

## IN A NUTSHELL

*JUDAISM: ALL THAT MATTERS*

KEITH KAHN-HARRIS

Hodder Education, 2012, pb, 158pp, £7.99

Reviewed by FIONA SMITH

A quick flick through the pages of *Judaism* reassured me that this would be an easily accessible book and its simple eye-catching cover and 'blurb' looked as if it would not be too taxing for a Gentile reader.

The first impression is visually attractive and the layout of chapters, spiced with photographs and summary paragraphs, inviting to the reader. The author, Keith Kahn-Harris, is a writer, sociologist, lecturer and music critic whose stated aim is 'to introduce the reader to Judaism, Jews and Jewishness' and in ten chapters covering history, politics, identity and culture he sets about this daunting task.

As a non-Jew I was looking for similarities as well as differences to my own background and I found them early on in the intriguingly entitled chapter: 'Judaism on one foot'. Here a Gentile is told by a certain Rabbi Hillel that the fundamental core of Judaism is an ethical message of dealing fairly with others – 'What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man' – rather like the Christian diktat, 'Love God and your neighbour as yourself'. I found 'Living Jewishly' was particularly interesting as much was very different from my own experience.

A chapter is devoted to antisemitism – a repeated theme in Jewish history – and its 20th-century manifestation culminating in the Holocaust or 'Shoah'. The impact of the state of Israel on Jewish life across the world is addressed as are current tensions and the issue of the plight of the Palestinians.

Although the book has a serious content it has lighter elements and is well written, informative and thought-provoking. It is peppered with Jewish jokes and I did find these lightened some of the more sombre issues. Food and jokes are seen to play a large part in Jewish life. The book closes with a short paragraph which summarises its content in a 'nutshell'. So for those who wish a taster turn to the end.

The excellent reading list whets the appetite for more in-depth study. The writer concludes with some slightly eclectic tidbits which caught my eye before closing the book – unusual Jewish communities, cult figures such as Sacha Baron-Cohen, Yiddish slang and Jewish songs which I associate with bar mitzvahs and weddings I have attended. I even played a few numbers by Debbie Friedman and 'Sapari' by Orphaned Land on YouTube!

## ILLUMINATING THE NEW WORLD

*JEWS IN AMERICA: FROM NEW AMSTERDAM TO THE YIDDISH STAGE*

STEPHEN D. CORRSIN, AMANDA SEIGEL,

KENNETH BENSON

New York Public Library, 2012, hb, 160pp, £29.95

*NEW ISRAEL/NEW ENGLAND: JEWS AND PURITANS IN EARLY AMERICA*

MICHAEL HOBERMAN

University of Massachusetts Press, 2011, pb, 280pp, £25.50

Reviewed by DAVID HERMAN

*Jews in America* is a beautifully illustrated, often illuminating, book about the early days of Jewish American history based on an exhibition in 2004 at the New York Public Library that commemorated the 350th anniversary of the first Jews who came to what was then New Amsterdam. Drawing on recent research, it tells the history of Jews in America from the mid-17th century to the 1920s. It is an excellent introduction, scholarly but always accessible, full of fascinating maps, portraits and early prints, ranging from Columbus to early Jewish settlements in the Caribbean, from the Civil War to the heyday of Yiddish culture.

From the very beginning it is full of fresh insights. Jonathan Sarna's introduction contrasts the 2004 exhibition with an earlier exhibition in 1954, which marked the 300th

anniversary of the arrival of Jews in North America. Sarna shows how in 1954 the positive focus on Jewish 'contributions' to American history reveals the nervousness of post-war American Jewry. It may have been 'the largest and most prosperous Jewish community in the world', he writes, but their pride in the new state of Israel and the new prosperity and respectability was overshadowed by other anxieties: domestic antisemitism, the Holocaust and McCarthyism. 'The goal, in 1954, was to pour oil on troubled waters.' Fifty years later, *Jews in America* reflects a greater confidence about Jewish history, past and present, and is able to confront a sometimes darker and more complex story.

The book is full of interesting facts and perspectives, perhaps especially on the less familiar early history. Recently converted Jews in Spain played an important part in supporting Columbus's voyages of discovery, helping to persuade Ferdinand and Isabella to support Columbus. Two high-ranking officials 'furnished the money required for fitting out Columbus's ships'. The catalogue goes on to document significant Jewish contributions to the Age of Discovery through new inventions and ideas about navigation.

The authors shift the emphasis from North America to the Caribbean and early settlements in South America. 'In colonial days,' writes Sarna, 'more Jews lived in the

Caribbean than in all of the North American colonies put together.' Perhaps the most interesting section comes on the Revolutionary period, in the late 18th century, showing how new constitutions 'allowed all men, including Jews, full political rights' and religious freedoms. Perhaps there is too great an emphasis on the early years, up to 1800. There is only one chapter on 'the long 19th century'. However, this is a fascinating story, superbly told.

Michael Hoberman's academic monograph, *New Israel/New England*, focuses in greater detail on the relationship between Puritans and Jews in 17th- and 18th-century New England, documenting the impact of early Jews on Puritan discourse, with a particularly interesting introduction on the relations between Puritans and Jews in 17th century Amsterdam and London.

