
Religion

Dana Evan Kaplan
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN
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Transformation and renewal
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In navigating the terrain of post-war American Judaism, Dana Evan Kaplan's book identifies suburbanization as the engine of Jewish religious change in America. As Kaplan tells it, post-war Jewish suburbanization put the synagogue congregation rather than the community at the centre of Jewish life, helping to institutionalize the American Jewish denominations. In the 1950s and 60s, as Jews moved from cities to suburbs they joined synagogues in greater and greater numbers, even as their level of religious belief and observance declined. The result, in Kaplan's critique, is that for non-Orthodox American Jews today, the synagogue and religious practice are little more than outlets for a fundamentally secular and non-religious ethnic identification, or worse, status enhancement.

If suburbanization changed American Judaism, then to Kaplan any innovation that has since taken place can be traced largely to dissatisfaction with these changes. Meditation and the influence of Eastern religions, feminism, and religious revivalism among the previously secular (the so-called *ba'al tshuva* movement) are all presented as either anti-institutional in spirit or as responses to the supposedly superficial and unfulfilling religious life of the American suburbs. Post-war prosperity transformed American Judaism. The renewal, it seems to Kaplan, will come through a genuine spiritual re-engagement by Jews with their religion. Thus, because of its success at spreading religious enthusiasm, even the messianic and proselytizing Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic sect is given extraordinarily sympathetic treatment.

The author is a serving pulpit rabbi in an American congregation and in parts his book reads more as sermon than scholarship. Kaplan's concern that Judaism is no longer meaningful to many American Jews outside of Orthodoxy is valid. Still, not all readers will agree with Kaplan's belief in the impossibility of a secular American Judaism that is primarily cultural rather than religious in content, or with his tendency to generalize the experience of "suburban Judaism".

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