

Plug-and-Play Judaism

Reviewed by SHMUEL ROSNER

Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal

by Dana Evan Kaplan
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DANA EVAN KAPLAN
*Contemporary
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TRANSFORMATION AND RENEWAL
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In 2003, the National Foundation for Jewish Culture appointed a special commission to assess “the future of Jewish culture in America.” It interviewed 32 writers, intellectuals, journalists, artists, religious leaders, and communal experts. One of its findings is as follows: “On the question of whether the American Jewish community is experiencing a cultural renaissance or decline, there was surprising unanimity,” wrote then-Foundation head Richard A. Siegel in an article published in the newsletter of the Jewish Education Service of North America, which described the commission’s discussions. “Virtually every respondent saw evidence of... both.” Unfortunately, he admitted, “the discourse about renaissance implies that our community is under attack, and that our job is to mount a desperate effort to revitalize our besieged institutions in order to combat decline.”

The attack of which Siegel warned looms over *Contemporary American Judaism*, the recent tome by Reform rabbi and Jewish studies professor Dana Evan Kaplan. Yet his book fails to answer the question put to the commission’s interviewees, the question on the minds of countless scholars, writers, rabbis, community leaders, philanthropists, and laymen: Will it be renaissance, or decline? Perhaps Kaplan simply doesn’t have an answer. “Optimists are hopeful that the Jewish community can find ways to engage

the as yet not committed," he writes, adding, "maybe they can." But then again, maybe they can't, as indicated by myriad surveys identifying a growing estrangement among young American Jews from both their religion *and* their people—that is, if they even agree that a Jewish people actually exists. To be sure, Kaplan cites several such findings. But he also cites other studies, ones that point toward the opposite trend—namely, toward an *increasing* Jewish identification within the same age group. Which returns us to the question: Renaissance or decline? Kaplan refuses to come down decisively on either side—which, in the end, may be for the best. For had he succeeded in providing a convincing answer, what would become of those innumerable experts thrashing out the issue from every angle, and on every platform, they can find?

Like all those who have dealt with the tangled web of Jewish American identity in recent generations, Kaplan devotes a considerable portion of the book to the issue of assimilation. The extent of the problem is well known, a fact that offers little consolation. Just three decades ago, in the 1980s, American Jews as a rule preferred to overlook intermarriage. Only in the 1990s did disregard morph into panic, and urgent if ineffective attempts to lure wayward children back home. In recent years, however, it would seem that even the last strongholds in the "war against assimilation" have given out, overwhelmed by the sense that the battle has in fact been lost. "Not only has American culture accepted intermarriage, it even encourages it," Professor Sylvia Barack-Fishman, who has written several books and articles on the topic, once told me. The enthusiastic reaction among many American Jews to Chelsea Clinton's July 2010 marriage to the Jewish Marc Mezvinsky lends credence to her observation.

Indeed, a 2009 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center shows that religious mobility is an integral part of American life. "In total, about half of American adults have changed religious affiliation at least once during their lives," the survey concludes. Those who are critical of this trend are clearly swimming upstream. Many young American Jews—among the more liberal segments of the population by any standard—would wholeheartedly agree with an insight offered by Noah Feldman, the Harvard law professor some American Jews love to hate on account of his scathing critique of modern Orthodoxy in the *New York Times*. Tribal seclusion, he told me, is "un-American."

Young American Jews will marry whomever their hearts desire. That's a simple fact. At this stage, the question troubling the American Jewish

community and its historiographers is, what identity will the *descendants* of these intermarriages adopt? Clearly, those who seek to win them over to Judaism won't find it easy. They'll have to offer a product of sufficient appeal in a marketplace full of equally appealing alternatives. The search for that product—that is, for a Judaism repackaged for twenty-first-century sensibilities—is, in essence, the topic of Kaplan's book.

American Jews are "trying to reconcile individualism with commitment," Kaplan writes in the introduction. They are "exploring virgin territory and they have no idea where it may lead." This exploration takes various and varied forms, and Kaplan tries to discuss all of them. He writes about Jews who are committed to the Torah and to Hebrew, and about those attracted to Buddhism; about Jews drawn to spirituality, and Jews who devote their energy to *tikkun olam* (social justice); about the older generation, that waning Jewish "establishment," and the younger generation, who shun an organized, fossilized Judaism in favor of smaller, more dynamic, and more socially and intellectually creative frameworks. He traces the three major denominations' attempts to adapt to the changing, elusive reality: the exceptional flexibility of the Reform movement (to which he belongs), the ongoing lurches of Conservative Judaism, and the flourishing of the Orthodox communities. Unfortunately, Kaplan does not expand on the question of to what extent Orthodoxy may be crowned the "winning denomination" of American Jewry—a worthwhile debate in itself. He does, however, present arguments in support of the claim that, in the battle for the soul of the Jewish people, Hasidism seems to hold the upper hand (at least for now). Apparently, its representatives—the energetic Chabad emissaries who serve up Orthodoxy with a hot meal, or Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's mystical-leaning, neo-Hasidic Jewish Renewal movement—have excelled in marketing their "products" to those seeking to infuse a bit of spirituality into their diluted Jewish identities.

Does the success of these movements point to the flourishing of American Judaism, or to its opposite? In an essay he wrote a decade and a half ago, "A Great Awakening: The Transformation That Shaped Twentieth Century American Judaism and its Implications for Today," historian Jonathan Sarna cited four main lessons to be learned from periods of Jewish American crisis and efflorescence. First, he claimed, Jewish continuity sometimes depends on the community's ability to detach itself from tradition and undergo a renewal. Second, there is no cure-all for the myriad problems the American

Jewish community faces; rather, solutions must operate on several levels simultaneously. Third, in many cases, the most innovative and effective ideas come not from the top—i.e., from institutions and their leaders—but from the bottom. And fourth, the Jewish community in the United States grows stronger when it reaches crossroads and confronts difficulties head-on.

In light of these lessons, one may read Kaplan's account of the state of contemporary American Judaism with a certain degree of optimism. After all, those seeking evidence of disengagement from tradition, for example, will find it in abundance in the chapter that describes Jewish America's enthusiastic embrace of feminists, homosexuals, and Jews who marry out of the fold. One sub-chapter depicts the well-known debate that raged within the Conservative movement preceding its revolutionary decision to allow its educational institutes to ordain openly gay rabbis, while another addresses the fresher polemics surrounding the issue of appointing women to rabbinical positions in the modern Orthodox community. Kaplan generally shies away from offering far-reaching conclusions on such phenomena; his is a deliberately descriptive, and not prescriptive, work. Nevertheless, the chapter titles he selects are indicative of his views: "Inclusivity as a Social Value," for instance, denotes embracing ostracized and rejected groups as an expression of the new direction American Judaism is taking. This approach, which first emerged in the liberal streams, has even sent up shoots in the more traditional communities—if gradually, and in relatively muted form.

Judging by Kaplan's book, American Jewry has taken to heart Sarna's other lessons as well, such as action on a number of parallel plans and encouraging grassroots initiatives. The more interesting chapters in the book deal with communities' "Herculean" efforts to breathe new life into synagogues, currently suffering from a prolonged decline in membership and attendance. Here is an instance in which the direction was determined from the bottom up, i.e., by congregants and local rabbis. "The leaders of the various denominations had historically avoided being too self-critical for fear of jeopardizing their positions and relationships with lay leaders as well as other professionals," writes Kaplan. "This reluctance may once have been a positive attribute, but had become a severe impediment to institutional change. Synagogue leaders now became aware that they needed to adapt [to the new reality]—and needed to do so urgently."

And adapt they did, in various places and through various means. Change sometimes starts from the top, such as the rewriting of prayers (the most interesting example of which is the new Reform siddur, *Mishkan T'Filah*), and sometimes from the bottom, as seen in the case of New York's vibrant Kehilat Hadar, which now serves as a model for similar communities throughout America. As a group, Hadar succeeded in combining "the traditions, commitment, and spirituality of an Orthodox congregation with the egalitarianism of the Conservative movement's Camp Ramah," noted *The Forward*. In a 2007 article on flourishing independent *minyanim* (prayer quorums) published in *Zeek*, Ethan Tucker, one of Hadar's founders, explained that while "the overall number of people involved in these minyanim remains a tiny percentage of the Jewish population at large, there is no denying that these emerging communities have already had an impact on the way Jews—in particular younger Jews—are thinking about Jewish communal life and commitment." The National Spiritual Communities Study, published that same year by Steven M. Cohen, J. Shawn Landres, Elie Kaunfer (another Hadar founder), and Michelle Shain, found that the common denominator among most independent Jewish congregations is "religious traditionalism and social progressivism." Clearly, the members of these congregations take their Jewishness with the utmost seriousness: Though many are young and single, they attend synagogue much more frequently than the average American Jew.

Last, Sarna's fourth lesson—that the American Jewish community grows stronger when it reaches a crossroads—accords well with the present trends in contemporary American Jewish life. The community has indeed weathered crises—of leadership, institutions, and tradition—but it has also devised creative responses, from elevating women's status in ritual life and spiritual empowerment (Kaplan devotes considerable attention to the new Jewish American spirituality) to building communal structures more suited to the next generation's needs. After all, as anyone in the advertising industry can attest, if a product wants to stay relevant, it must accommodate the target group with the greatest buying power.

Obviously, the strength or weakness of one's Jewish identity cannot be measured on the basis of synagogue attendance alone. Another, no less important indicator is the individual Jew's sense of attachment to the entire Jewish people. As the above-mentioned National Spiritual Communities study found, "the participants in emergent communities report high levels of

psychic connection with Jews and the Jewish people.” But this finding merely underscores the chasm between the members of these congregations—a tiny but very committed percentage of American Jewry—and the majority of the young Jewish population in the United States, which displays a growing sense of remoteness from and indifference toward its religious and national roots. In a resounding article in a 2006 issue of *Commentary*, titled “Whatever Happened to the Jewish People?” Steven M. Cohen and Jack Wertheimer determined that today’s younger generation of American Jews is “significantly less likely” to take positions such as “Jews in the United States and Jews around the world share a common destiny.” And surely no discussion of the issue is complete without mention of the uproar surrounding a recent article by Peter Beinart in the *New York Review of Books*, in which he blames the growing gap between young, Jewish American liberals and the State of Israel on the latter’s religious backwardness and brutal nationalism.

For some reason, even Kaplan—who undoubtedly has a genuine interest in Israel and world Jewry, having chosen to do his Ph.D. at Tel Aviv University—devotes far more attention to the Jewish religion than to Jewish “peoplehood.” He puts considerable effort into addressing issues both large and small related to “Jewish life”—several pages, for example, are dedicated purely to an analysis of the somewhat negligible custom of laying an orange on the Seder plate—but has very little to say on American Jews’ attitude toward their brethren in other countries. A subchapter on “The Importance of Israel for American Jewish Identity,” for instance, extends over a mere four pages of a 446-page book.

Ultimately, Kaplan’s determined focus on the religious dimensions of Judaism tends to pass over the national aspect of this same identity. The result is what can only be called a deficient description of American Jewry. Simply put, the community he depicts is not the one we know for its vigorous activism and influential political lobby, deeply involved in both domestic and foreign affairs—and, yes, always looking out for the interests of the State of Israel. Kaplan devotes little to no attention to issues that ignited passionate reactions within major Jewish institutions and organizations. He disregards important topics, such as the division among American Jews over the issue of recognizing the Armenian genocide, or the worsening clash between AIPAC and its left-liberal challenger, J Street.

The reason for this brevity might be structural—the book addresses an exceedingly broad subject, after all—but it also seems to reflect the author’s

preference for drawing a distinction between “religious” issues and other problems with which American Jews are dealing. In so doing, Kaplan sidesteps the need to address the claim that Jewish American identity is expressed not just in terms of religious commitment, spiritual revival, and cultural flourishing, but also in terms of its ability to preserve this enormous community as one among many in the mosaic of the “Jewish world”—a world of religion and culture, to be sure, but also of nationhood, with all its attendant politics.

Kaplan is largely content, in *Contemporary American Judaism*, simply to describe the existing state of affairs, as opposed to offering predictions about the future. He explains trends, analyzes actions, and details the difficulties lying ahead, but remains mum on whether any of the novel solutions American Jewry is devising to deal with its challenges are likely to succeed. Still, the picture he paints allows the reader to formulate his own conclusions, albeit based on partial information.

Clearly, American Judaism is undergoing a profound transformation, from a coherent religious identity with a strong element of nationhood or “peoplehood” to one of “spiritual catering,” which adapts itself to the needs of each and every community, and even of each and every individual. As such, the common denominator among all Jews is narrowing to the barest of minimums (the refutation of Christ, for example, or simply self-identification as a “Jew”—whatever that means). Recent studies on young Jewish Americans’ *weltanschauung* have referred to this type of identity as “plug-and-play.” Some view this state of affairs as a given, accepting that Jewish institutions will have to deal with it as best they can. Others, like the Israeli writer A.B. Yehoshua, rage against it, and lambaste American Jewry for allowing the situation to deteriorate to such an extent. (Yehoshua, whose pronouncements at the American Jewish Committee panel in 2006 enraged the audience, and much of American Jewry in general, later clarified that he didn’t mean to claim that American Jews’ Judaism is just a “game.”)

The Judaism that Kaplan describes is indeed plug-and-play: Each according to his needs (spiritual, social), inclinations (religious, sexual), and abilities (financial, primarily, although Kaplan does not explicitly address the heavy economic burden inherent in a religious education and lifestyle); each, too, in accordance with the number of hours he is willing to dedicate to cultivating his “Jewish identity,” increasingly just one of many identities—

such as political, familial, sexual, and professional—competing for his time and energy. The contemporary American Jewish table is piled high with dishes from which one may pick and choose. Moreover, today's American Jews can decide when to partake of the dish they have assembled, at what pace they prefer to eat it, which spices to add, and how much to leave on the plate—not to mention how much to put in the freezer for later, and how much simply to toss out. In America's culture of plenty, Judaism has no choice but to adapt to the wants and needs of its potential consumers. Gone are the days when religion was considered a kind of exclusive club, one that required its members to meet certain criteria and abide by a respected authority. Now, many American Jews view Judaism as a service provider whose job is to seek out its customers—and, of course, to ensure their continued satisfaction.

In this context, it is surprising that Kaplan devotes so little attention to the tremendous effect of businessmen and philanthropists on the character of contemporary American Judaism. Arguably, the American Jewish community no longer belongs to rabbis who point the way for their public, or to organizations that enlist the individual in the service of the greater good. Rather, it belongs to the wealthy, who shape it according to their tastes and proclivities. To be sure, their generosity plays a key role in ensuring the survival of Jewish identity. Yet at times, it also lends this identity a certain capriciousness: One millionaire wants to effect tikkun olam in Africa, while another prefers literary salons; one's family foundation focuses on assistance for Israeli Arabs, while another's is intent on keeping Jerusalem united under Israeli sovereignty.

While this chaotic democratization of Jewish life holds considerable appeal, in the final analysis, who can deny that the major goals held in common are superseded by the donors' quirks? The more family foundations supplant Jewish federations as the driving force behind American Judaism, the harder it becomes for the community to allocate resources to *national* initiatives that hold very little attraction for impatient donors. Instead, the community is forced to divide its activity among dozens or even hundreds of minor projects that, in many cases, are utterly dispensable. Philanthropists' mode of thinking, shaped largely by business models, undoubtedly has its positive aspects, such as insistence on proven results. But they may also promote a glittery, chic sort of Judaism, one frequently drained of demanding intellectual and moral content.

Like every good marketing effort, the attempts toward Jewish retention, recruitment, and renewal boast an undeniably refreshing momentum and originality. But they are also overly congenial, absent a sense of self-worth, and dangerously reductive. By whittling away Judaism to the *broadest* common denominator, one risks ending up with the *lowest* common denominator. If Kaplan's portrait of American Jewry is accurate, we would have to conclude that the "leadership" of this community no longer leads the way. Rather, American Judaism is led by its public, and gets swept up in its caprices. Bearing in mind the unique set of circumstances that prevails in the United States—religious freedom, economic prosperity, material abundance, pervasive Christianity—it may well be that there is no other way. But Kaplan does not persuade us that this is indeed the case. Nor does he give any air time to those who claim that the current trends in American Jewish life are in truth destructive. In the end, the book provides a sufficiently detailed response to the question of what American Judaism looks like, but offers precious little in the way of what it *should* look like.

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