

**The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism. Edited by Dana Evan Kaplan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 462 pp.**

Beginning with three chronological essays covering 1654–1880, 1880–1945, and 1945 “to the present,” and continuing with twenty topical (and interdisciplinary) essays exploring subjects such as “the body and sexuality in American Jewish culture” (outstanding), this is a volume, despite (or maybe because of) its randomness, that continually provokes, upsets, teaches, and surprises. I cannot possibly review twenty-three essays in a few hundred words, so I will comment upon the introduction and third chronological essay, both by the editor, and raise some of the same issues I would discuss with many of the other contributors

The book begins with some confusion. The editor attempts to distinguish between “Judaism” and the “Jewish religion” (1). But is not Judaism the Jewish religion? Judaism is not the “sociological approach” but a religion, and while the “Jewish religion” does “suggest a more specific concern with beliefs and practices . . . associated with a supernatural reality” (leaving aside what the editor might mean by “supernatural reality”), the two are one and the same (1). The confusion carries through some of the essays, but usually the other contributors have it right; Judaism is the religion of many Jews, and Jewish is a term for those Jews who may or (more likely) may not be involved in Judaism. The contrast needs to be between Judaism (or, its adjectival form, Judaic) and Jews (or, its adjectival form, Jewish). Without this clarification, the use of these fundamental terms is unclear.

Nineteen-forty-five to the present is dwarfed by the time span of the other two survey essays. And yet, even if one covers only sixty years, the tendency to generalize about American Jews is tempting. The problem with “many American Jews” (61), “many rabbis” and “all Americans” (62), “many Jews” (63), “many congregants” (64), “many young people” (65), “many Jews” (66), “many American Jews” (67), “many American Jews” (68), “many young Jews” (69), “many American Jews” (70), “most other Jews” (71), “most Reform congregations” (72), “many ultra-Orthodox” (74), “most Orthodox leaders” (75) is to constantly cause

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the reader to think about the thousands of exceptions, or, to make the statements so general as to be meaningless: “Protestants, Catholics, and Jews all adhered to the ‘American way of life’” (61).

The tendency (not the need, I think) to generalize leads to a number of conclusions with which I would take issue:

“The Reform movement grew, which was due in large measure to the joining of many intermarried couples” (4). I suspect this is something an Orthodox rabbi might have said, but it has absolutely no basis in fact in the early post-WWII period.

“Privatized” Judaism (in contrast to the late Marshall Sklare’s “ethnic” Judaism) is “familial” and “interpersonal” (thus the popularity of Passover and Chanukah, Kaplan points out) and has become “dominant over ethnic identity” (8, 9). Leaving aside how one can be private, familial, and interpersonal concomitantly, the editor continues this discussion by explaining that those with a privatized Judaism “see themselves as part of the Jewish people” (9). It is not clear how a private Judaism differs from an ethnic Judaism.

“Some congregations . . . developed reputations as ‘bar mitzvah factories’” (10). I do not think repeating this common accusation from Jews who choose not to affiliate with synagogues does much to explain post-WWII Jewish life in America. I have attended hundreds of b’nai mitzvah since my own in the mid-1950s, and I have been continually amazed at how well the rabbis (and/or, the cantor) have come to know the young man or young woman.

“A whole generation grew up seeing their suburban parents’ Judaism as vapid and pointless” (10). Again, we have the problem with generalizations. Surely there have been a significant number of Jews in the post-WWII generations (how many generations have there been?) who have found the Judaism of their parents meaningful and even joined suburban congregations.

“The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism deliberately avoids breaking down American Judaism into its denominational components” (11). And yet, on the next page, the editor admits that “throughout the twentieth century, American Judaism has maintained a denominational structure” (12), and, a page later, that the “American Jewish community is religiously pluralistic,” with “Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist . . . or any one of a number of other congregations belonging to numerous streams or denominations” (13). So, what would be the point in avoiding the obvious?

“The future of American Judaism depends on the ability to fashion and market a compelling religious vision” (15). Notwithstanding my inability to predict what Judaism will “be like . . . in fifty to one hundred

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years” (17), it is doubtful that Judaism in America has ever depended on such a vision, and equally dubious as to whether it will need one in the future.

“Without serious theological reflection, American synagogues will become generic community centers” (16). In fifty years of observing synagogues, I have rarely seen a synagogue (excuse the metonymy) with “serious theological reflection.” And I doubt they will ever have this, and yet they will remain distinct from community centers.

“There will be an emphasis on lifelong learning, rather than restricting education to those of school age” (17). This prediction reminds the historian of the 1950s, when synagogues everywhere were filled with bar mitzvah, post-bar mitzvah, confirmation, post-confirmation, high school, and adult education programs. If this is true, been there, done that.

“American Jews therefore placed much of their energies into the fight against antisemitism both domestically and worldwide” (62). The years to which this refers are vague, but antisemitism has been such a minor theme in the post-WWII period that Jews have, everywhere, devoted only a small part of their energies to fighting it. There has been no significant enemy to fight in the past half century.

“American Jews” joined “the exodus to suburbia and further accelerating the assimilatory process” (63). For the editor, the suburbs (in contrast to the Lower East Side, 63), represent most everything bad. Truth is, most of the 1,500 or so professors of Judaic Studies in America today (and a large majority of the rabbis) grew up in the suburbs of post-WWII America—they were not just places of assimilation. Indeed, the editor, on the very same page, notes that “increasing numbers of American Jews were joining these new synagogues” (63).

“The 1950s and 1960s saw a massive building boom of synagogues, as it appeared that the American Jewish community had an ‘edifice complex’” (63). I find this outrageous – there are many other explanations for the construction of countless synagogues in the 15 years or so after WWII, and they are far more accurate.

“Despite their lack of piety, suburban Jews felt compelled to participate in the religious affiliation that was seen as a cornerstone of American citizenship” (64). It seems unreasonable to both conclude that post- WWII suburban Jews embraced “holidays and life-cycle events” and simultaneously to accuse them of a “lack of piety.” How can anyone measure the piety level of Jews who celebrate holidays and observe life- cycle events?

“Beginning in 1945 . . . the Reform movement . . . pioneered innovative services that stressed creativity and originality” (64). While I do not deny that one might find an occasional creative liturgy in the immedi-

ate post-WWII years, the period of innovative liturgy began only in the mid-1960s. Everywhere in the 1950s, Reform congregations used the Union Prayer Book.

“The religious schools . . . were unable to transmit much at all about Judaism, Hebrew, Jewish history” (65). Again, this is a meaningless generalization.

“In the 1960s . . . many young people began joining the counterculture, listening to rock ‘n’ roll, imbibing drugs, and joining in ‘free love’” (65). Seems to me that it is meaningless to equate drugs and music as the background for making Jews “more ready to affirm an ethnic and cultic [?] identity” (66). Plenty of young Jews, while listening to the Beatles and Dylan, made Judaism and Jewishness a more significant part of their lives in the last half of the 1960s without drugs. Here, as elsewhere, the editor draws upon secondary sources exclusively, especially Robert Ellwood’s studies of the 1950s and 1960s, as he moves from his own to someone else’s generalizations with never a primary source. Ellwood, whose conclusions about Jews and Judaism are from secondary sources, provides Kaplan with his primary source.

“Wiesel wrote . . . Night, one of a series of gripping novels” (66). Wiesel, who has castigated as “blasphemy” novels about the Holocaust, would be surprised to find his memoir described as fiction.

I have a final word on one other essay. I found the five or six essays by the sociologists the most compelling parts of this compendium, and am especially glad that the editor published a lecture, “The American Jewish Urban Experience,” given by Nathan Glazer in Detroit a few years earlier. It is brief, intelligent, and important. My own research, in two communities (Los Angeles and Cleveland), contradicts, however, one of his conclusions in explaining why Jews, more rapidly than any other group, moved out of American cities in the 1950s and 1960s when Blacks moved in. Glazer rejects prejudice as an explanation, but over and over, notwithstanding the awkwardness of saying such things, I found this the most pronounced reason for Jewish flight. Jews simply did not want to live in a neighborhood which was changing color too fast.

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