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the predicament of the theologians discussed here and understand why they have each taken their chosen paths. But the next “courageous leap” for liberal theologians might be to bypass God completely, to wrap spiritual experience in a Jewish vocabulary that does not require intellectual gymnastics to make sense.

Notes

1. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), 437.
2. Milton Steinberg, “A Critique of ‘The Attributes of God Reinterpreted,’” *The Reconstructionist*, March 7, 1941, 7.

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Two Views of American Judaism

A Review Essay

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Reviewing

Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal
by Dana Evan Kaplan
(New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 446 pp.

Orthodox by Design: Judaism, Print Politics, and the ArtScroll Revolution

by Jeremy Stolow
(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 265 pp.

The myriad ways that Jews live and worship today are the subjects of Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan’s book *Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal*. The author, who received his ordination from HUC-JIR in Jerusalem, is the rabbi of Temple B’nai Israel in Albany, Georgia. In a broad-ranging survey of the contemporary scene, he provides the general reader with a popular overview of the diverse ways in which today’s Jews seek to express their

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spirituality, redefine their ethnicity, and revitalize their communal institutions.

The author's subject is American Judaism—that is, Judaism practiced in America and influenced by the American experience. Without a scholarly research agenda nor a radical new thesis to advance (p. xv), Rabbi Kaplan's aim is descriptive rather than prescriptive. His stance is that of the interested observer and his audience is the uninitiated reader. The goal is to show how much Judaism has changed since World War II, and especially in the last three decades. In this modest goal (p. xxi) the author largely succeeds, painting a lively portrait of a religious community in the midst of transformation and renewal.

Rabbi Kaplan identifies important trends in the post-World War II period that impacted on the way Jews relate to religion. During this period, religion went from being a communal endeavor, organized along denominational lines, to a spiritual quest undertaken by individuals for diverse personal reasons. At the same time, the traditional spurs to communal cohesion—fear of anti-Semitism, automatic identification with the State of Israel, the memory of the Holocaust, and the stigma against intermarriage—receded in importance. Now, in the new millennium, the ethos is becoming decidedly post-ethnic and individual identity is splintering. Suburban institutions built by the prior generation, their synagogues and seminaries, movements and camps, with their narrow definitions and one-size-fits-all services, cannot satisfy the spiritual aspirations of many contemporary Jews. What Kaplan shows is not so much how the old order is crumbling but how the new order is emerging, and he does so in a largely nonjudgmental way, without unreliable predictions, whether dire or rosy, for the future.

With the study's tight focus on the internal dynamics of the American Jewish community, it is up to the reader to discern the larger context—America as a vast landscape of historic, well-defined, largely Protestant denominations. In that context, the newly arriving and aspiring Jewish immigrants and their descendants would do well to introduce Judaism to their non-Jewish neighbors in a form the latter could understand. What they develop is a Judaism of denominational structures and creeds. They build beautiful, free-standing houses of worship in park-like settings (photo, p. 22) that are occupied once a week for worship but at most other times stand rather vacant. This American form of Judaism helps

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to reassure the general population that the Jews in their midst are not an alien intrusion but an essential part of the developing American narrative. America becomes a “three-religion country” (quoting Herberg, p. 12) that acknowledges a culture rooted in the *Judeo-Christian* tradition. Life for the Jews is “relatively idyllic” (p. 54). These results are not small achievements. If in the process the religion itself has become for some “irrelevant, dull [and] insipid” (quoting Heschel, p. 16), the next generation is free to follow its bliss and find new paths, as Rabbi Kaplan describes in his text.

The eight chapters of the book divide the material into blocks of content that are manageable, logical, and coherent, with important insights along the way. In chapter 1 there is a historical overview of the post-World War II period, highlighting the shift in focus from communal concerns, such as philanthropy (taking care of each other) and Jewish survival, to the self-absorption of the “me generation” with its concern for individual well-being. The privatizing of religious experience is the subject of chapter 2, where we meet the spiritual seekers, Jewish and Buddhist-leaning meditators, nature lovers, and social activists. The rise and fall of the four American denominations are surveyed in chapter 3, with a look at the emergence of postdenominational strands. There is a good discussion of the internal rivalries and zigzags to the right and left in Orthodoxy, and the author concludes that we have seen the end of what small amounts of interdenominational cooperation there once were (pp. 154–55).

The collapse of the intermarriage stigma is the focus of chapter 4, with analysis of conversion, outreach, the patrilineal descent resolution, and the problem of syncretism. The chapter includes a noteworthy account of Denver’s short-lived unified conversion project. Chapter 5 takes as its theme inclusivity as a social value. The chapter covers changing attitudes towards women, gays, and lesbians and the impact of their expanding roles on ordination, theology, and liturgy. Chapter 6 treats a diverse range of phenomena under the heading of “Radical Responses to the Suburban Experience,” including the Jewish renewal movement, its origins in the *chavurah* movement, the impact of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, and the *baal t’shuva* phenomenon. The popularization of Jewish mysticism is the subject of a truncated chapter 7, where nothing substantive is written about the Kabbalah Centre under threat of legal action. Instead, the focus is entirely on Chabad, its origins,

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emissaries (*shluchim*), and messianism after the death of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson in 1994. We see the transformation of Chabad from a classic, isolated Chasidic group led by a charismatic rebbe into an institutionalized synagogue-based movement with a program of international outreach (p. 329). Chapter 8 concludes the volume with efforts to revitalize synagogue services, placing a new emphasis on warmth, welcome, music, choice, and experimentation.

This outline of its contents does not do justice to the tone and tenor of Rabbi Kaplan's book. It is neither a dry academic treatise nor a disquisition on the past, present, and future of American Judaism. It is a colorful collective portrait of a religious community of spiritual searchers in transition. Consistent with his aim to engage the general reader, most chapters begin with a vignette drawn from American popular culture that reveals something about the topics within. Chapter 1 begins with the career of Bess Myerson, who became Miss America shortly after World War II, illustrating the limitless possibilities for Jewish achievement in the United States. Chapter 3 starts by recounting reactions to Rabbi Paul J. Menitoff's startling speech predicting the demise of Conservative Judaism. Chapter 4 details the battles over the origins, ownership, and marketing of Chrismukkah, with a nod to the related "holiday" of Festivus. Bread and oranges on the seder plate introduce chapter 5, and a portrait of the career of David Ingber, the bodybuilding rabbi, starts the discussion in chapter 6. A section of chapter 7 is devoted to tracing Bob Dylan's on and off relationship with Judaism and includes a photo of Dylan in *t'fillin* (p. 316).

What Rabbi Kaplan has written is a travelogue through wide swaths of the American Jewish experience. Along the way the reader travels past a landscape dotted with Jewish Buddhists (Jubus), the Adventure Rabbi, Tot Shabbat and Pet Shabbat, Eco-Kosher, Hebrew tattooing, Rosh Chodesh groups, Jewish Outward Bound, Shulshopper.com, female *mohalot*, the stained glass ceiling, Jack Abramoff (a *baal t'shuva*), davenology, Matisyahu's Chasidic reggae, Friday Night Live, iWorship, and Synaplex. The value of Rabbi Kaplan's inclusive and nonjudgmental approach is to let us encounter these things, at a remove to be sure, and make of them what we will. However extensive one's personal involvement with Judaism, no one could have experienced all the movements, strands, and personalities the author describes. Although I never

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had the privilege of worshiping with Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalom, I still feel enriched to have encountered his fourfold recitation of the *Sh'ma* in Kaplan's retelling (p. 277).

The volume would have been strengthened by the addition of a chapter devoted to the renewal of Jewish learning in new formats and venues. There is mention in passing of Chabad Web sites, *baal t'shuvah* yeshivot, and "an explosion of Jewish studies courses and programs on university campuses" (p. 383). The latter, however, are unexplored, possibly because academic departments devoted to Judaic studies do not meet the author's general criteria for inclusion in the book, which include behavior by Jews performed with a religious motivation (see p. xxi). While it is true that the universities hosting these departments may not be operated under Jewish auspices (although some are), it is often the case that the majority of faculty and students in Jewish studies departments are Jewish, virtually all of them seeking a meaningful connection to their heritage. One can debate whether this supplies a religious motivation for their studies the way it does for a yeshivah student, but their stories, if told in Kaplan's book, would have broadened his portrait of the American Jewish community and served as a counterpoint to the author's observations, early in the book, that found little interest in reading ancient texts and little demand for serious study (pp. 2, 22).

Similarly in need of supplementation is the author's treatment of gay and lesbian Jews. In this case a segment of the Jewish community that felt it was not being served by established institutions, if not downright excluded, built its own network of congregations to hold services, conduct classes, visit the sick, celebrate gay liberation, and welcome everyone. The result today are some two dozen congregations oriented to the concerns of the LGBT community located in major urban centers stretching from Atlanta to West Hollywood. Explaining why straight people attend gay synagogues, Jay Michaelson, writing in the *Forward*, described their services as warm, welcoming, voluntary, joyful, ironic, humorous, and innovative. The movement's growth from the 1970s onward was generated entirely at the grassroots level by interested laypersons, with some of the congregations hiring rabbis only after decades of operating without them. Rabbi Kaplan's account, which narrowly focuses on the coming out stories of three rabbis, one Orthodox and two Reform (pp. 249–257), misses the larger and more significant

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story of decades of successful grassroots religious activism that fits so perfectly within the overall theme and timeframe of his study.

The ArtScroll publishing phenomenon is treated in a page in Rabbi Kaplan's book (p. 294). We learn about ArtScroll's success as a publisher of Chareidi (ultra-Orthodox) materials that, however, have been criticized for their anti-intellectual and ahistorical approach. If Kaplan is a generalist who paints with a broad brush, then Jeremy Stolow is a specialist who probes with a sharp scalpel. In *Orthodox by Design: Judaism, Print Politics, and the ArtScroll Revolution*, Stolow provides a book-length account of the publisher's activities, focusing on the way the design of its products, no less than their contents, mediates between Chareidi authority and the English-speaking audience that gravitates towards its publications, giving them a roadmap for "an easy path to a hard life" (p. 107). The author, an assistant professor of communications at Concordia University in Montreal, is a scholar in the field of media and religion.

The subject of the study, ArtScroll Publishing Company, is a remarkably robust entity. Founded in 1976 by Rabbis Meir Zlotowitz and Nosson Scherman, it began as a print shop in Brooklyn serving its Orthodox community with wedding invitations and the like. Today, ArtScroll is an imprint of the Mesorah Heritage Foundation, a not-for-profit charitable foundation that in 2007 reported gross revenues of \$7.6 million (p. 187). The booklist shows a thousand titles in print, and fifty new titles are added annually. There are plans to expand into Spanish, French, Russian, and Hebrew.

ArtScroll publishes a variety of genres that include classics of the rabbinic canon, such as Bible, Talmud, prayer books, and halachic manuals, alongside modern literary genres such as kosher cookbooks, self-help guides, history titles, biographies, children's books, and fiction. It commands space in Jewish bookstores that is the envy of rivals. A good number of Conservative and Orthodox (but not Chareidi or Reform) synagogues have adopted its siddurim and Chumashim for congregational use (see Table 2, p. 73).

The ultimate aim of the enterprise is *kiruv* (religious outreach), as ArtScroll both embodies and promotes the moral mission of Chareidi Judaism to bring unaffiliated, lapsed, and nonobservant Jews into the fold and to hasten the ultimate redemption of the Jewish people (pp. 45, 50). Within this social universe, ArtScroll acts as a "hinge" that joins the cultural elites of the Chareidi

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yeshivah world with the English-reading public, “connecting elite ideas to a mass readership” (p. 11). This outreach is performed in a nonpolemical way by providing readers with clear instructions for correctly performing Jewish rituals and the promise of psychological rewards—increased satisfaction, meaningful experiences, and inspiring observances (pp. 111, 132–43). A quotation from a childrearing manual can serve as ArtScroll’s philosophy: “The way to cultivate a desire for Torah is not through force or pressure, but rather through enjoyment and a feeling of satisfaction” (p. 141).

Where some have seen ArtScroll as evidence of a shift to the right in Orthodox Judaism, Stolow sees its products as emblematic of a different trend, text-centrism, the tendency to elevate the authority of written texts over learning obtained directly from parents, teachers, neighbors, friends, and the local rabbi. ArtScroll’s success marks a shift in the balance between mimetic and textual modes of pedagogy (following Haym Soloveitchik, p. 56). “Now it is the text alone that commands” (p. 13). Here the author may overstate his thesis. In the first place, ArtScroll disavows it. “We’ve always stressed the importance of having a teacher,” Rabbi Scherman told him (p. 14). The purpose of its annotated Talmud edition is to “improve [the student’s] ability to learn from the original, preferably under the guidance of a rebbe” (p. 32). Second, as Stolow acknowledges, no script can completely control all the nuances of behavior entailed in any performance (pp. 143–44). Third, the aim of *kiruv* is not to create atomistic individuals who study and observe Jewish rituals in isolation from one another. The customer at the North Pole who purchases ArtScroll products (p. 176) is a true outlier in every sense of the word. Successful outreach inducts the returning Jew into a community of believers and, more importantly, performers of mitzvot, where learning from texts will be supplemented at every turn by face-to-face encounters with knowledgeable members of the community (see p. 177).

Although the book-length treatment of the subject creates an aura of preeminence for the publisher and the subtitle proclaims an ArtScroll revolution, in the course of Stolow’s study we learn the limits of ArtScroll’s success. Half of its titles do not sell well. For Bible, Talmud, and prayer books there is a ready market, but other genres are less successful and few consumers try to acquire everything. The rabbis’ biographies are interchangeable, the

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history and self-help books are disparaged, and the novels “stink . . . No one buys them. They’re awful and they don’t read well,” in the words of an interview subject (p. 85). Apart from the classic religious texts, most titles on the booklist are not acquired by Jewish libraries and are seldom used in the curricula of Jewish day schools (pp. 217–18). Little of what ArtScroll does to make its volumes user-friendly is unprecedented in the history of Hebrew publishing. Also, despite inflated claims, ArtScroll’s market is a niche market composed largely of newly minted Chareidi knowledge seekers who are not entirely comfortable with Hebrew as a language of study and comprehension (p. 67). As facility with Hebrew increases, the need for ArtScroll decreases. Its primary crossover product is a cookbook, *Kosher by Design*, which is popular with Christian evangelicals. Further, ArtScroll authors are not original thinkers. They do not produce new ideas, insights, or interpretations, nor do they seek that distinction. They are aggregators and popularizers of the thoughts and insights of others at a level Stolow deems “middlebrow,” like book clubs and the popular press (p. 11). It is widely opined that ArtScroll books are for beginners, a remedial technology that “basically assumes you’re an idiot without treating you that way” (pp. 14, 118). Revolutionary their content is not.

The strongest argument for true innovation is in the area of design (p. 9). In the media-rich environment of English-speaking Jewry, with countless experts from Deepak Chopra (self-help) to Martha Stewart (refined living) competing with rabbinic authorities for audience and influence, ArtScroll uses the superior design of its products to draw in and then to instruct the unengaged reader. Stolow points to many of ArtScroll’s design elements that he considers noteworthy adjuncts to its mission. These include advanced typesetting and typographic techniques, full color covers, the suppleness of the paper and the durability of the bindings, some in hand-tooled leather, others in a leather substitute, pleather (leatherette), that imparts a “warm and comfortable touch to the hand” (p. 170). Book covers are a “surface mode of address” (p. 167), importing conspicuous consumption into the realm of religious artifacts. The density and weight of ArtScroll’s volumes counter the rootlessness of contemporary culture and the weightlessness of modern, digital life (p. 178). ArtScroll prayer books contain extremely detailed instructions,

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ultra-traditionalist commentaries that exclude anything non-Jewish, and may be purchased in a wide range of editions, with or without prayers for the State of Israel. For its interlinear translation series, ArtScroll has developed an arrow (patent pending) that gently prods the eye to move right to left even as one reads the English version left to right. Full color photographs in the cookbooks “possess a cathetic power” to convey viewers into a world of “authenticity and harmonious fellowship” (p. 154), casting a “magic spell” that captivates viewers and furthers the goals of *kiruv*. The design elements communicate an aura of superior, upscale products, very much in line with the high-quality religious experiences they promise to deliver.

Stolow finds warehouses of significance in these design features, but in the end, the ArtScroll phenomenon may be more a matter of degree than revolution, pouring old wine into new vessels (p. 108). Every successful enterprise stands on the shoulders of its predecessors. The introduction to Philip Birnbaum’s *Daily Prayer Book* published by the Hebrew Publishing Co. in 1949—which the ArtScroll siddur is in the process of replacing—explains how its uniform typeface, new translation, and simple directions will assist the worshiper and banish confusion during services. We need not credit ArtScroll with a revolution to fully appreciate its achievement as chronicled in *Orthodox by Design*. Having identified a niche market, it serves it exceedingly well. Its books are user-friendly, aesthetically appealing, and commercially as well as religiously savvy. The result is a line of books that are scrupulously traditional and pedagogically innovative (p. 43). Most importantly, the volumes increase their readers’ satisfaction with the religious experiences they seek. Perhaps a consumer of ArtScroll products sums it up best with a comment posted on Amazon.com: “They make a fine gift” (p. 9). Still, like every commodity in the marketplace, no matter how well executed, they will not be to everyone’s taste.

What will American Judaism look like at the end of the twenty-first century? No one can predict this with any assurance. But when the account is written, Rabbi Kaplan’s study will be one of the benchmark works against which the future development of American Judaism will be measured. Similarly, when in the future digital books retrieved online will have entirely replaced the weighty tomes we now store and display on shelves, we will look

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back to Jeremy Stolow's study to explain how a publisher of real tangible books, some bound in hand-tooled leather and others in pleather, was able to flourish (for a short time?) at the turn of the third millennium.

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