Marshall Sklare loved history and deeply believed that contemporary Jewry could not be understood in the absence of a proper historical framework. He often alluded to history in his books, articles, and teaching. He encouraged his students to examine issues of change over time.

So in the spirit of his teaching, my aim herein is to draw upon my own recent work on the history of American Judaism to examine issues of continuing concern to social scientists, particularly the problem of assimilation, within a historical framework. I am also going to make a specific proposal concerning the American Jewish Data Bank.

Let me begin with a personal anecdote. Almost 30 years ago, when I first became interested in the history of American Jewry, I mentioned my interest to a scholar at a distinguished rabbinical seminary, and he was absolutely appalled. “American Jewish history,” he growled. “I’ll tell you all that you need to know about American Jewish history: The Jews came to America, they abandoned their faith, they began to live like goyim, and after a generation or two they intermarried and disappeared.” “That,” he said, “is American Jewish history; all the rest is commentary. Don’t waste your time. Go and study Talmud.”

I did not take this great sage’s advice, but I have long remembered his analysis, for it reflects, as I now recognize, a longstanding fear, now hundreds of years old, that Jews in America are doomed to assimilate, that they simply cannot survive in an environment of religious freedom and church-state separation. In America, where religion is totally voluntary, where religious diversity is the norm, where everyone is free to choose their own rabbi and their own brand of Judaism—or indeed no Judaism at all—many (and not just rabbinical school scholars) have assumed that Judaism is fated sooner or later to disappear.

Social scientists surely recognize this assimilationist paradigm. It is a close cousin to the secularization thesis that once held sway in our field. Some, like Sklare’s nemesis, sociologist Milton Gordon, proclaimed a “right to assimilate.” “The individual,” Gordon insisted, “should be allowed to choose freely whether to remain within the boundaries of community created by his birthright ethnic group, to branch out into multiple interethnic contacts, or even to change affiliation to that of another ethnic group should he wish to do so as a result of religious conversion, intermarriage, or simply private wish.”
Others, like Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, considered assimilation a misfortune but nevertheless inevitable. "Will the Jews continue to exist in America?" he asked in 1963. "Any estimate of the situation based on an un illusioned look at the American Jewish past and at contemporary sociological evidence must answer flatly—no... History, sociology, and the emptiness of contemporary Jewish religion all point in the same unhappy direction." Either way, whether actively by choice or passively through inaction, assimilation widely was assumed to be unavoidable. The rabbinical-school scholar was not alone in thinking that American Jewish history, if not a complete waste of time, was certainly a foredoomed enterprise.

Studying the history of American Judaism, however, I have been struck by how much more complex our past has been than the assimilationist paradigm would have led us to imagine. Far from being a simple-minded story of linear descent from Orthodoxy to intermarriage, the story I found displays a far more cyclical and unpredictable pattern: periods of revitalization as well as periods of assimilation; periods when Judaism was, by all measures, stronger than before and periods when it was weaker.

Let us consider a few examples. In the 1820s, highly motivated and creative young Jews in the two largest American communities where Jews lived, New York and Charleston, moved to transform and revitalize their faith, somewhat in the spirit of the contemporaneous Second Great Awakening. In so doing, they hoped to thwart Christian missionaries, who always insisted that in order to be modern one had to be Protestant, and they sought most of all to bring Jews back to active observance of their faith. They felt alarmed at the spirit of Jewish "apathy and neglect" they discerned all around them. Chronologically, their efforts paralleled the emergence of the nascent Reform movement in Germany, where Jews "convinced of the necessity to restore public worship to its deserving dignity and importance" had dedicated the innovative Hamburg Temple in 1818. They also paralleled developments in Curacao, where in 1819 more than 100 Jews, unhappy with their cantor and seeking a new communal constitution "in keeping with the enlightened age in which we live," had separated themselves from the organized Jewish community rather than submit to its authority. In both of those cases, however, government officials had intervened and effected compromise. In America, where religion was voluntary and established religious leaders could not depend upon the government to put down dissent, innovators faced far fewer hurdles.

In New York, the young people, "gathering with renewed arduor [sic] to promote the more strict keeping of their faith," formed an independent society entitled Hebra Hinuch Nearim, dedicated to the education of Jewish young people. Their constitution and bylaws