

## *Book Reviews*

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**Marc Dollinger, *Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2018), 242 pp.**

Marc Dollinger's first book, *The Quest for Inclusion* (2000), focused on Jewish liberalism, seeking to explain its hold on American Jews as a matter of their self-interest. Focusing on the period from 1930s to the mid-1970s, he showed how they believed that they would benefit from the creation of a more tolerant society in which race, as well as religion, did not determine civic privileges and liabilities. That book essentially emphasized how Jews twinned their political agendas with liberalism, cosmopolitanism, and civil rights.

In his new book, *Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s*, Dollinger revisits familiar turf, but with a difference. This study looks primarily at the latter part of the 1960s and the legacy of those transformative years. In focusing on this period, Dollinger asks a different question: How, he poses, did the rise of African American militancy in the latter part of the 1960s, which he repeatedly calls "Black Power," leave its mark upon the political and cultural outlook of the nation's Jews? How did the calls and actions of African Americans in the years immediately after the triumph of the civil rights legislative agenda—for self-determination, race-conscious social policies, and communal pride—transfer to and transform the Jews of the United States? How, Dollinger contemplates, did the political upheavals of the late 1960s, inspired by African American activists, change the ways in which American Jews behaved politically, both with the larger society and within the Jewish communal infrastructure?

This book provides an important intervention in American Jewish history, a field that for the most part makes Jews the authors of their destiny, in which their ideas, sensibilities, reactions, and concerns for the most part explain everything. Indeed, in the robust literature on the

history of Jewish-black interactions, Jews act and blacks receive—whether money, advice, or access to Americans with real power. Jews, in that broad interpretive trope, gave, and African Americans, by necessity, took.

In *Black Power, Jewish Politics*, Dollinger upends this familiar and deeply planted way of thinking. He treats Jews as the takers and not the givers. Jews, particularly although not exclusively the younger rising generation born in the post–World War II era and very much participants in the assertive politics of the 1960s, learned from African Americans and created a new political culture that in turn shook up Jewish life in America.

Unlike, according to Dollinger, the generations that had preceded them, these Jews, deeply influenced by Black Power, did not hesitate to publicly assert Jewish interests, doing so directly in their own name. Whether considering domestic political developments, institutional policies, matters of global affairs, or cultural practices within their own communities, the Jews of the late 1960s volubly asserted that Jews, as Jews, had their specific stake in outcomes. Unlike those who came before them, these Jews, sometimes labeled the “new Jews,” eschewed vague statements about universalism and did not make disingenuous claims to be acting in the interests of the common good. Instead, Dollinger’s subjects demanded to know how Jews would benefit and what Jews would get out of it, whatever the matter at hand might have been.

Ironically, Dollinger shows, while the tenor of Jewish politics in the period under study owed much to Black Power, the quest for self-interest led to a rupture in the real, although always fraught, political partnership between blacks and Jews that had evolved in mid-twentieth century. Jewish action based on avowedly self-interested decision-making and calls for Jews to act politically in the name of their particularistic Jewish agenda seemingly could not coexist with the kind of cooperation that had existed earlier. But that cooperation had been built on an asymmetrical distribution of power, and Dollinger points out that the politics of the late 1960s resulted in a new and, as he saw it, improved relationship of equals.

*Black Power, Jewish Politics* has much to say about the Jewish and African American disillusionment with postwar liberalism. At the heart of the liberalism, rejected by both Black Power advocates and the new

Jews, lay a commitment to gradual integration based though on the reality that had Jews benefitted from their whiteness. They had no desire to see any diminution of it. The author, through careful analysis of internal memos and correspondence of Jewish communal organizations—including the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Congress, and the American Jewish Committee—shows that the men behind these bodies understood how much they had been part of the world of white privilege and how their own economic and political ascent had been aided by their phenotype.

Dollinger also points out that, despite Black Power's formative influence, many of the strategies that Jewish leaders adopted in the 1960s ended up exacerbating the nation's shameful and persistent patterns of racial disparity, working to the disadvantage of African Americans. He, for example, tackles the issue of the rise of Jewish day schools. With a few exceptions, most such schools came into being in the 1960s based on the ostensible desire of Jews to educate their children in all-Jewish environments. Advocates for such schools claimed that separate Jewish education would foster Jewish pride and group continuity, a claim that reflected much of the rhetoric of Black Power. But by exiting public schools—a necessary part of creating segregated Jewish schools—Jews played their part in the larger and, most observers would agree, tragic phenomenon of the era, which saw white people abandoning integrated education as a reality and a *desideratum*. Even when individuals involved in Jewish communal decision-making recognized that this would happen, they still placed Jewish self-interest, Jewish power, ahead of anything else.

The honesty of this book, the willingness of the author to tackle a number of subjects, uncomfortable even decades later, makes it an important contribution. It offers a well-researched set of chapters, cogently structured and based on a deep immersion in the primary sources. The fact that the title *Black Power, Jewish Politics* puts African Americans first, making them the pivotal players and African American ideology the dominant force in shaping Jewish action, deserves credit as well.

A few problems, though, haunt *Black Power, Jewish Politics*. Dollinger tends to flatten the political and cultural practices of Jewish communal elites before the late 1960s. They did not always behave as cagily or duplicitously as he suggests; rather, since the late nineteenth century, they

were frequently open in their declarations that Jews followed their group-specific agendas and took self-interested stands in the political arena. In ignoring this, Dollinger has set up something of an analytic straw man.

So, too, by using the always-capitalized phrase “Black Power,” Dollinger misses all of the complex political turmoil within African American organizations, institutions, and, more broadly, among the rank-and-file. We never really learn, aside from quotes from a number of the most visible and vocal advocates of Black Power, about the diversity of opinions and strategies that constituted African American politics in these years. Who constituted the advocates of Black Power? Did they receive no resistance or argument from other African Americans who may not have, either partially or entirely, subscribed to the messages of Stokely Carmichael, Eldridge Cleaver, or Jesse Jackson? These are issues Dollinger declines to explore and, as such, the politics of black America comes out here as flat as the politics of Jewish America.

Additionally, the treatment of gender is a problem here. The fact that Dollinger, in the index, can encapsulate everything he has to say about Jewish women into citations of less than a dozen pages, points to something missing. It seems, from reading this book, that Jewish men did all of the work of adopting the ethos and message of Black Power as they challenged the Jewish liberal status quo. Other than in the few pages devoted to the impact of the women’s movement on Jewish women, no Jewish women play a role here. Jewish women acted only vis-à-vis internal Jewish communal issues. If that represented the reality of the Jewish politics of the era, then it behooved the author to say so and to fold a gendered analysis into the book. He needed to have considered the Jewish politics of this era as a manifestation of a new kind of ethnic masculinity or women deserved to be players beyond purely women’s issues.

Dollinger ought, it seems, to have given a nod to the fact that Black Power, broadly defined, transformed more than Jewish politics. He ought to have at least acknowledged the global impact of Black Power. Dollinger would then have shown how the new thinking and action of American Jews followed a broad, almost universal trajectory. After all, Black Power inspired activists in a wide variety of other ethnic communities in the United States, shaping the political and cultural energies of

the descendants of other European immigrants and unleashing political militancy among young Native Americans, Asian Americans, and so many others. And its message revolutionized the politics of no fewer places than Jamaica, South Africa, Northern Ireland, and Palestine.

This then leads to a final way in which *Black Power, Jewish Politics* falls a bit short. The degree to which Israel, from the June 1967 war and beyond, functioned as the dividing wedge between Jews and African Americans cannot be overstated. But Dollinger actually *understates* the significance that Black Power advocates placed on this issue. They saw the expansion of colonialism in the Middle East, ensuing as it did from Israel's military activities following the 1967 War, its emerging settlement policy, and the process by which it formally annexed lands with large Arab populations. To the advocates of Black Power, individuals whose ideas and fervor so profoundly inspired American Jews, the developments in the Occupied Territories mattered. Conversely, American Jews at that same time moved Israel, and support of it, to near the top of their agenda.

This subject, while certainly addressed in *Black Power, Jewish Politics*, does not get the central analytic attention it deserved. Yet Marc Dollinger provides a very important antidote to much of the historiography as well as to popular Jewish recollection about this pivotal era.

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**Rebecca Erbelding, *Rescue Board: The Untold Story of America's Efforts to Save the Jews of Europe* (New York: Doubleday, 2018), 384 pp.**

In mid-January 1944, John Pehle, a young assistant to the secretary of the Treasury Department in the United States government, stomped the snow off his shoes and entered the White House, preparing for the most important meeting of his professional life. Over a year and

a half later, tens of thousands of European lives were saved as a result of this meeting. In her new book, *Rescue Board: The Untold Story of America's Efforts to Save the Jews of Europe*, Rebecca Erbelding, an archivist, curator, and historian at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, draws from a rich source of archival materials to present the first history of the War Refugee Board, an agency authorized through executive order by then-President Franklin D. Roosevelt after the meeting with Pehle.

In her research, Erbelding offers an amendment to the traditional narrative of American responses to the extermination of European Jewry—the story of a country that lent too little aid and gave too little attention, until the Holocaust had already gone too far. Erbelding succinctly covers this well-documented territory from the outset, discussing the difficulties European Jewish refugees faced in their efforts to escape to the United States from Nazi Europe: from the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 through to the turning back of the *MS St. Louis* in 1939. But rather than repeating this narrative of inaction, Erbelding focuses on ways an admittedly small group of governmental officials did attempt to provide aid to European Jews. These officials spent the final year and half of World War II working with Jewish organizations, officials from neutral countries, and resistance groups in their attempts to rescue Jews from the web of Nazism: orchestrating covert rescue missions and prisoner exchanges, bartering supplies for Jewish lives, and distributing care packages. Their actions were not limited to Europe, however. In the summer of 1944, the War Refugee Board opened a refugee camp in upstate New York, outside of Oswego, that housed nearly one thousand refugees. Through her research, Erbelding offers a more nuanced understanding of American responses to the Holocaust.

This is not to say, however, that the history of the War Refugee Board offers a redemptive history for the United States. Nor does Erbelding attempt to situate it as “the one bright spot” (286). The backdrop of years of American indifference to events taking place in Europe remains hauntingly present throughout the book. Indeed, as Erbelding demonstrates, it took months of meetings and negotiations to convince Roosevelt of the need for action—action that did not occur until 1944,

after Nazi Germany's military war and genocidal war had been waging for years and millions of lives had been lost. Yet the War Refugee Board's ability to provide aid in the face of these obstacles, which Erbelding meticulously documents, only serves to highlight the importance of their actions.

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**Daniel Judson, *Pennies for Heaven: The History of American Synagogues and Money* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2018), 256 pp.**

Daniel Judson's well-researched, marvelously original, and surprisingly entertaining study of how American synagogue finance evolved from colonial times to the present—along with his analysis of contemporary trends and how financing might change in the near future—is a must-read for anyone concerned with funding synagogues after the 2007–2008 economic recession, the widespread availability of free religious knowledge online, the dissolution or blurring of denominational lines, falling membership, and the apparent disinclination of the current generation of young people to pay for synagogue services. Historically, he writes, American synagogues have thrived on a broad-based paradigm of what he calls “democratic pragmatism” where, rather than a few wealthy donors, each member is expected to pay his or her share toward the bottom line; today, observers wonder if that paradigm is sustainable.

The author correctly asserts that examining synagogue life through an economic lens, rather than the more common intellectual or spiritual one, brings into view many issues that might otherwise remain hidden and sharpens the focus on worshippers' actual values and culture. Placing his story firmly within the context of broader changes in American history and politics, and providing enlightening comparison with the way Christian churches have financed their buildings and paid their clergy, Judson covers a comprehensive range of topics: the primacy of the

principles of competition and the marketplace in the completely voluntary realm of American religious life; the origins and implications of the “Free Synagogue” or voluntary dues movement; the synagogue center movement of the 1920s (the proverbial “shuls with a school and a pool,” which often meant enormous debt); the debate over who should fund religious schools; and the huge controversy in the mid-twentieth century over using lucrative bingo games to fund synagogue operations—an embroilment that resulted in the Conservative movement’s expelling sixteen congregations from its umbrella organization for violating its ban on bingo. Especially illuminating is his account of the “*hazzan* craze” starting in the late-nineteenth century, when Orthodox synagogues in New York outbid each other in paying ever-more-extravagant salaries for superstar cantors, a phenomenon reminiscent of the Dutch “tulip mania” of the 1630s. He also discusses the steady professionalization of the American rabbinate during the twentieth century and the current weakening of the traditional rabbinical hiring system, along with the current challenges posed by the alternative Chabad model of synagogue finance, as congregations in other movements seek to either imitate or compete with Chabad’s success.

One of the first surprises in reading *Pennies for Heaven* is learning that the practice of financing synagogues mainly by charging dues—which, as the author remarks, most might assume was handed down at Mt. Sinai—is in fact not ancient at all but a twentieth-century innovation that did not become widespread until well after World War I. Until then the main source of revenue for synagogues was the selling of seats and matching annual assessments on terms not unlike that of buying tickets to a Broadway show. Only the purchasing member could sit in a particular seat, and prices and assessments were based on proximity to the Ark, comfort, and quality of view, with at least three and as many as five different classes of seats sold. The result was visible distinctions based on wealth within the congregation, with clear “rich” and “poor” sections. The system fell out of favor during the Progressive Era and World War I, when rhetoric about the value of democracy and egalitarianism was widespread and prominent rabbis demanded, as we are told, that “In God’s house, all must be equal!” Under the dues system, congregants paid a fee and then took whatever seat happened to be

free when they walked in. Another advantage of that model was that it enabled synagogues to sell virtually unlimited memberships, beyond the number of seats in the sanctuary. Most synagogues maintained the practice of selling seats only for the High Holidays, using the promise of a guaranteed seat to incentivize members to pay their financial obligations for the rest of the year.

It was also in response to the charge that synagogues had become the province of only the rich and the demand for democratization that Rabbi Stephen Wise during the same period pioneered the idea of the Free Synagogue, where there were neither fees for seats nor mandatory dues. *Pennies for Heaven* provides valuable biographical information about Wise's vision, leadership, and remarkable organizing and fundraising skills, as well as an account of the scores of synagogues that have successfully brought back this model in our own day.

Similarly, for those in New York who could not come or who balked at paying high fees for the rest of the year, numerous worship services sprang up just for the High Holidays. These came to be known as "mushroom synagogues"; they were held in venues such as Yiddish theaters, movie theaters, dance halls, or meeting rooms connected to saloons. The services depended on extravagant, circus-like, and sometimes vulgar advertising, promising star cantors and choirs but often led by quick profit seekers of dubious credentials. By 1917 a reported 150,000 worshippers attended such services. "Do you want to get pleasure for your money this year?" read one such advertisement. "Then come to the beautiful airy People's Theater Synagogue. You will hear good singing, beautiful davening, Jewish and sweet. The management guarantees good service." Established synagogues of all denominations, which saw the "mushrooms" as sacrilegious economic competition, began a campaign to eradicate them through calls for boycotts, alternative services, and the distribution of free synagogue tickets to the poor. When those efforts failed, they used their combined political power to outlaw such services through a 1934 bill in the New York State Legislature criminalizing anyone presenting "fraudulent religious services."

The final chapter may make some readers feel wistful. It looks at the synagogue building boom of the 1950s—a time when rapid suburbanization gave rise to Conservative and Reform synagogues across

the United States overflowing with congregants, and religious school classrooms could not be built quickly enough to keep up with demand. In this chapter, Judson turns to the question of evolving methods to maintain these buildings today, including mergers, renting out space, adopting the “community synagogue” model, and other ways to promote greater efficiency. He also examines alternate trends in traditional synagogue financing that have in part been made necessary and possible by the weakening of ideological commitment to Jewish denominations and to the ability of congregations to hire rabbis from outside the mainstream seminaries. Independent *minyanim*, for example, are nondenominational, do not own buildings, and have no paid clergy. In Chabad, budgets are leaner because the rabbis are paid considerably less than those in other Jewish denominations; a few wealthy donors are sought so that for most, services are virtually free; and each rabbi rules unto himself and does not answer to a board of directors, allowing for more risk taking and entrepreneurship.

Despite its enumeration of the many challenges facing the contemporary American synagogue, *Pennies for Heaven* ends on a note of optimism, suggesting that just as American synagogues have successfully evolved to meet new conditions over the past three hundred years, the synagogues of the future will likewise find ways to survive and thrive.

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**Eric Lidji, *The Seventeenth Generation: The Lifework of Rabbi Walter Jacob* (Pittsburgh: Rodef Shalom Congregation, 2018), 294 pp.**

*The Seventeenth Generation: The Lifework of Rabbi Walter Jacob* is a biography prepared by Eric Lidji, director of the Rauh Jewish History Program & Archives at the Senator John Heinz History Center. This book adds to a growing number of publications on American rabbis

born in Germany who fled the country of their birth under the Nazi regime. Their fate and their biographies are now well documented by the new, open-access digital humanities database MIRA (<http://mira.geschichte.lmu.de/>). Many of these men relocated to the United States, where some had significant impact on American Judaism in the postwar era. Their decision to migrate to the United States was connected to a spectacular rescue organized by the American rabbinical colleges on behalf of their colleagues in the German rabbinate, scholars of modern Jewish “Wissenschaft,” or those studying for the rabbinate. At least 250 individuals continued their lives and careers in the United States.

Lidji tells the story of Walter Jacob, born in 1930, who joined his parents, Ernst and Annette Jacob, and his brother, Herbert, when the family fled his hometown of Augsburg in south Germany after the so-called *Kristallnacht*, or “Night of Broken Glass.” While the emigration of rabbis had begun earlier, this pogrom entailed a massive physical attack on German-Jewish synagogues and communities and especially targeted the rabbinate, who were systematically arrested and taken to concentration camps or Gestapo prisons, where they were tortured, humiliated, and, after several weeks, given the option to either leave the country immediately or continue to be held under even worse circumstances. Walter’s father, Ernst, senior rabbi of Augsburg, was swept up in this action, as was Walter’s grandfather, Benno Jacob, a notable rabbi and biblical scholar in Hamburg. Early in 1939 both Ernst and Benno obtained a temporary visa from the British chief rabbi, which allowed them to flee to the United Kingdom. They were joined a few weeks later by Annette and the boys. The British chief rabbi’s initiative was coordinated with the emergency rescue by the American rabbinical colleges, which provided support and mediated positions for rabbis, rabbinical students, and scholars of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*.

While Lidji frames Jacob’s biography with information on his parents’ flight and ultimate resettlement to St. Joseph, Missouri, he soon turns to the experience of young Walter in this massive cultural transformation. He highlights how this adolescent refugee grew up in America but was raised in a distinctly German-Jewish home, which highly identified with the modern German rabbinical tradition and a long lineage of male family members—fifteen generations before Walter—in the rabbinate.

Unsurprisingly, Walter decided to enter the rabbinate and followed the family tradition. Lidij details the worlds Walter straddled—educated in the United States yet committed to the ethos of a long lineage in the German rabbinate. These factors profoundly determined his personal and professional life.

In 1957 Walter Jacob was hired as assistant rabbi of Pittsburgh's congregation Rodef Sholom under Senior Rabbi Solomon Freehof. Jacob would later succeed Freehof at Rodef Sholom as senior rabbi, where he served for the rest of his life. He also ascended to the position of chair of the Reform movement's responsa committee, a role that's pivotal in the movement's decisions in Jewish law, or halakhah. This intellectual task, which has been bestowed on few, gave and still gives guidance to the movement's effort to calibrate modern Jewish identity with historic interpretation of Jewish law.

While the German-Jewish tradition had always had a special place in the life of Walter, it took until late in his life—in the mid-1970s—to return to the country of his birth. His travel to West Germany opened a new and unexpected window in Walter's life, as the rabbi began actively confronting his family's past and their persecution during the Nazi era. While this active encounter was not easy, it proved to be essential and turned into a chance to find some sort of closure, and build something new: Meaningful conversations generated close relationships with the Jewish community of Augsburg, with Jews and non-Jews in Germany, and even earned Walter an offer to take on the liberal rabbinate in Munich, which he turned down.

After the end of the Cold War there was once again a growing demand for liberal Judaism, after the Shoah had destroyed this uniquely German-Jewish modernity. This provided a rare opportunity to re-establish a liberal Jewish leadership in central Europe, where Jewish religious life had largely been shaped by East European Orthodoxy in the aftermath of the Shoah. Lidji highlights how Jacob became a natural bridge builder between the American Reform movement and the new grassroots liberal communities in Germany, and how he played a role in establishing a new liberal rabbinical seminary, the Abraham Geiger College, in Germany in 1999. The founding of the College did not only provide a liberal rabbinical seminary

on the continent, but also corrected the historical birth defect of rabbinical training in Germany. Unlike its historic precursors, the new seminary was not excluded from a theological faculty at a state university; rather, it was placed within a Jewish School of Theology at the University of Potsdam.<sup>1</sup> This renewed a heritage long believed to be lost for future generations, one that would successfully be taught to new generations of liberal rabbis from Germany.

Lidji's biography of Walter Jacob is an important contribution to a more recent chapter in transnational Jewish history, which intensely connects American and European Jewish history. It provides an in-depth example of the cultural transfers caused by flight and expulsion of the German Jewish rabbis and scholars, and it highlights the dramatic impact the migration had on American Judaism. These immigrant Jewish leaders shifted the center of modern Jewish identity from Europe to the United States, and the 250-plus German rabbis who continued their careers in the United States left a unique mark by providing a special mix of progressive outlook and traditional Jewish knowledge. While they did not question their identities as "American" rabbis, many of them built their careers on an Old-World ethos in the profession or on their experiences of Nazism, as Joachim Prinz and others did. A large number of the refugees returned to Germany in the post-war period to come to terms with the trauma, the experience of racism, and the shocking end of the German-Jewish experiment which also seemed to conclude their own history as the last of a special kind. What they discovered, however, was an unexpected victory: They were able to secure a "seventeenth generation," and a future for liberal Judaism in central Europe.

Lidji's biography is well researched and authentic, having grown out of a close relationship he built with Walter Jacob himself. In telling Jacob's story, the author made good use of multiple interviews and records in the Rodef Sholom Archives in Pittsburgh. Where he falls short, however, is in failing to frame this biography in the

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1 "School of Jewish Theology," The University of Potsdam, <https://www.juedischetheologie-unipotsdam.de/index.html>.

larger transnational context of this important chapter of Jewish history. The use of scholarly literature and materials beyond the local scope could have helped this biography reach far beyond Pittsburgh. This leaves the study somewhat incomplete and disconnected from its international framework. Nevertheless, Lidji's work may inspire American Jewish historians to take a new look at the genre of biography, which has recently received greater attention within the historical profession.

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**Samira K. Mehta, *Beyond Chrismukkah: The Christian-Jewish Interfaith Family in the United States* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 268 pp.**

In 1966, in the midst of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the West and a hot conflict in Vietnam, the United States armed forces issued a pamphlet decrying a threat to the American way of life. It was not directed at the forces of international communism, or racial disharmony, but rather at that insidious menace to religion and the family: interfaith marriages. Three chaplains, representing Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and Judaism, presented the case that exogamous unions eroded the idea of a of a religiously united home and undermined the social benefits that flowed from strong American families.

In *Beyond Chrismukkah: The Christian-Jewish Interfaith Family in the United States*, Samira Mehta, herself the product of a religiously mixed marriage, notes that such partnerships are now a growing phenomenon in the United States. If one counts weddings across denominational lines within a major religion (such as between a Baptist and a Methodist), 50 percent of marriages in the 1990s began as interfaith. Of those unions, six in ten remained mixed, with the rest eventually settling on a single creed, usually through conversion of one of the parties. A 2016 study showed that 20 percent of American adults grew up in interfaith homes, and in the twenty-first century Jews seem to marry across religious lines between 40 percent and 50 percent of the time. (This rate is equal to that of Catholics, though the small size of the American Jewish community makes it much more vulnerable to the loss of membership and thus the subject of anxiety on the part of its leadership.) “Interfaith family life,” says Mehta, “is a major and formative piece of the American religious landscape.”

Mehta’s first chapter lightly sketches the historical background examining how the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Catholic Church, and the mainline Protestant denominations began in the 1970s to come to terms with the challenge of mixed marriages. Protestantism, dominant culturally and numerically, was much more sanguine about the problem, but it posed severe problems to Jewish and Catholic clergy, who put a number of barriers in front of the couples before they would sanction an interfaith union. Chapter Two, which is the weakest, looks at a few examples of the depiction of mixed marriage in popular culture, particularly the short-lived sitcom *Bridget Loves Bernie*, the Barbra Streisand/Robert Redford love story in *The Way We Were*, and a Jewish-Lutheran wedding on *Little House on the Prairie*.

By the 1980s Jewish Reform leaders realized that they could not stem the tide of mixed couples, and in Chapter Three Mehta examines the guidebooks written to create Jewish families out of interfaith marriages. Some were aimed at the married couple; others, such as *Mommy Never Went to Hebrew School* and *Nonna’s Hanukkah Surprise*, illustrated ways children could keep their Jewish identity while still valuing links to their Christian relatives. These writers treated Christianity as a set of private beliefs, but Jewish identity was seen as an all-encompassing civilization,

found in both culture and beliefs. The non-Jewish spouse was then the one who should abandon her traditions, lest the family be disunited and the children confused. This ignored Christianity's non-creedal elements and attachments to symbols such as the Christmas tree and the fact that "new Jews"—especially those of patrilineal descent—were often made to feel unwelcome by their adopted coreligionists.

Mehta turns in Chapter Four to mixed marriages in which the non-Jewish partner is not white, creating a reversal of the usual scenario in which Jews are viewed as the minority partner. This, says the author, destabilizes "the majority/minority power dynamic, creating a situation in which the two cultures had to interact with each other on a more equal footing. Jewishness lost the deference that it often receives as the minority culture as it made room for another minority culture, albeit Christian."

Chrimukkah, the fictional holiday that first appeared in a 2003 episode of *The O.C.* and that spawned a brief commercial popularity, is used in Chapter Five as a springboard to examine families that chose to live with blended customs. Mehta then gives the reader a deeper look at four interfaith families that have chosen to adopt mixed practices. They are an interesting collection: a Christian-Jewish marriage in which ecological concerns predominate; an "interreligious" pair formed from the union of a Jew and a Unitarian Universalist; a Mormon-Jewish family; and a couple who tries to embrace Christianity and Judaism equally. Rather than being rootless or morally unanchored, these interfaith couples appear to have created their own unique traditions. Mehta explains this by observing the broader American religious scene—a scene where individual choice was the ethos that trumped communal ties and increasing multiculturalism allowed families a cafeteria of "practices and products available in order to shape an identity."

Mehta concludes by musing on her own Hindu-Unitarian background and wondering what the future holds for the children of interfaith families. "I cannot tell you what the children will do," she says, "but I can tell you that they are, by and large, all right."

*Beyond Chrimakkuh* offers some interesting conclusions about recent Reform Jewish attempts to deal with the problems posed by interfaith marriage. Its strength lies in the interviews with families that have met

the challenges, but we learn little about mixed marriages that have been unsuccessful (surely an important part of the story) or about families that chose to emphasize the Christian partner's religion. Strategies around a Chrismakkuh-like blending have a long history stretching back to nineteenth-century Germany, and Mehta would have benefited from considering a longer time frame. In structure, the book is too much like the dissertation from which it sprang, marred by contemporary academic jargon such as the necessity for the author to "locate," "unpack," "situate," and "historicize" events that are "reinscribed." The chapter on movie and television depictions mistakes a few mass media productions for "popular culture," and in it Mehta misses an opportunity to consider how their treatment of interfaith marriages fits in with Hollywood's longstanding distaste for adherents who take their religions too seriously. Overall, this is not a deep book, but it deserves a place on the shelves of scholars of contemporary Judaism.

*Gerry Bowler is a Canadian historian whose research interests focus on the intersection of religion and popular culture. His latest book is Christmas in the Crosshairs: Two Thousand Years of Denouncing and Defending the World's Most Celebrated Holiday.*

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**Sharon B. Oster, *No Place in Time: The Hebraic Myth in Late-Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2018), 352 pp.**

Over the past fifteen years, American literary studies have undergone what Cindy Weinstein recently called a "temporal turn." This increasing scholarly attention to the place of time in both constructing and subverting ideas on Americanness is much indebted to Elizabeth Freeman's seminal *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010), Wai Chee Dimock's *Through Other Continents* (2006), and Dana Luciano's *Arranging Grief* (2007), as well as to Weinstein's own *Time, Tense, and American Literature* (2015) and her new edited volume *A Question of Time* (2018).

Sharon B. Oster's *No Place in Time: The Hebraic Myth in Late-Nineteenth-Century American Literature* is a remarkable contribution to this current critical moment. In her debut monograph, Oster provides fresh insight into the Protestant "Hebraic myth" that "rendered the Jew a figure *out of time*" (4) and into how this myth—which placed Jewishness in the ancient past and outside modernity—was reimagined in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American realism to place Jews *in time* "as guarantors of a promising American future" (4).

Oster's juxtaposition of Christian and Jewish authors generates a rich and nuanced argument. Whereas older studies focus mostly on the question of agency—on whether Jews were able to break free from an assimilationist Protestant mythology—Oster presents a more complex discussion of how ideas of Americanness and its relation to modern Jewishness were negotiated by both Christians and Jews through a particular language of time. In this regard, and although she claims not to entirely follow his call for a methodological revision in Jewish American studies, Oster's book is in line with Jonathan Freedman's *Klezmer America* (2008), in which he astutely shows that as both subjects and objects of representation, Jews "helped transform the ways in which Americans imagined Otherness itself" (6).

*No Place in Time's* introduction traces the emergence of the Hebraic myth in the rhetoric of the Puritan era. It then moves on to explore the critical adaptation of this myth during the mass migration period, a time when debates on Jewish citizenship and assimilation saturated the American public. Each of the four ensuing chapters follows historical shifts in prevailing literary genres and the intersection of these aesthetic shifts with changes in discourse on the temporal location of the Jew.

The first chapter is dedicated to periodical culture in the late nineteenth century, specifically to the local color writing of Abraham Cahan. Cahan, Oster argues, finds a temporal way out of the binary impasse of assimilationist linear progression versus backward-looking nostalgia. His design of a literary cyclorama effect allows him to transform the sentimental, frozen-in-time image of the shtetl life into a dialectical, messianic, "world to come" anticipation of an uncertain—hence, non-teleological—future. The second chapter moves from the margins to the center of the American literary market. It discusses several works

in Henry James's major phase, with an emphasis on *The Golden Bowl* (1904). James's novel, Oster suggests, melds sacred and secular temporalities in its modernization of the "noble Hebrew" figure as a pawnbroker. Furthermore, James parallels his pawnbroker figure with the realist writer himself. Oster thus aptly complicates the limiting philosemitic/antisemitic dichotomy that characterizes debates on Jewishness in James, determining that James "links himself to the Jewish pawnbroker through their common function as negotiators of worth and mediators of time" (99).

In the third and fourth chapters, Oster turns her attention to representations of intermarriage. Chapter Three studies the failed intermarriage plot in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. Oster contends that Wharton's choice to have her protagonist Lily die rather than marry Simon Rosedale places "Rosedale's Jewish otherness at the nexus of two competing systems of value and corresponding orders of time: the inexorable linearity of naturalist decline, and the unpredictability of chance that disrupts it" (145). The failed marriage is thus not entirely somber, insofar as Rosedale interrupts the temporal determinism of the naturalist narrative of decline by introducing into it a liberating, speculative, "viable future that can be imagined, [even] if not realized" (153).

Chapter Four deepens the exploration of the temporal dimensions of Jewish-gentile intimacy through a discussion of works by Mary Antin and Anzia Yezierska. Oster contends that whereas Antin's *The Promised Land* (1912) endorses religious intermarriage as a means to temporally reconcile "Jewish traditions of the past with the modern, American future" (188), Yezierska's *Salome of the Tenements* (1923) places American self-fulfillment not in the "sexual literalization" of the melting pot metaphor (214) but in the fashioning of a Jewish artistic individual self. This disillusioned self undergoes an "aesthetic redemption" (215) and comes to merge "past and future" in her subject position (219).

The concluding coda goes back in time to look at Emma Lazarus's revision of the Hebraic myth. Lazarus's poetic work succeeds in "recasting Christianity as ancient and reclaiming Hebraic Jewishness as modern and central to the future in its own terms" (238). In this way, Lazarus prefigures the various literary efforts to place the Jew in the American present that Oster discusses.

*No Place in Time* is rife with insightful readings of key literary and historical texts. It is a valuable project for rethinking the poetics and politics of American realism through the lens of time. Oster's exploration of various authors who sought to disrupt "realism's own historicity" (16) by introducing various modes of "religious, sacred time" (27) invites us to transcend the binary between secular and sacred time and to acknowledge the modernist qualities that, to varying degrees, these works all possess. Overall, this is a thoughtful and impressive book, one that will be useful to scholars working in Jewish studies, American studies, and novel theory. It provides a foundational discussion of how Jewishness was *timed* during the mass migration era and beyond, and it traces the socio-aesthetic grammars that determined, to use Oster's language, how the story of the Jew in time can be told.

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**Eddy Portnoy, *Bad Rabbi and Other Strange but True Stories from the Yiddish Press* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 244 pp. + illus.**

Eddy Portnoy's *Bad Rabbi and Other Strange but True Stories from the Yiddish Press* is both fascinating and frustrating: fascinating for the stories told, frustrating for its lack of analysis. Did Jews count among their ranks winners and losers? Both, but so what? *Bad Rabbi* is a strange book: not a history, not a sociological/anthropological study, and for the most part lacking contextualization. It is more an assemblage of separate journalistic happenings than anything else. Portnoy has a very light and breezy touch. His use of late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century slang in describing events occurring not later than the 1920s can be

somewhat disconcerting. He includes many photographs, drawings, and cartoons from the Yiddish press, all translated—a definite advantage to those challenged by Yiddish.

Of the eighteen chapters, fourteen originally appeared in the e-zine *Tablet* and were enlarged for the book. Both the first chapter, on a Jewish abortionist's trial in 1871, and the sixteenth chapter, on the professional wrestler Martin "the Blimp" Levy, came out of the English-language press; while interesting, the author does not really explain their placement in this book.

The vast majority of Portnoy's subject matter comes from the Yiddish press in Poland, particularly *Moment*, *Haynt*, *Unzer ekspres*, plus the Polish-language *Nasz Przegląd*. Other Yiddish publications from Poland cited (once each) include *Fraydenker*; *Der fraynd*; *Kapores*; *Der blofer*; *Literarische bleter*; *Vokhnshrift far literatur, kunst un kultur*; *Idishe bilder*; *Film velt*; and *Dos yidische folksblat*. The American Yiddish press is represented by a few stories from *Forverts*, *Morgn frayhayt*, *Di varhayt*, *Di yidische tsaytung*, with single mentions of *Di yidische gazetn* and *Morgn zhurnal*. Oddly enough, *Dos yidishes tageblatt*, the first Yiddish daily in the world, receives no mention. (Technically it was not a daily, since, being Orthodox/traditional, it did not appear on the Sabbath.) Nor is there any mention of New York's *Der tog*, which was considered the "New York Times of the Yiddish press."

Each chapter focuses on a particular event; the book is not arranged thematically. Especially noteworthy are the chapters on Naftali Herz Imber, I.J. Singer, Urke Nachalnik, and Poland's 1929 Miss Judea contest. Certainly there is variety: A piece on a Jewish abortionist is followed by the story of a Jewish murderer. Other chapters deal with the 1906 riots over tonsillectomies for schoolchildren, Jewish fortune tellers in New York City, press wars in Warsaw, Jewish suicide stories in Warsaw, battles among the Hasidim at a *bris*, Warsaw divorces, the *shomer shabos* movement, the struggles over a *rebbetzin's* marriage, and, finally, stories from the crime blotter of Warsaw Yiddish newspapers.

Material for the chapter dealing with the *shomer shabos* movement examined only one Yiddish publication, with photographs from the Polish-language *Nasz Przegląd*. This truly represents a lost opportunity,

since both the movement and resistance to it existed all over Europe and the United States.

Portnoy opines that Jewish newspaper readers were especially entranced by stories of failure, as they struggled to keep their collective heads above water. Yet these selfsame newspaper readers in America constituted the most socially mobile of all ethnic groups in the migration wave that started in 1870 and ended in 1924. Anyone who has spent significant time reading the advice column *Bintel brif* in the Yiddish *Jewish Daily Forward* will be in familiar territory. Unlike the romantic notion of that feature as presented in compilations, the majority of *Bintel brif* items were not centered on dilemmas of Americanization, Old World–New World adjustment, or questions about what Americanization means. Reading this column year in, year out—uncompiled, unedited, unannotated—is an exercise in melodramatic banality: love triangles, cheating spouses, and scandal marked the world of the *Bintel brif*. It's easy to see them as a forerunner to today's reality television.

Such is the character of many of Portnoy's stories. Naftali Herz Imber, remembered today for his poem "Hatikvah," earned his living as an occult prophet and mystic. Gimel Kuper, whose reportage from Poland appeared in the socialist *Forverts* was—to use twentieth-century slang—"outed" by the Communist *Morgn frayhayt* as being I.J. Singer, the older brother of another writer whose serialized novels first appeared in the *Forverts*, Isaac Bashevis Singer. I.J. paved the way for his brother to come to America.

Yitzhok Fabrerovitsh, better known under his nom de plume, Urke Nachalnik, began life as a yeshiva *bokher* turned Hebrew teacher. Finding a life of crime more lucrative, he ended up as a convict behind bars, where he took a writing course and changed the course of his own life by becoming a writer himself. Portnoy tells Nachalnik's story well; with the German occupation, he returned to his former comrades to organize weapons for the underground. He, along with other Jewish gangsters, attacked Polish collaborators who enjoyed beating up Jews. He continued to resist the Nazis, was caught, and on his way to execution, violently turned on his captors.

American Jews hailed the crowning of Bess Myerson as Miss America in 1945, but she was not the world's first Jewish beauty contest winner.

Portnoy chronicles the crowning of Warsaw's Zofia Oldak. In 1929, she became Poland's Miss Judea after a contest that lasted months. Portnoy begins by writing that "all told, 1929 was another bad year for the Jews." Considering that 1929 marked the beginning of the Great Depression, for whom was 1929 a good year? In that same year, according to a blogpost on Jewish beauty queens, the Hungarian Erzsebet Simon was crowned Miss Europa, Vienna's Elizabeth "Lisl" Goldarbeiter became Miss Austria, Sarah Gamze was named Miss Judea in Latvia, and three Jews were crowned in Palestine: Zmira Mani as Miss Jerusalem, Sarah Chelbi-Lazar as Miss Petah Tikva, and Chana Meyuchas-Polani as Miss Palestine.

Ultimately, despite the presence of the interesting chapters outlined above, this book looks down on the readers, writers and publishers of the Yiddish press, basically presenting them as fools, fanatics or rogues. The entire history of the Yiddish press was not an extended *Bintl brif*. "*Am yisrael chai!*—the people Israel lives!"—this line from the Haggadah could easily be adjusted for those to whom Portnoy gives voice: "*Am amkho chai!*—the common rabble live!" It is his focus on the *amkho* that provides the connective tissue to this body of work.

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**David Weinstein, *The Eddie Cantor Story: A Jewish Life in Performance and Politics* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2018), 304 pp.**

Author and historian of early American broadcast media, David Weinstein has crafted a readable yet analytic biography of American entertainer and philanthropist Eddie Cantor. In *The Eddie Cantor Story*, Weinstein argues for a reconsideration of Cantor's centrality within narratives of American entertainment by contextualizing the comedian's responses to a complex web of political, social, and economic forces. The book frames Cantor's identity as an American Jew as deeply influential not only to his public performance—paving the way for the acceptance and ultimately popular success of Jewish comedians who would follow him—but also as the driving force behind Cantor's unceasing philanthropic efforts and liberal social attitudes.

Weinstein situates Cantor's career as a product of his childhood on the Lower East Side. Orphaned at a young age, Cantor grew up primarily under the care of his maternal grandmother, who, despite her best efforts, struggled to keep food on the table. Ultimately, Weinstein credits this hardscrabble childhood, during which Cantor worked a variety of jobs, with giving him the insight to continuously adapt his performance style to the ever-changing demands of the entertainment world that would serve him so well throughout the rest of his career. Building on successes in smaller comedy circuits, Cantor used his skill in understanding the inner workings of the socio-political systems that surrounded him to work his way up to increasingly more prominent stages in vaudeville before landing a long-term contract on *Ziegfeld's Follies*, an elaborate, long-running Broadway revue.

Throughout the book, Cantor is portrayed as having unlimited talent, with a keen understanding of the work and positioning necessary to ensure continued success and relevance. Other comedians of the time shed their Jewish identities, changing their names and styling routines around topics of mainstream interest. Born Edward Itkowitz, Cantor's name change was the result of a misunderstanding during his school days and scarcely concealed his Jewish heritage. Moreover, while his acts were accessible enough to garner great acclaim from largely non-Jewish

audiences, Weinstein argues that Cantor's performances contained coded references to Jewish expressions, jokes, and songs that added another level for those versed enough in Jewish culture to appreciate them (1). At times, however, Cantor's savvy positioning proved controversial, most notably in terms of the comedian's blackface routines that would be remembered as some of his trademark acts. Weinstein carefully situates Cantor's blackface within the norms of his day and recognizes ongoing conversations concerning the denigrating nature of the practice. Nonetheless, the efforts come off a bit like justification, as Weinstein argues that Cantor was under pressure to maintain the practice and contends Cantor's blackface characters challenged pervasive stereotypes. Despite these criticisms, Weinstein demonstrates Cantor's deft ability to adapt to changing trends as the comedian moved from stage to stage and through ever-developing broadcast media, crafting performances that took advantage of the affordances of each, further cementing himself at the pinnacle of American comedy.

Beyond subtle references in Cantor's formal performances, Weinstein argues that Cantor's Jewish identity served as a driving force in directing the comedian's interests and energies off stage. As Hitler's regime rose in Germany, Cantor used his spotlight to vehemently and publicly denounce the Nazi influence in the United States. Among other statements, Cantor called renown antisemites, including Father Charles Coughlin and Henry Ford, "the enemies not only of the Jews, but of all Americans" (145). Given the era's highly-charged political atmosphere, Cantor's overt condemnation startled sponsors who pulled their financial backing, concerned with maintaining broad appeal across demographics. The fallout from slowed Cantor's radio career through the end of the war. During this time, Cantor remained active in film and theatre and began to take advantage of the advancing popularity of television in order to retain his presence in the American entertainment landscape.

Throughout his career, Cantor used his platform to promote his political and charitable interests. In addition to Zionist and pro-Jewish appeals, Cantor worked closely with President Frankly D. Roosevelt to establish the March of Dimes and consistently supported union organizing within the entertainment industry. Moreover,

Cantor consistently levied his influence to promote equality for African American musicians and comedians. Despite the criticism Cantor received for his continued use of blackface, Weinstein argues that Cantor was known to insert commentary concerning anti-racist causes into his acts and used his programs to feature African American entertainers. Although Cantor was not a religiously observant Jew, Weinstein's work purports that his actions on and off the stage were informed by a deep-seated Jewish ethic that pushed him to work for justice across all arenas of life.

Weinstein's narrative is comfortably tidy. He carefully draws lines between the events that directed the course of Cantor's life, explicating the motives for each change of course. Dependent on publicly available sources and Cantor's own writings, which focus nearly exclusively on his public and professional life, however, Weinstein seems to give short shrift to influences within the private sphere. For instance, Weinstein only mentions in passing Cantor's wife and five daughters, and only in relation to the progress of Cantor's career. Weinstein notes that Cantor used them as an excuse to leave the theatre world to focus on telling "genuine bedtime stories" (82), while in fact he was positioning himself to move into the world of radio and television. Although *The Eddie Cantor Story* fulfills its promise to explain how Cantor used his influence within the realms of performance and politics, the wholly public-focused nature of the account leaves a noticeable gap in understanding who Cantor truly was.

In all, Weinstein's work presents a carefully researched narrative that attempts to resituate understandings of Cantor's influence on contemporary American comedy. For too long, Cantor was perceived to offer little past shallow humor and blackface sketches, and he was relegated to the footnotes of American comedy history. Weinstein, however, argues that for decades, Cantor provided a model for expressing Jewish identity in popular culture and crafted templates for the archetypes of Jewish comedians who would follow (232). *The Eddie Cantor Story* positions Cantor as a Jewish comedian who refused to dampen his Jewishness for a mainstream American audience, rising to stardom not despite this identity, but because of his ability to make his otherness feel so familiar.

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**Robert H. Mnookin, *The Jewish American Paradox: Embracing Choice in a Changing World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2018), 308 pp.; Steven R. Weisman, *The Chosen Wars: How Judaism Became an American Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 328 pp.; Jack Wertheimer, *The New American Judaism: How Jews Practice Their Religion Today* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), 379 pp.**

Robert H. Mnookin begins his book *The Jewish American Paradox* with a story about a conversation he had with his daughter Jennifer when he was on sabbatical in Oxford, England. English schools had a required course called Religious Education, and Jennifer's was taught by the headmistress at the Oxford High School for Girls. The headmistress asked if there were any students not of the Christian faith, so Jennifer raised her hand and told her that she was Jewish. The headmistress asked her if her parents would object if she were to read selections from the New Testament as part of the course. Jennifer assured the headmistress that her parents would not mind, even though they were from a different religious background.

Her father asked Jennifer, "How did all of this make you feel?" to which she responded, "When are we actually going to become Jewish?" (1). This was one of the interactions that began Mnookin thinking about what it might mean to be Jewish. Like many American Jews, Mnookin grew up with the idea that it was enough to simply say that he was Jewish. Being Jewish was a consequence of descent. His daughter challenged this view, arguing that if being Jewish is going to be more than a nominal, residual identity of no inherent value, then it should be a religious identity that needed to be studied and practiced. Mnookin and his wife had to figure out ways to respond to Jennifer's challenge, which he partially describes in this book.

What makes this work interesting is that Mnookin is in many ways a typical American Jew. He begins the book with a nominal ethnic identity and not much more and ends the book just as nonobservant as before but able to state that “being Jewish is a much more conscious and salient part of my identity because of choices I have made” (221). Yet Mnookin is also a professor of law at Harvard Law School; he is not only bright but also self-aware, especially of personal and religious choices that he and his family have made in the past and might make in the future, based on current ways of thinking. This results in an extremely thoughtful and readable book. It allows the reader to get an inside view of the thinking that many American Jews may share but from the pen of an astute and highly thoughtful individual who has extensive training in analyzing issues, policies, and approaches.

Mnookin argues that the America Jewish community today faces four critical challenges, each of which creates conflict within the community as a whole as well as, in many cases, within ourselves. These four challenges are: (1) that most American Jews do not practice the Jewish religion; (2) that American Jews are no longer being persecuted; (3) that Israel has become a source of conflict instead of unity; and (4) that a majority of American Jews intermarry. While much of this is well known and has been thoroughly discussed, Mnookin is at his best describing the conundrum of passing on Jewish identity in the absence of Jewish religious practice.

Mnookin opens his discussion of “the puzzling nature of Jewish identity” by telling the story of his participation in an informal faculty seminar conducted by Erik Homburger Erikson, the famous psychologist. After about six sessions, a book review titled “Erik Erikson, the Man Who Invented Himself” was published in which Erikson was accused of “bad faith” for hiding his Jewish background. The writer of the review argued that by denying his Jewish background, Erikson had lived his life in blatant contradiction with his own developmental theories that emphasized “wholeness,” meaning that we need to accept our past and not repress our personal histories. Mnookin uses this encounter to launch his discussion of what he calls “the slippery nature of identity,” and it works well in that regard. The story about Erikson is so good, however, that it would be a worthwhile read even if it didn’t move the narrative along.

Near the end of *The Jewish American Paradox*, Mnookin comes to the conclusion that although it may sound logical to state that to be Jewish one must practice Judaism as a religion, this will not work for the American Jewish community. There is just too much diversity of beliefs to arrive at any consensus on what American Jews should believe, and there is no way to establish a standard for religious practice. So Mnookin leaves us with the quandary of how to perpetuate Judaism in the absence of “a clear path by which you can pass Judaism on to your children” (56).

Mnookin’s thoughts on the paradox that American Jews face “embracing choice in a changing world” suggest that we might get a deeper perspective by looking back into the mist of history. However, Mnookin works to keep his book firmly focused on the future instead, referring only as needed to the development of Jewish law, the roots of anti-semitism, the origins of the matriarchal principle, and the history of Zionism. Steven R. Weisman’s *The Chosen Wars* provides a fuller historical background on American Jewish history in the nineteenth century, retelling the dramatic story of the personalities and controversies that contributed to “the transformation of Judaism into an American religion” (xxviii).

Weisman cites three main factors that molded Judaism into an American religion: (1) the practical exigencies of working and living in nineteenth-century America; (2) the Jewish determination to conform to American culture and society; and (3) secular intellectual influences, including “the evolving revolutionary concepts of science, citizenship, anthropology, history, and literary analysis in an egalitarian democracy” (xxx). While Weisman’s book breaks no new scholarly ground, he nevertheless writes in an entertaining manner, bringing controversies well known to American Jewish historians to the attention of a broader audience. Weisman describes numerous dramatic episodes, such as the conflict over liturgical reform in Charleston, South Carolina, in the 1820s and 1830s; the “fist fight in Albany” involving Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise in the 1840s and early 1850s; the radical Reform positions of Rabbi David Einhorn in the 1860s and 1870s; Felix Adler’s creation of the New York Society for Ethical Culture in 1876; the “emerging schism” that developed in the aftermath of the 1883 Trefa Banquet in Cincinnati; and many others.

In announcing his thesis for the book, Weisman writes that the Judaism of America today “bears witness to a spirit of dynamism and change similar to what had existed among the rabbis and Jewish scholars throughout Jewish history” (xxv). The impact of this spirit on American Judaism was distinctive, producing “a particularly *American* response [emphasis in original]” (xxv). American Judaism was forged as a consequence of the influence of the culture of a country that “disdained religious hierarchies while allowing and even encouraging citizens of all faiths to create institutions reflecting their own, distinctive understanding [of] God” (xxv). While this may seem obvious, the thesis that American Judaism is based on ideas that differ radically from the ideas that animate Judaism in other parts of the world (and particularly in the State of Israel) will give meaningful historical perspective to lay readers coming to nineteenth-century American Jewish history for the first time. What may be needed for the interested neophyte reader is a new rendition of twentieth-century American Jewish history as well, to connect the story that Weisman tells with the paradox of contemporary American Jewish life that Mnookin describes.

The most important book by far of the three under review is Jack Wertheimer’s *The New American Judaism*. Wertheimer, who began his career as a Jewish historian writing about Eastern European Jews in Imperial Germany, has spent many years researching and writing about contemporary American Judaism. In 1993 he published *A People Divided: Judaism in Contemporary America*, which focused heavily on the various American Jewish denominations. Now Wertheimer is revisiting the subject but with greater insight as to the internal thought processes that are at work in the social and personal decisions being made by most American non-Orthodox Jews. Wertheimer tries very hard to be nonjudgmental while seeking to explain the values systems that promote certain types of behavior, but it is fairly clear that he sees what is happening as a grievous misfortune, even a tragedy.

What becomes immediately apparent is that while Mnookin and Weisman are resolutely optimistic, Wertheimer is skeptical that American Jews have the determination to rebuild an American Judaism that can be sustainable into the future. He phrases this pessimistic appraisal cautiously, but it is nevertheless obvious. He concludes by writing, “In our

current age when hyper-individualism reigns and so many Jews imagine it necessary to recast their distinctive religion in 'universal' terms, the rebuilding of Judaism will require a renewed appreciation for Jewish memory, community, and particularistic content" (272).

Wertheimer begins his book by reminding readers that it is not just Judaism that has been struggling in recent years. His introduction opens with the dry understatement that "the twenty-first century, thus far, has not been an auspicious era for religion in America" (1). Many factors have contributed to the decline, and Wertheimer cites some specific events and trends that have made religion and those who advocate for it look stupid, venal, perverted, violent, and/or destructive. He mentions the many highly publicized scandals involving clerics and the revelations that religious institutional hierarchies have covered up wrongdoings, perhaps systematically, as well as the sustained religious violence in the United States and throughout the world, in particular the traumatic attacks on 11 September 2001. More broadly, he suggests that contemporary sensibilities place traditional religious teachings in an awkward position. Whereas the dominant ethos of the past strongly supported religious affiliation if not inner piety, today "the turn to postmodernism" with its "relativization of truth" and "insistence that all human endeavor is socially or subjectively constructed" has undermined claims that not only specific religions speak truth but that religion as a whole has important lessons of value.

Yet even in a depressed American religious environment, American Jews continue to distinguish themselves by their seeming apathy. Wertheimer writes, "Were we to rely solely on survey research ... the major emphasis would be on how little they believe and observe" (25). Wertheimer sets his task as trying to understand the dynamics at play that create this situation. He wants to understand what most non-Orthodox (and, in separate chapters, the Orthodox as well) Jews think and feel and how these factors play out in Jewish religious practice. To do this, he interviewed approximately 160 rabbis, all of whom are listed in the acknowledgments at the beginning of the book. They include prominent spiritual leaders of what used to be the three dominant denominations—Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox—but one can see from the distinctions and subcategories just how much American Judaism

has changed since Wertheimer's 1993 book. What immediately struck me was that he cannot simply describe the Orthodox as 'Orthodox' but has to separate them into three separate groupings: Haredi (i.e. ultra-Orthodox), Orthodox Outreach (which includes Chabad), and Modern/Open/Centrist Orthodox (mainstream Orthodox who have to be described by no less than three adjectives to keep everyone happy). He also has a category of rabbis representing Sephardi Jews, as well as those leading "Religious groupings outside the mainstream."

Virtually every interview lasted for at least an hour and focused on two themes: (1) how each rabbi perceived of the religious lives of the Jews that they encounter and (2) what steps were being taken to address the religious needs of those Jews. Wertheimer writes that he aimed for a cross-section of rabbis from different regions of the country, serving in different types of settings, and of course in different denominations and nondenominational frameworks. He preferred rabbis who had at least a decade of experience but were more than a decade away from retirement. In addition, he spoke to many others who were "knowledgeable observers of the American Jewish religious scene" (13), some of whom were asked to address specific developments while others were questioned more generally about their impressions. Wertheimer also reports that he "personally attended several hundred synagogues over the years" (13) as a visitor or guest speaker, which gave him a chance to "speak with ordinary Jews in different types of settings" (13). He explains that he opted to conduct what he calls "on background" interviews, which would preserve the anonymity of his many sources. "I am asking readers to put a good deal of faith in my reliability in those sections of the book that draw upon unattributed statements" (13). He adds that while this a common research practice, what makes his approach "a bit unusual" (13) is that his sources describe the activities of others rather than of just themselves.

*The New American Judaism* is divided into three parts, each of which is interesting on different levels. The first part analyzes the reasons for the lack of content in the religious lives of "ordinary" American Jews. Wertheimer describes an altruistic Judaism that, in his view, has replaced a Judaism of norms and expectations. He describes how most non-Orthodox Jews practice "a Judaism for peak moments" (43) that

centers on child-centric rituals and connects to life cycle events. Part two revisits his 1993 book but emphasizes the decline of the various movements by titling the section, “The Leaky Vessels of Denominational Judaism.” Wisely, Wertheimer the sociologist has emphasized the interaction between the religious movements and local congregations rather than movement-wide pronouncements. He spends part three discussing the innovative responses that various groups have undertaken to respond to various challenges.

I found the first part to be highly illuminating, especially Wertheimer’s explanations for why so many Jews in the pews perceive Judaism in the way that they do. Why does there appear to be such a chasm between the normative structures of Judaism and the behavior of most congregants? Wertheimer argues that many of the non-Orthodox feel alienated by the Jewish religion’s emphasis on God. One Silicon Valley rabbi he spoke with recounts a frequently heard statement, “I am a rational person and God does not make sense to me. Don’t talk to me about that” (28–29). Partially as a result, most congregants have distanced themselves from regular attendance at services. In turn, this makes the public worship experience incomprehensible. The infrequent synagogue attender thus finds much of the services to make no sense.

Adding to their discomfort, the use of Hebrew further increases incomprehension. Wertheimer writes that the English translations “fail to mediate the dissonance between traditional Jewish theology and what the average synagogue-attender personally believes” (30). He suggests that many of the prayers have theological conceptions that are at odds with the therapeutic worldview that pervades every aspect of the congregants’ lives. The problem, according to the author, is that the more effort that goes into eliminating dissonant concepts, “the more confusion people feel about the purpose of the enterprise” (30).

What most congregants *do* believe is that God is “there with us” when we behave in an altruistic manner. In Wertheimer’s words, “they associated God with the capacity of humans to do good, to help the sick and needy, and to offer hope; these resonated as Godly attributes” (32). He effectively utilizes “The God Survey,” a report on the state of Reform Jewish belief based on a survey that Rabbi Mark Dov Shapiro sent out to his congregants at Sinai Temple in Springfield, Massachusetts, right after

Yom Kippur in 2011. Shapiro reported that most of his congregants did not construe God as a celestial figure who acts in this world. God is not above us in heaven, they said, but rather beside us or within us. Most believed that God “acts” when human beings behave in a way consistent with divine attributes such as love, kindness, and justice.

Wertheimer concludes that American Jews have radically reconstructed their understanding of the Jewish religion, which he calls “Golden Rule” Judaism. Their fundamental religious imperative is to figure out how to be a good person, which they understand as a “subjective, self-invented, improvisational approach” (41). He contrasts this with the traditional Judaic concept in which people believed in divine commandments obligatory upon every Jew. Even in non-Orthodox circles, there was previously a sense that expectations or norms existed independently of how individual Jews might practice or not practice. Citing the influence of the late sociologist Charles Liebman, Wertheimer argues that most American Jews used to agree that there was an essence called “Judaism” by which individual Jews could be measured, to the extent that they conformed to or deviated from the norms established therein.

Wertheimer places a great deal of the blame for the lack of structure in contemporary Judaism on “religious leaders who invented a new commandment in the 1980s—the injunction to engage in *tikkun olam*, repairing the world” (41). The author quotes Leonard Fein, who had written that a commitment to social justice could “serve as our preeminent motive, the path through which our past is vindicated, our present warranted and our future affirmed” (42). Weisman, in his introduction to *The Chosen Wars*, provides the historical background showing how Reform Jews abandoned the idea of a personal Messiah while continuing to believe in a time of redemption for which humans must work. In a recent email to me, Weisman commented, “I don’t think many Jews today appreciate that the centrality of social justice among Jews today has its origins in this evolution in the 19th century.”

Wertheimer laments that “the promoters of this ideology have triumphed” (42). He has astutely analyzed and explained the dynamics that have transformed the religious expectations of the vast majority of non-Orthodox Jews. As a pulpit rabbi, I myself have seen the shifting norms of the nominal American Jew firsthand. I am not, however,

convinced that the current alienation from Judaism is a result of anything religious leaders have advocated. Societal trends are extraordinarily powerful, and it would seem much more reasonable to attribute the current state of Judaism to those broader forces. Advocates for *tikkun olam* attempt to formulate an impactful response to those forces that they hope will enthruse the huge numbers of alienated Jews described in Mnookin's work.

The question asked—either implicitly or explicitly in all three volumes—is how to respond to the current sociological reality. With widespread intermarriage, the decline of Jewish ethnicity, the perception that antisemitism is no longer a threat (although increasing numbers are arguing that the hatred of Jews is now resurgent), ideological and religious differences with the leadership in Israel, and all of the other contemporary issues, problems, and challenges that we have read about, what are we to do? In a postmodern world, there is no simple answer to that question.

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