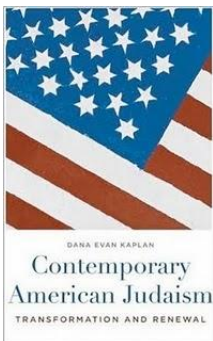


The Hitchhiker's Guide

Publication: *First Things*
Author: Goldman, David P
Date published: February 1, 2010

Senior editor David P. Goldman reads a pop-up book of Jewish demographics. *Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal* by Dana Evan Kaplan Columbia University, 446 pages, \$34.50



A housewife in an old-country joke accuses her kitchen maid of stealing four pounds of meat. "The cat ate it!" the girl protests. They take the matter to the rabbi, who puts the cat on the scales; it weighs exactly four pounds. "There's the meat!" proclaims the rabbi, who turns to the maid and demands: "Now tell me- where is the cat?"

Dana Evan Kaplan, the leader of a Reform Jewish congregation in Georgia (the state, not the country), claims to find Judaism in a spiritual buffet featuring faux-Buddhist meditation, "feminist neoHasidism," "pop-up" Torah, Jerry Springer-inspired psychodrama, and other concessions to New Age narcissism. But where are the Jews?

The cat has Kaplan's tongue on this question. His ramble through what he calls "contemporary American Judaism" conspicuously lacks index entries for "demographics," "fertility," "birthrate," and the like. Given the Reform movement's obsession with its demographic disappearance, something stronger than the term denial seems appropriate. What the missing data suggests is that Reform, Conservative, and other nontraditional Jewish denominations are on a path to disappearing within two generations, destroyed by intermarriage and lack of children.

Kaplan's account is not quite a Reform-movement manifesto, although it sports a laudatory foreword by the president of the flagship Reform seminary, Hebrew Union College. Rather than the survey it purports to be, the volume is an extended apology for pluralism, padded with documentary material long available in more reliable works. Traditional Judaism, Kaplan avers, is narrow, dogmatic, sectarian, and uncaring. "The classic Reform rabbis of the late nineteenth century spoke incessantly of the mission of Israel and the need to bring the teachings of ethical monotheism to all humanity," he claims. "This was a radically new approach." (As a matter of fact, Maimonides said this in his twelfth-century Epistle to Yemen.)

Kaplan cites an observation by Hebrew Union College sociologist Steven M. Cohen that young American Jews, favoring "constructing their own opportunities for Jewish engagement," erect "nuanced niches" to create "differentiated opportunities for Jewish engagement." But Kaplan makes no mention of Cohen's dire assessment of the consequences of these attitudes:

We are now in the midst of a non-Orthodox Jewish population meltdown. . . . Among Jews in their 50s, for every 100 Orthodox adults, we have 192 Orthodox children. And for the non-Orthodox, for every 100 adults, we have merely 55 such children. In nearly two generations, in our own lifetime, the Orthodox have embarked on a path to nearly doubling their size. At the same time, the non-Orthodox are en route to nearly half their number.

Orthodox Jews are having many children while non-Orthodox Jews are having very few and marrying half of those few to Gentiles. An often cited assessment of these trends by Antony Gordon and Richard Horowitz has made the rounds for years, showing that within four generations the total number of American Jews will double if present trends continue, and 95 percent of them will be Orthodox. Linear forecasts are unreliable, to be sure, but the one thing on which the Orthodox and Reform communities appear to agree is that the former is growing and the latter is melting down.

No stunt is too silly for anti-traditional synagogues to get warm bodies into the pews

Kaplan cannot bring himself to report the despair of Reform Jewish sociologists, but despair nonetheless pervades his pladoyer for an "inclusive," "nondenominational," and "moderately affiliated" Judaism. No stunt is too silly for anti-traditional synagogues to get warm bodies into the pews. It would be instructive to disentangle the cause-and effect relation between the degraded practice and the deteriorating demographics of anti-traditional Judaism. Are Jews leaving Reform, Reconstructionist, and related congregations because the services ape popular culture, or do the services ape popular culture because "progressive clergy" will do anything to get "moderately affiliated" members in the door?

That is not a trivial question, for some of the Jews who are disappearing from the ranks of these progressive movements return to traditional Judaism. Kaplan mentions Chabad's often successful efforts to bring Jews back to observance, but he consigns the movement to a chapter on "the popularization of Jewish mystical outreach," right next to the Kabbalah Centers. On the contrary: What young Jews encounter at Chabad services, for all the movement's idiosyncrasies, is the normative Judaism that Kaplan insists cannot be defined.

One item that might have run credibly in *The Onion* involves remodeling the synagogue service around the psychodrama techniques pioneered by Jerry Springer, "the son of Holocaust survivors," as Kaplan respectfully observes. The sort of Jew whom Kaplan addresses has no use for "long, boring reading of a text in a foreign language"- otherwise known as the practice of hearing the Pentateuch in Hebrew in the course of the liturgical year.

One creative response to this problem was to dramaticize [sic] the Torah portion of the week. Peter Pitzele pioneered a methodology of psychodrama called Bibliodrama that draws on the individual's own experiences to act out family stories from the Bible. "The search for a credible spirituality began for me as a solitary quest. It began in response to a few scattered moments of transcendent, almost hallucinatory, insight that had moved and troubled me as a young man." Pitzele tried a variety of religious programs and disciplines, including both Christian and Eastern spiritual approaches.

To reject the possibility of a normative Judaism is both ahistorical and disingenuous

Pitzele calls his method "pop-up Torah." An accompanying photograph shows Pitzele holding up a pop-up mask of Joseph, which he uses as a prop for synagogue psychodrama. A Jewish Dickens would be hard put to invent a name that better symbolizes the condition of Reform Judaism: "Pitzele" is a Yiddish diminutive meaning "a very small putz."

Kaplan enthuses:

Theoreticians have long spoken about the therapeutic culture of narcissism in the United States. Television talk show hosts such as Jerry Springer . . . had made fortunes bringing people into a forum where they could express their innermost feelings...While much of the spectacle was a crass distraction...the underlying psychological need was very real. Synagogues had historically done virtually nothing to tap into the enormous emotional need that Americans felt to talk about themselves...Psychodrama was a way for the congregation to witness emotional scenes being acted out and make the ancient story of Judaism come alive.

A variant of pop-up Torah is Storhtelling, which Kaplan calls "one of the hottest Jewish educational programs." He reports:

"Founder Amichai Lau Lavie explains that it is part psychodrama and part psychotherapy, with the Storhtelling staff using the stories of the Torah to engage worshippers. 'We use edu-tainment. We make them laugh. It's 95 percent humor, culture, radical fun and 5 percent meaning.'"

What does one say to a self-styled rabbi who redesigns the Torah service around narcissism? The Torah bans graven images to prevent people from worshipping themselves. Kaplan makes a virtue out of what God summoned the people Israel to oppose. When does this stop being Judaism?

Never, if self-identified Jews called it Judaism, says Kaplan. He denounces those who "believe that it is . . . possible to speak of 'normative Judaism,' which posits that there is one long unbroken chain of tradition . . . transmitted from generation to generation." In fact, he argues, "the reality of Jewish diversity" includes "new Jewish philosophies and approaches developed over the last two hundred years" that "denied that the Jews were God's chosen people, rejected the obligatory nature of Jewish law, and, in a few cases, abandoned the belief in God entirely."

To be called "Judaism," says Kaplan, "the belief or behavior needs to be expressed or performed by Jews and/or in the name of Judaism. Their actions need to have a religious motivation, which I understand to include a belief in God, in whichever ways God is understood." To argue that such a thing as "normative" Judaism exists, Kaplan adds, is "essentialism," the catch-all postmodern curse on anything that claims consistency and continuity.

For a thousand years, between the formulation of synagogue service in the ninth-century Babylonian academies and the emergence of the Reform movement in nineteenth-century Germany, few Jews would have had to ask what was "normative." There were small deviant movements: the Karaite fundamentalists, for example, who rejected rabbinic authority and insisted on taking the written Torah literally. Still, from late antiquity until the nineteenth century, a Yemeni Jew could daven comfortably at a synagogue in York, and a rabbinical court in Worms could issue a ruling binding on a merchant in Cairo.

Judaism meant something quite specific for nearly two millennia: For Jews in every corner of the Diaspora, the reading of the Torah relived the moment of revelation at Mount Sinai, and Torah study kept that moment alive in every generation. In thousands of synagogues scattered around the world, all Israel stood as one before God to receive the Torah. The synagogue service embodied the sacrificial service of the tabernacle in the wilderness, and the Sabbath table of every Jewish household re-created the Temple altar. Every Jew continued the eternal life of Abraham's family and lived in this world with a foretaste of the world to come. For this "beautiful inheritance" and "happy destiny," as the morning prayers intone, Jews flourished despite dispersion and persecution.

None of the anti-traditional alternatives, by contrast, has yet succeeded in persuading Jews to remain Jews.

To reject the possibility of a normative Judaism is both ahistorical and disingenuous. In defense of antitraditional Judaism, Kaplan cites the late Abraham Joshua Heschel, who said: "It is customary to blame secular science and antireligious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid." But Heschel preached a radical return to tradition rather than its abandonment. Famously, when a woman pouted that she did not find the traditional Siddur (prayer book) relevant, he rebuked her with the words: "The point is to make yourself relevant to the Siddur."

Kaplan leads us on a dreary promenade through the spiritual quest of confused people. If the story has a hero, it is the Chabad dropout Zalman Schachter-Salomi, the founder of the Jewish Renewal Movement, who "uses a freely associative speaking and writing style with New Age terminology and even computer jargon that can be difficult to fully comprehend." Schachter-Salomi contributed the afterword to Kaplan's tome, with special emphasis on "Gaia consciousness." We also meet Jochanan Kalisher, who observes the High Holy Days with Native American drumming; Sylvia Boorstein, who teaches Buddhist meditation and claims to be "a faithful Jew" and a "passionate Buddhist"; and a host of other tedious types.

The fad for Eastern mysticism, Kaplan explains, has produced a new genus of hyphenated Jew: "American Jews interested in Buddhism have been called JuBus, or sometimes Bujews. Likewise, a Hindu Jew is called a Hinjew, a Sufi Jew is called a Jewfi, and so forth." (It is hard to see Hinjews as a successful hybrid, though; no matter how many times they're reincarnated, they still won't please their mothers.)

Kaplan cannot ignore the resurgence of the Orthodox, but he insists on treating traditional Judaism as one more brand in the religious supermarket. "Orthodoxy is not a unified movement in the sense that the other Jewish religious denominations are," he avers. "There are numerous diverse groups that share many common beliefs, including the idea that the halacha is binding in its entirety."

That is misleading. Reform and Conservative Judaism are unified only in the sense that congregations pay dues to a common umbrella organization, but- as Kaplan informs us- individual synagogues and members are free to believe as much or as little as they want and appropriate any external practice they find titillating. The Reform prayer book offers a half dozen alternative services with wholly contradictory theologies; in his own congregation, Kaplan writes, he switches among them at random.

Orthodoxy, by contrast, has many organizational expressions, but the variation in belief and practice is negligible among its most divergent groups- for example, between Modern Orthodoxy and Hasidism. There are exceptions: The Haredi might shun a Modern Orthodox service at which women participate in ritual leadership. Still, an observant Jew can pray comfortably at an Orthodox synagogue anywhere in the world with minor adjustments for chant tropes and pronunciation. Haredi and Modern Orthodox frequently pray together; a dozen or two Hasidim attend Shabbat services at the Modern Orthodox synagogue around the corner from my home. Each Reform congregation, in contrast, spins in its separate orbit- and sometimes in several orbits in the same synagogue, through "Synaplex" or "multiple Shabbat programming," a format that, according to Kaplan, is popular in Miami and San Francisco.

Relations between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews have been steadily deteriorating, and this is already leading to the creation of two separate Jewish peoples

Kaplan's animus toward the Orthodox stems from a perceived injustice: He grudgingly allows Orthodoxy shelf space next to the JuBus, Hinjews, Jewfis, bongo drummers, and Storahellers. The Orthodox won't reciprocate, for they do not consider such things to be Jewish at all. "The non-Orthodox religious movements-Reform, Reconstructionist, and the woefully misnamed Conservative movement- are, in my view, becoming increasingly similar," he observes. "Their leadership maintains that they have significant ideological and ritual differences, but these subtle nuances are basically invisible to the average layperson." In contrast, "relations between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews have been steadily deteriorating, and this is already leading to the creation of two separate Jewish peoples," Kaplan complains.

That is not quite true; there still are Conservative congregations led by traditional rabbis with at least a core of observant members. But they are few and aging, and over the next generation most of them will merge with Modern Orthodox synagogues or disband. Still, broadly speaking, Kaplan's conclusion is correct. There isn't much left to discuss between Jews who agonize over how to approach the wholly other God who created the universe and loved Abraham with infinite and inexplicable grace, and the self-absorbed narcissists who inhabit the world of Dana Evan Kaplan.

DAVID P. GOLDMAN is senior editor of FIRST THINGS.

<http://www.faqs.org/periodicals/201002/1948586861.html>

Read more:
<http://www.faqs.org/periodicals/201002/1948586861.html#ixzz0ziD63AW1>