



Who Rules the Synagogue?: Religious Authority and the Formation of American Judaism

Zev Eleff

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Early in the 1800s, American Jews consciously excluded rabbinic forces from playing a role in their community's development. By the final decades of the century, ordained rabbis were in full control of America's leading synagogues and large sectors of American Jewish life. How did this shift occur?

Who Rules the Synagogue? explores how American Jewry in the nineteenth century was transformed from a lay dominated community to one whose leading religious authorities were rabbis. Zev Eleff traces the history of this revolution, culminating in the Pittsburgh rabbinical conference of 1885 and the commotion caused by it. Previous scholarship has chartered the religious history of American Judaism during this era, but Eleff reinterprets this history through the lens of religious authority. In so doing, he offers a fresh view of the story of American Judaism with the aid of never-before-mined sources and a comprehensive review of periodicals and newspapers.

Eleff weaves together the significant episodes and debates that shaped American Judaism during this formative period, and places this story into the larger context of American religious history and modern Jewish history.

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