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Zev Eleff

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Zev Eleff : Who Rules the Synagogue?: Religious Authority and the Formation of American Judaism before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Who Rules the Synagogue?: Religious Authority and the Formation of American Judaism:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Superb analysis of 19th century American synagogue leadership By Ben Rothke When asked if the patriarch Abraham wore a kippah (skullcap), a young boy replied innocently, but incredulously what, Abraham not go out without a kippah?. The anecdote illustrates that our perceptions of our current environment are not always indicative of how they truly played out throughout history. In *Who Rules the Synagogue?: Religious Authority and the Formation of American Judaism*, historian Zev Eleff shows that synagogue life in the United States today, is not, to quote the Talking Heads, same as it ever was. Nineteenth century American Judaism underwent significant changes which for the most part has not been thoroughly studied. This well-researched monograph is a fascinating and enlightening read and was recently nominated as a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award in early January. Eleff explores the years 1816-1885 of American synagogue life. He asks questions as to how synagogues were run, what the specific roles of the rabbi and congregants were, what types of text were in use, how the liturgy was modified and more. The book brings to light that in the early 1800s, American synagogues were lay-led. In this milieu, pulpit rabbis found themselves subservient to an often-hostile lay body. Leadership and direction came not from the rabbinate, rather from the synagogues board. In those early years, it was the lay leaders who made the decisions, and the rabbis role was to offer their learned guidance around those decisions. By the end of the 19th century, Eleff writes that a significant change occurred and rabbis gained (or perhaps regained) control of the synagogue and overall Jewish communal life. The book details how that change happened. The question of who rules the synagogue was not simply how to create an org chart for the synagogue. Its that religious authority is what determines the overall dynamic in Jewish society. By understanding that dynamic, Eleff has uncovered just how Jewish communities developed and evolved. The book notes that much of this lay/rabbinic struggle occurred at the same time clericalism was raging thought the Christian issues around clericalism. Also, the rabbis and laity often fought around areas of textual authority, specifically around sacred texts. Some rabbis updated and wrote their own prayer books with the understanding that with control over the nature of the text and prayers, comes rabbinic power. The book notes that once power was regained, it did not come without a cost. There was at least one unforeseen ramification in that many of the laity receded into the religious background as the rabbis assumed larger roles and responsibilities. While the pictures Eleff paints have changed significantly; there is still some issues that gave not changed. The disaffection of Jewish youth in the synagogue, inter-rabbinic quarreling, and the problems of talking during services are still issues in the 21st century. The 70-year period the book covers was a time of transition and tension and a time of how religious power developed. Eleff writes that it was the Civil War in which rabbis ironically gained power again via several issues set in motion by the war. The book ends in the 1885, just before the mass migration of Jews from Eastern Europe started, which would change Jewish and synagogue life even more. An absorbing read, the book chronicles the struggles and challenges that an emerging American Jewish society faced during these turbulent years. For those with an interest in American Jewish history, *Who Rules the Synagogue?: Religious Authority and the Formation of American Judaism* should be part of their required reading list.

Finalist for the American Jewish Studies category of the 2016 National Jewish Book Awards 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.

"Eleff's scholarly and concise history of the struggle for power within American synagogues during the nineteenth century is a major contribution, and it is destined to take its place alongside Davis's *The Emergence of Conservative Judaism: The Historical School in Nineteenth-Century America* (1963); Jick's *The Americanization of the Synagogue, 1820-1870* (1976); and Sarna's *American Judaism: A History* (2004) in the historiography of nineteenth-century American Judaism."--*Religious Studies* "This well-documented, well-reasoned, eminently readable account of transatlantic throughways for this dramatic transformation of Jewish religious life yields helpful context for understanding the contemporary state of American Judaism Recommended."--*CHOICE* "This well-researched monograph is a fascinating and enlightening read...An absorbing read...For those with an interest in American Jewish history, *Who Rules the Synagogue?: Religious Authority and the Formation of American Judaism* should be part of their required reading list."--*The Times of Israel* About the Author Zev Eleff is Chief Academic Officer of Hebrew Theological College in Skokie, IL. He earned his PhD in the field of American Jewish history at Brandeis University. Eleff is the author or editor of six books and more than thirty scholarly articles, and his most recent publication is

