

## **An Optimist's View of American Jews**

By **Peter Ephross** August 2017

*Jewish in America* is a work of history that is as much about the future as it is about the past. In much of the book, author Richard Rubin details American Jewish history from colonial times to the present, highlighting the uniqueness of the American Jewish experience. He deftly intersperses his own experience with anti-Semitism—as a child, when applying to college and while serving in the army in the mid-20th century—with historical observation and social science data.

A longtime professor of political science at Swarthmore College, Rubin is no revisionist: He agrees with the consensus that the American Jewish experience is a special, pluralistic one, beginning with George Washington's famous 1790 letter promising protection and rights to the worshipers at Touro Synagogue in Newport, R.I. To Rubin's credit, he doesn't sugarcoat the history of anti-Semitism in the United States, although he rightly emphasizes its steep decline in the second half of the 20th century.

While Rubin's view of American Jewish history isn't groundbreaking, he has clearly assimilated prodigious amounts of research. For example, he highlights the academic belief that Jewish interest in study and analytical thinking might stem from the Jewish community's interaction with Greek philosophy. This emphasis on study, he argues, along with the Jewish interest to remain focused on life on earth as opposed to the afterlife, differentiated Jews from others and accounts for their success in the United States.

Rubin's predictions for the future in the latter parts of the book might raise a few eyebrows. He acknowledges the threats to Jewish survival posed by intermarriage but remains relatively optimistic. What he calls "American assimilative Jews," he writes, will need a "consciousness of their Jewish culture"—a thorough knowledge of their history and uniqueness—to survive. His optimism stems in part from his own experience: He married a non-Jewish woman who helped him raise his children as Jews. Indeed, Rubin says his wife helped him intensify his Jewish identity by encouraging his exploration of Judaism. Whether Rubin's experience can be replicated on a grand scale, however, remains to be seen. While four of his children are Jewish, one became a devout Catholic.

**Peter Ephross** edited a collection of oral histories, *Jewish Major Leaguers in Their Own Words*.