

couple in this context. The book has a bibliography and a useful list of internet addresses for further study, but no name index. The German-American Heritage Museum in Washington, D.C., founded in 2010, should be included in future editions.

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**Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal, by Dana Evan Kaplan. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. 446 pp. \$34.50.**

A number of highly targeted studies have begun to analyze the scope and significance of recent innovations in contemporary American Judaism. However, the book under review, Dana Evan Kaplan's *Contemporary American Judaism: Tradition and Renewal*, is one of the first synthetic, book-length explorations of the changing realities of American Jewish life. Kaplan seeks to share a popular overview of Judaism over the past five decades with the "uninitiated reader." He certainly succeeds in reaching this goal. *Contemporary American Judaism* offers an accessible narrative that is especially well suited for introductory courses on American Judaism and lay audiences interested in understanding the rapidly shifting landscape of Jewish identity today.

One of the strengths of this text is its sensitivity to the importance of placing new models of Jewish life in a larger historical context. Kaplan's study begins in the post-war years and narrates the institutional and ideological evolution of American Judaism over the last half century (with an emphasis on the past two decades). Subsequent chapters explore various themes that have shaped American Jewish life over this period, including "The Reengagement with Spirituality," "The Popularization of Jewish Mystical Outreach," and "Herculean Efforts at Synagogue Renewal." The book is striking for its up-to-date analysis of very recent developments ranging from new emergent religious communities, to intermarriage debates, to references from popular culture such as an episode of the sitcom "The O.C." which popularized the word "chrismukkah."

Nevertheless, for a book presented as an analysis of "contemporary" trends, *Contemporary American Judaism* provides far more detail on earlier developments, such as Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's *Renewal Judaism*, the attraction of Buddhism, and the emergence of the Conservative Movement, than on the rise of more recent phenomena. Only time will tell whether some of these newer trends in American Jewish life will have a lasting impact. Yet, I would posit that trends such as young adult engagement through Hillels and programs such as Birthright, the explosion of Jewish cultural and literary

organizations, and the shift from membership to meaning as an organizing principle of Jewish life will also prove worthy of inclusion in future explorations of Judaism during the first decade of the twenty-first century.

One of the most interesting subtexts in this book was the tension between Kaplan's desire for an "essentialist" definition of Judaism and his recognition that any such definition would fail to encompass the tremendous diversity and variety that exists today. Even though Kaplan acknowledges the absence of any a priori components of Jewishness, he clearly finds it difficult to fully embrace expressions of Judaism that fail to match certain normative standards. American Jews, Kaplan explains, were fundamentally divided between "those who still cared about Judaism and those who did not" (p. 51). Elsewhere Kaplan exclaims, "these hipsters may love John Stewart's comedy and Matisyahu's reggae, but they are not interested in Jewish institutions that are based on a long-term commitment to community" (p. 385). Without some essentialist basis, it is difficult to justify the clear distinctions Kaplan makes between what appear to be clearly distinguishable categories of engaged and non-engaged Jews.

This belief suggests an enduring attraction to an increasingly outdated paradigm that distinguishes universal from particular allegiances, religious from secular practices, and obligatory from elective practices. Such dichotomies apply identity categories inherently foreign to Jews raised in a post-ethnic moment of American history. As a result, new approaches, organizations, and activities confound the established, and generally binary, rubrics of identity. However, this disconnect does not necessarily reflect a lower level of interest and engagement of American Jews. Perhaps the hipsters just have a different definition of "community" and "commitment." These different, but not necessarily inferior, conceptions of Judaism demand further analysis in order to fully understand the puzzle of contemporary American Judaism.

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