

Tablet

A NEW READ
ON JEWISH LIFE

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Renewed

Assessing the transformations that have shaped contemporary American Judaism

By [Adam Kirsch](#) | 7:00 am August 25, 2009

For a very long time, discussions of the future of American Judaism have taken place in an atmosphere of pessimism and recrimination. Since the 1960s, the familiar story goes, Jewish religious institutions have allowed the majority of Jews to slip away. Synagogues are spiritually uninspiring places, which most Jews visit only on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The Reform and Conservative movements are in an identity crisis, unable to come up with convincing theological rationales for their existence. Israel and the Holocaust have become the real pillars of American Jewish identity, and they are growing less potent all the time.

Dana Evan Kaplan's new book, [*Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal*](#) (Columbia University Press), touches on every one of these laments. Yet as its subtitle suggests,



The 2008 Rosh Hashanah tashlich service at congregation Eitz Or, a Jewish Renewal congregation in Seattle.

Credit: Joe King, some rights reserved.

Kaplan offers some reason to believe that a less depressive, more hopeful age is finally arriving for American Judaism. As a pulpit rabbi, at Temple B'nai Israel in Albany, Georgia, Kaplan is certainly aware of all the shortcomings of institutional Judaism: “the ‘Jewish establishment’ is criticized both implicitly and explicitly in this volume,” he warns at the outset. He has harsh words, sometimes clearly drawn from personal experience, about the inflexibility of rabbis and synagogue boards, and the low standards of Hebrew schools—“Hebrew School, cynics remarked, was the place where students failed to learn Hebrew.”

Yet his book is primarily about the creative ways that Jews—clergy and laypeople, institutions and individuals—have responded to these problems. “Jews in

contemporary America are exploring virgin territory,” Kaplan writes in his introduction, “and have no idea where it may lead.” This sense of openness, of course, already positions Kaplan on one side of the fundamental divide in contemporary American Judaism. This is the gulf between the Orthodox, for whom halacha is necessarily the same in 21st-century America as it was in 17th-century Poland or, for that matter, second-century Judea, and the other movements—Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and so on—for whom Judaism can and should be reinvented to meet the needs of contemporary Jews.

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A generation or two ago, Kaplan reminds us, most observers believed that Orthodox Judaism, like the more fundamentalist forms of Christianity, was headed for decline or even extinction in the United States, on purely demographic grounds: “Sociologists subscribed to the theory that conservative forms of any religious group corresponded with low social and economic standing. Therefore, Orthodoxy was incompatible with the middle-class aspirations of most American Jews and was destined to decline as they became more affluent.”

In fact, just the opposite happened. In the words of one rabbi quoted by Kaplan, “Orthodoxy has achieved a presence and a prominence in America simply and literally unimaginable even a mere four decades ago.” His own hometown of Waterbury, Connecticut, is a perfect example of that revival, Kaplan shows. When he grew up there, in the 1970s, the city had 2,500 Jews

and three synagogues, one for each denomination. Since then, the Conservative synagogue lost its building and the Reform temple was absorbed by one in another town. But Waterbury is now home to a thriving *haredi* community, drawn there by a yeshiva. “The 7-Eleven on Cooke Street—which was less than half a block from my Uncle Herman’s former house—now offered kosher Slurpees,” Kaplan writes with amazement.

Kaplan, like many liberal Jews, clearly harbors some admiration for the theological consistency of Orthodoxy. When he writes “religion is not a consumer good like the latest style of polo shirts at the Gap,” he is ostensibly voicing the Orthodox point of view, but it’s hard to imagine that he, like many rabbis of all denominations, doesn’t feel the same way. Still, he cannot embrace Orthodox strictness, and neither can the vast majority of American Jews. Kaplan does not offer many hard statistics—even the historical portions of his book sometimes feel impressionistic—but according to the 2000 National Jewish Population Survey, only 13 percent of American Jews consider themselves Orthodox (as opposed to 26 percent Reform, 34 percent Conservative, and 25 percent “just Jewish”). For most American Jews, remaining actively Jewish will not mean returning to the practices of their ancestors but finding, or inventing, new ones.

The most vital parts of *Contemporary American Judaism* are devoted to such innovations. They can be grouped into two broad categories: those that expand the range of Judaism, by making a place within it for women, gays, intermarried couples, and children of intermarriage; and those that deepen the experience of Judaism, by focusing on “spirituality” as a complement to ritual and text.

Kaplan writes about the first type of transformation in his chapter “Inclusivity as a Social Value.” As that title suggests, the increasing demand for feminist and gay equality within Judaism is a reflection of wider social changes. Since American Jews are generally progressive on such questions, it was inevitable that they would demand progress in their synagogues and denominations, and all things considered that progress came rapidly. The Reform movement, least encumbered by halacha, led the way, ordaining its first woman rabbi, Sally Priesand, in 1972.

The Conservative movement moved more slowly. Women were allowed to be called to the Torah and be counted as part of a minyan by the early 1970s, but opposition from the Talmud faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary meant that it did not admit female rabbinical students until 1983. The pattern was the same when it came to gay equality: Hebrew Union College began accepting openly gay rabbinical students in 1990, JTS not until 2007. Even in the Orthodox world, Kaplan notes, the role of women (if not of gays) has been evolving, with a few congregations hiring women in quasi-rabbinical roles.

At the same time, and partly thanks to the presence of these new voices, many Jews have started to experiment with the liturgy, the rituals, and the theology of Judaism. As a congregation leader, Kaplan is especially sensitive to the ways that standard synagogue Judaism fails to meet the needs of contemporary Jews—above all, their need for a more inward spiritual experience. Kaplan includes a case study (and even a photograph, which he took himself) of one of his congregants, Gail Greenfield, whose “spiritual path” he considers representative. Greenfield was raised in a Conservative household, but while her family kept kosher

and observed Shabbat, “there was little mention of God, and somehow I felt that there was something missing from my life.” As an adult, she turned to New Age, self-help, and Buddhism to fill that void. In turn, those influences led her to reimagine Jewishness: inventing a “Tu B’Shevat seder which was meaningful and spiritual,” and forming a group of like-minded Jews who “were not interested in attending [synagogue] on a regular basis because they found it boring and repetitive.”

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Kaplan catalogs some of the disparate Jewish responses to this widespread feeling. He writes about the Manhattan synagogue B’nai Jeshurun, whose exciting, music-filled services draw a young, eager congregation, and have been a model for synagogues around the country. He profiles charismatic Jewish Renewal figures like Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, a one-time Chabad rabbi who has won “a small but extremely dedicated following” with his combination of Hasidic fervor and New Age spirituality. He devotes an illuminating section to Chabad itself, showing how the selflessness and enthusiasm of its emissaries have inspired even many non-Orthodox Jews who ought, logically, to dislike its theology (not to mention the scandalous suggestion that the late Lubavitcher rebbe was, or is, the messiah).

At the same time, Kaplan does not gloss over what he calls, in one section heading, “the deteriorating relationship between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox.” The key issue

here is the decision by the Reform movement, in 1983, to allow patrilineal descent—that is, to consider the child of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother to be Jewish. This quite clearly contradicts millennia of Jewish practice, and no Orthodox authority was willing to accept it. The result, Kaplan writes, is that “substantial and growing numbers of American Jews” are not considered Jewish at all by Orthodox criteria—including those of the rabbinate in Israel. The implications of this for the future of American Jewry, and for the America-Israel relationship, are potentially explosive. “The United Jewish Appeal,” Kaplan notes, “stopped using their slogan ‘We Are One’ because it no longer represented reality.” Yet this is not necessarily a reason for panic. *Contemporary American Judaism* itself points the way to a future where Judaism itself is no longer one, but many and diverse—and none the less Jewish for that.

Adam Kirsch is a contributing editor to *Tablet Magazine* and the author of [Benjamin Disraeli](#), a biography in the *Nextbook Press Jewish Encounters* book series.

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