starting points: 1492 and 1654, the moment when Jewish communal life began in North America. Developed at the turn of the twentieth century, this approach became entrenched in the scholarship against the backdrop of two World Wars, the Holocaust, and the Cold War.

Twentieth-century scholars of American Jewish history customarily contrasted the supposed medievalism of Iberia/Ibero-America with the forward-looking religious freedoms and political and social equalities of Protestant Dutch/English America and the United States. The overall result was a form of stadial history. It became the norm for general accounts of early American Jewish history to move spatially and chronologically from medieval Iberia and inquisitional Ibero-America to quasi-tolerant and quasi-modern Dutch and English America to the emancipated and fully-modern United States.

This schema, still reflexively espoused by scholars of American Jewish history, possesses several intellectual flaws. Any paradigm that tolerates a hemispheric interpretation of American Jewish and converso history from 1492 to 1654, then views American Jewish history as a primarily North American (and ultimately United States) phenomenon from 1654 onwards is fundamentally inconsistent. The twin turning points of 1492 and 1654 downplay long-term continuities. The post-1654 focus on North America arbitrarily discounts the larger Caribbean and South American Jewish communities of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Too often, the scholarship on early American Jewish history assumes rather than critically examines the liberalism and modernity of colonial North America and the United States. And, perhaps most damning, the notion that Catholic Iberian South America remained trapped in the medieval era, while Protestant-dominant North America rushed headlong into modernity, smacks of ethnic and religious bias. (Some historians might object that the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions were self-evidently barbaric and medieval, but that claim will be contested in the next chapter. For