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Covenant of Care: Newark Beth Israel and the Jewish Hospital in America – Book Review

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Covenant of Care: Newark Beth Israel and the Jewish Hospital in America. By Alan M. Kraut and Deborah A. Kraut. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007. vii + 328 pp.

Covenant of Care: Newark Beth Israel and the Jewish Hospital in America tells the story of New Jersey's Newark Beth Israel Hospital (NBIH), from its earliest operations in a converted mansion to its present status as a "modern regional medical center" that is part of a major healthcare network. While primarily an institutional history, this case study reflects the fate of voluntary religious hospitals over the course of the twentieth century.

The first Jewish hospitals in America were established in the mid-nineteenth century, in response to outbreaks of disease in several major cities. Even more hospitals opened during the Progressive Era. The founding of Jewish hospitals resonated with the core values of *tzedakah* and *tikkun olam*. They also arose as a form of self-help at a time when both Jewish doctors and patients faced discrimination from a medical establishment that was largely gentile. The founding of Newark Beth Israel Hospital at the turn of the last century highlighted deep divisions in Newark's Jewish community. It required the combined efforts of Jewish women's groups, doctors, businessmen, and rabbis; these factions had competing agendas regarding health care provision, assimilation, and traditional religious life. Among other issues, there was no clear consensus on how Jewish "The Beth" should be; for example, parties grappled with whether to serve kosher meals when doing so would cost more and when few patients requested them. Tensions among stakeholders made many of them reluctant to support the project and left the hospital vulnerable to funding crises that seldom abated. Although the Krauts clearly love their subject, they do not hide the internal conflicts. Their book is a remarkable accomplishment, in fact, for shedding light on the kinds of factional disagreements that often lie beneath the surface of philanthropic endeavors.

Newark Beth Israel Hospital finally opened in 1902 and soon outgrew its High Street residence. A second building was added in 1908, and between 1915 and 1920 the hospital was able to expand further by adding properties on several adjacent streets. In the 1920s NBIH attained accreditation from the American College of Surgeons. The desire to maintain good standing with the ACS inspired hospital leaders to once again upgrade the facilities. By 1928 they had made the controversial decision to move the hospital out of the center of Newark to the Weequahic section, where Newark's Jewish population was then migrating. Financial pressures troubled the hospital though, and increased during the Great

Depression. As pledges to pay off the new building went unfulfilled, staff were forced to accept pay cuts and several wards were closed.

After World War II, Newark Beth Israel Hospital hit its stride. The hospital ran its own nursing school, published a medical journal, and became one of a small number of community hospitals authorized to run medical residency programs. Its physicians conducted pioneering research in endocrinology, reproductive physiology, and cardiac care. This transformation of “the Beth” reflected the rise of the “industrial medicine” of the 1950s as well as major changes in the American health care system, such as the proliferation of private insurance and the greater availability of federal money.

Paradoxically, the rise of NBIH as a state-of-the-art medical facility coincided with an erosion of support from the Jewish community in Newark. Weequahic was the center of Newark’s Jewish community in 1950, but families soon began to leave for the surrounding towns of Essex county. The explosion of the suburbs dispersed the population that formerly had supported the hospital financially and through volunteer work. At the same time, the shift of American industry toward the Sun Belt caused an exodus of jobs from the center of the city. Newark became known for poverty and crime, and for the dramatic riots of 1967. As a result, NBIH augmented its facilities for the treatment of trauma victims.

In the 1980s, the hospital redefined its mission to that of a “regional medical center” known for cardiovascular surgery, kidney transplants, and neonatal intensive care. Nevertheless, the spiraling cost of health care soon restricted the operations of the hospital once more, taking a toll on staff morale, public perception, and possibly patient outcomes. In 1996 escalating costs forced the sale of the NBIMC to the Saint Barnabas Healthcare System, a not-for-profit corporation originally tied to the Episcopal church. Once a stronghold of Jewish identity, the hospital had in effect been consumed by one of its earliest rivals. This seems to have been a difficult conclusion for the authors, who argue that the vision of the hospital’s founders is reflected in the foundation dedicated to community health concerns created from the proceeds of the sale.

Covenant of Care carries several themes, and, for the most part, the authors have made judicious choices in their inclusion of material. The story is communicated partly through portraits of figures important to the hospital’s development, and while the attending anecdotes do not always fit the greater narrative, they document how much the survival of the hospital depended on the commitment of a small number of people. Throughout the book, the authors pair the story of Newark Beth Israel Hospital with that of other Jewish voluntary hospitals, showing that the fate of NBIH was not an isolated case. Their work suggests that religious

voluntary hospitals are fragile institutions that are able to maintain their distinct identities only as long as their communities of origin do so. *Covenant of Care* is a perceptive assessment, but its message is bittersweet.

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A Power among Them: Bessie Abramowitz Hillman and the Making of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. By Karen Pastorello. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008. xvii + 273 pp.

Karen Pastorello's new book is both a throwback and a welcome innovation. It is a throwback in the sense that it offers a biography of a labor leader through a lens trained rather narrowly on the public dimensions of a life. But it is a welcome innovation in the sense that it restores Bessie Abramowitz Hillman to a photographic panorama that has far too long focused on male leaders to the exclusion of women, the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) to the exclusion of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACW), and New York to the exclusion of Chicago. That Pastorello, working with admittedly limited resources, manages to use Hillman's experiences as an ACW founder and lifelong union organizer to illuminate the evolution of labor feminism is an accomplishment indeed.

The outline of Hillman's life in some ways parallels the stories of other Jewish women who became labor leaders. Born in eastern Europe, she emigrated rather than face an arranged marriage, began working in the needle trades shortly after arriving in Chicago, and was politicized by the conditions of her work environment. In 1910 she participated in a major strike at Hart, Schaffner, and Marx, a strike initiated by women, and in the aftermath of the successful settlement became first an organizer for the United Garment Workers and then a founder of the ACW. A roughly similar story could be told of Rose Schneiderman, Fannia Cohn, Rose Pesotta, and Pauline Newman, all of whom worked within the ILGWU in New York. All these leaders struggled with similar problems. Union executives were almost exclusively male and usually hostile to any perceived encroachment of women into the ranks of leadership, despite the predominance of women workers in some sectors of the needle trades. Like her ILGWU colleagues, whom she knew and with whom she cooperated, Hillman depended, at least to some degree, on the kind of middle-class female allies she had first met at Chicago's Hull House. All the women labor leaders were constantly confronted with a choice

Reviewers

Nathan Abrams, director of film studies at Bangor University in the United Kingdom, is author of *Commentary Magazine, 1945–1959: ‘A Journal of Significant Thought and Opinion’* (2006) and editor of *Jews & Sex* (2008).

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Holly Folk is assistant professor in liberal studies at Western Washington University, where she teaches courses in American religious history.

Paula E. Hyman is the Lucy Moses Professor of Modern Jewish History at Yale University. She is working on a book on Zionism to be published in the *Key Words in Jewish Studies* series of Rutgers University Press.

Ronit Irshai (Naamat), a faculty member of the Gender Studies Program at Bar-Ilan University, is also affiliated with Hebrew University’s Melton Center for Jewish Education. Her book, *The Maleness of Halakhah (Jewish Law): Feminist Perspectives on Modern Responsa Literature: Contraception, Abortion, and New Reproductive Technologies*, will be published by Magnes Press.

Anna D. Jaroszynska-Kirchmann is professor of history at Eastern Connecticut State University in Willimantic. She is the author of *The Exile Mission: The Polish Political Diaspora and Polish Americans, 1939–1956* (2004). She is currently President of the Polish American Historical Association.

Anna Karpathakis is associate professor of sociology at Kingsborough Community College, City University of New York. She is the co-editor, with Tony Carnes, of *New York Glory: Religions in the City* (2001).

Melissa R. Klapper is associate professor of history at Rowan University. She is the author of *Jewish Girls Coming of Age in America, 1860–1920* (2005) and *Small Strangers: The Experiences of Immigrant Children in the United States, 1880–1925* (2007).

Sam Kliger is director of Russian Jewish affairs at the American Jewish Committee and president of the independent Research Institute for New Americans (RINA).

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