

Dana Evan Kaplan. *Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. xxxiv + 446 pp. \$34.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-13728-7.

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Creating a Spiritual Postwar American Judaism

In the 1950s, when the Reform rabbi and Zionist leader Abba Hillel Silver wrote a book about Judaism, his editors at MacMillan insisted that the title be put in the past tense, and so the book was called *Where Judaism Differed*. The story about Judaism that Eisenhower-era Americans wanted to read was not “where Judaism differs.” Dana Evan Kaplan’s *Contemporary American Judaism* suggests that readers and editors have since developed a higher tolerance for the weird and the raw in American religion.

The Silver anecdote is one of several (many procured through e-mail and phone interviews) in Kaplan’s popular book about the post-1945 years that illustrate a trend of post-World War II American Judaism: the need to balance increasing confidence in asserting religious values and commitments against what rabbis perceived as the national mood. For some fifteen years after World War II, societal trends in the United States impeded American Jewish self-expression: “Most suburban Jews were not ‘religious’ in the classical understanding of this term,” Kaplan explains of the disconnect between Jewish sentiment and the “deeply felt religious faith” upon which President Eisenhower and his successors hoped to unite the country. “Many were trying to express an essentially secular Jewish identity in a religious framework where it did not comfortably fit” (p. 18).

Kaplan explores the challenge of the immediate postwar era—that American Jews were being accepted on terms not their own, but those of a country in the midst

of religious revival. Ever sensitive to the mores of the surrounding majority culture, Jewish leaders recognized that Cold War America was neither the time nor the place to offer a dissent from religious norms. Come the late 1960s, the changes the decade entailed and the end of the religious revival, American Jews no longer had to stifle an urge toward authentic self-expression: “Less inhibited by the conformity expected in the cultural environment of the 1950s, more Jews were admitting what had probably long been true: that they had no heartfelt religious faith” (p. 31).

Kaplan characterizes the period from 1945 to the present as one in which “nothing is for certain and everything is possible” in American Judaism (p. xix). At first this sense of possibility in Judaism centered on the potential for American acceptance of Jews and their religion. Beginning in the late 1940s, the United States no longer appeared to Jews as a *treife medinah* (an unkosher state), but as the kind of culturally and religiously pluralistic country where a kosher food industry—to take one example of Jewish religious life—could thrive. Building Jewish institutions was central to this 1940s and 1950s buttressing of Judaism’s status as an American religion. Kaplan writes, “Some joked that the American Jewish community had an ‘edifice complex,’ the obsession with building for its own sake” (p. 21). Succeeding generations often proved less than grateful for these large synagogue buildings and their commodious parking lots, and by the late 1960s, the direction of American Judaism shifted toward *reconstructing* the Judaism that parents and grandfathers

had built. “How American Jews have continually been adjusting their conception of Judaism according to their evolving expectations drawn from their daily lives” is Kaplan’s focus (p. xvi).

In his chapters “Facing the Collapse of the Inter-marriage Stigma,” “Inclusivity as a Social Value,” “Radical Responses to the Suburban Experience,” “The Popularization of Jewish Mystical Outreach,” and “Herculean Efforts at Synagogue Renewal,” Kaplan shows the many new faces Judaism has revealed since the 1950s and how Jewish innovation was often a response to the critique of “the superficiality and hypocrisy of American Jewish life.” Rebellious against religion in general, this postwar generation nonetheless shared a deep faith that “their parents were pretending to be religious, but were not” (p. 30).

Kaplan is a historian and a rabbi who does not force a detached perspective on his scholarship. In describing postwar observance of Kashrut, he writes that “many suburban Jews placed the emphasis on keeping their homes kosher, as if it was the house that needed to observe the religious obligation” (p. 20). Some will hear the voice of a congregational rabbi in this history (all can see his picture: the dust jacket photo of Kaplan shows him in full rabbinic regalia, Torah pointer [yad] in hand, reading Torah), but at least for this reader, Kaplan’s partisan view of Judaism enriched the story. Although “not a work of original research,” as the author states upfront, Kaplan makes excellent use of secondary-source literature and shows the kind of awareness of the major debates in American Judaism that comes with a lifetime of engagement with Judaism (p. xv). As many scholars of American religion are wont to do, Kaplan offers a bit of his own story: a childhood attending both the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue (Reform) and the Ramaz school (Modern Orthodox) put the author in a state of bewilderment about contemporary American Judaism: “By the second or third grade, I was already trying to figure out why our synagogue and my school seemed to present Judaism so differently” (p. xxiii). “Betwixt and between,” as cultural anthropologist Victor Turner might have described Kaplan’s childhood Jewish identity, the author

seems to have been primed to explore the intersections of various branches of Judaism and American culture.

Those who view the study of contemporary American religion as little more than a cocktail of journalism and gossip may find some fuel for their fire in these pages. Kaplan’s history of Amy Eilberg’s rabbinical ordination (the first woman to be ordained in the Conservative movement) reads: “Some of those who opposed the decision believe that Joel Roth, a professor of Talmud, consented to the ordination on the condition that Eilberg agree not to serve as a witness. Partisan sources claim that she did agree to this, but then broke the agreement as soon as she took her first pulpit, but Eilberg brusquely denied this” (p. 238). (Kaplan’s history of the orange-on-the-Seder-plate tradition is similarly enlivened by anecdotal reporting.) But gossip is not the right word. This is a work by a scholar of who is genuinely committed to the conversation about American Judaism and the result is mostly salubrious for the reader.

Whether it is occupational hazard or benefit, Kaplan is alert to real questions about contemporary American Judaism and offers some good, clear answers: What distinguishes Judaism from other religions (“central authority is vested in sacred texts and traditions rather than an authoritative religious leader or a clerical chief” [p. xx])? What were the major divisive issues between Conservative and Orthodox Judaism in the 1950s (mixed seating and the electronic microphone systems)? Is there such a thing as spirituality in traditional Judaism? (Yes, but most postwar Jews perceived spirituality to be the result of their effort to experiment “with approaches to Judaism that differed radically from what they had experienced in their parents’ suburban synagogues” [p. 58].) From whence arose American Jewish preoccupation with *Tikkun Olam*? (The Reform movement resuscitated this Mishnaic concept that was given new meaning in the context of 1960s political activism.)

Much of what is described in Kaplan’s book seems to have little to do with the lives of most American Jews, but that, too, is surely central to the story of contemporary American Judaism.

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