Weisman notes: “The thesis of this book, is that the Judaism of America today... bears witness to a spirit of dynamism and change similar to what had existed among the rabbis and Jewish scholars throughout Jewish history...” The key word here is “change.” The history of American Judaism is one of adapting to and reacting to change. The world was changing and they could not simply stay put. Many people love change. Many people fear change. But what should be clear to everyone is that change will happen whether we like the change or not. American Judaism faced that change head on, sometimes in positive and creative ways , sometimes in messy and contentious ways. But they faced it because to not face it, to not struggle and embrace that change would have been to ignore reality and let Judaism down.

As Americans and as American Jews we continue to face new and different changes to our world, culturally, politically and spiritually. The lesson we can learn from our American Jewish predecessors is that such change brings struggle but if we face it with an open mind and a willingness to adapt, that change can be a great opportunity and bring about great things.

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