

Essays animate study of American Judaism

A young man, [according to a recent] study of post-Holocaust Jewish identity among 20 to 30 year-old adults reveals the following when he recounts his typical Shabbat experience. After engaging in many of the traditional Friday night rituals, he and his other Jewish friends usually end the evening by singing "Amazing Grace" ... "When I hear Amazing Grace," says the young man. "I think Shabbos" (174).

As an academic, when I encounter such statements, I find them stimulating reflections of the complex interaction between American and Jewish culture. As a rabbi, however, I throw up my hands in consternation at this quirky, unconventional, personalized expression of Judaism. The anecdote comes from a short piece by Debra Renee Kaufman, "The Place of Judaism in American Jewish Identity," one of the many outstanding contributions from leading scholars to "The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism." Aply edited by Dana Kaplan, the volume includes pieces from a variety of disciplines that complement each other. Both the points of agreement and disagreement between the articles serve to highlight the major trends of American Judaism as well as areas of contested interpretation of the Jewish religious experience.

Consisting of 23 articles as well as an "Introduction" by Kaplan and an "Afterword" by

Jonathan Sarna, CCAJ is divided into two parts. "Part One: Historical Overviews" provides a chronological glimpse of Jewish religion in America from 1654-present. The bulk of the book, however, is found in "Part Two: Themes and Concepts" which Kaplan has sub-divided into five sections: "Religious Culture and Institutional Practice," "Identity and Community," "Living in America," "Jewish Art in America," and "The Future." The essays are short (10-15 pages), well-written, and accessible to a thoughtful audience interested in American Judaism. I have used the text with great success for an undergraduate seminar on American Judaism at UC and would highly recommend the book for an adult reading group.

In addition to accessibility, the book also merits praise for bringing distinguished scholars together, approaching American Judaism from a variety of perspectives, and substantively enhancing our understanding of Jewish religion in America. Several distinguished scholars such as Chaim Waxman, Sylvia Barack Fishman, Jonathan Woocher, Charles Liebman, Nathan Glazer, and David Biale, to name a few, appear in this volume, not to mention outstanding pieces by less well-known scholars. Although much of their work might be familiar to experts in the field, the Cambridge Companion to American Judaism provides an easy primer to cutting edge

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developments in our understanding of American Judaism. The volume includes a variety of angles for examining American Judaism that shed far more light than heat. Where can you find discussions of theology, civil religion, denominations, rituals and the National Jewish Population Survey connected to suburbanization, Alexis de Toqueville, economic theory, Kenny G, the Federation, Philip Roth and The Hebrew Hammer? Although the book focuses on understanding Judaism as a religion, many of the essays pay attention to secular Jewishness as well. Such a variety of viewpoints will encourage the readers of CCAJ at least to question and at most jettison conventional explanations of American Judaism. In an extremely important piece, Sylvia Barak Fishman, ("Choosing Lives: Evolving Gender Roles in American Jewish Families") rescues feminism from being the "whipping

boy" of contemporary social and religious ills by presenting some surprising facts. For example, highly educated "career" Jewish women are not necessarily less Jewishly affiliated than stay-at-home mothers (243). Likewise, no longer can intermarriage adequately account for what leaders such as Stephen Bayme have called the greatest threat to Judaism, Jewish indifference. Since most Jews marry at a relatively late age, one has to wonder what happens in the first 30 years of someone's life that has generated this indifference to Judaism. CCAJ fills in the explanatory gap. A personalized approach to religion, the suburbanization of American Jews, post-denominationalism, the decline in Civil Religion, the transformation of public rituals into private ceremonies, the socio/economic cost of acquiring Jewish knowledge and its declining "usefulness" (to be sure, a matter of perception), best account for

the current state of Jewish religion in America.

It has always struck me that Judaism acknowledges the anniversary of the world's birth with a celebration, Rosh Hashannah, followed by a period of reflection, Yom Kippur. To reach a significant milestone inspires rejoicing and requires introspection. Appropriately, then, following a joyous year commemorating the 350th anniversary of Jews living in America, the time has come to move from celebration to examination. "The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism" admirably performs this task in a manner which animates the study of American Judaism. No one who reads this collection of essays will view the Jewish religion in America as simply a pale reflection of its European antecedent. And for Jewish professionals who throw up their hands before Jews who think Shabbos when they hear "Amazing Grace," "The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism" provides a map to hold on to when we put down our hands and engage in our sacred task of serving the Jewish people.

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