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Dana Evan Kaplan, *Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 446 pp.

Dana Evan Kaplan's monograph, *Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal*, is a "popular overview of how American Judaism has changed since 1945." (xv) Kaplan draws from the contributions of historians, sociologists, and innovative Jewish clergy and lay leaders to survey the challenges facing today's American Jewish community. His first priority is illustrating how "the Jewish religion, as practiced by American Jews, has changed" (xxi) in the last several decades. In this volume, Kaplan is not very interested in ethnic expressions of Jewishness; he concentrates chiefly on Judaism as religious behaviors "performed by Jews" (xxi).

Kaplan's book is concerned with both outlining problems and exploring potential solutions. In the first category, a historical overview summarizes the large-scale shifts in American Jewish life since 1945. In two other chapters, Kaplan documents the waning strength of the major denominations, as well as the "collapse of the intermarriage stigma" (161). Five of Kaplan's chapters, on the other hand, discuss ways in which American Jews have tried to revitalize Jewish life. He first explores American Jews' experimentation in new religious ceremonies, social justice initiatives, and meditation as ways of "reengaging" with spirituality (56). He summarizes the achievements of Jewish feminists in the last half century and briefly touches on the growing acceptance of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender/Transsexual) Jews in communal institutions. The havurah movement, Jewish renewal, and the ba'al teshuva movement make up the bulk of a chapter on "radical responses to the suburban experience" (258). An in-depth discussion of Chabad follows, in addition to an account of the efforts initiated in the 1990s toward synagogue renewal and transformation.

For scholars of contemporary American Jewish life, the first half of Kaplan's book is familiar territory. In large part, he touches on themes introduced in Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen's *The Jew Within* (2001), the last chapters of Jonathan Sarna's *American Judaism* (2004), and several publications by Jack Wertheimer. Susannah Heschel, Pamela Nadell, Judith Plaskow, and others have thoroughly documented the significant changes in Jewish ritual life inspired by a diverse group of Jewish feminists. There is no shortage of literature on intermarriage and Jewish communal responses; webinars pop up several times a month on the specific needs and concerns of Jewish millennials. But for a general audience, Kaplan's overview chapters on these subjects are highly readable and informative.

Kaplan's most significant contributions, however, come in the latter portion of his book. His final two chapters on the success of Chabad-Lubavitch and recent efforts at synagogue renewal are particularly engaging. Here, he begins to answer the question of what some institutions are doing right to meet the needs of their constituents. Kaplan devotes a couple of pages to the independent minyanim movement. In light of the recent publication of Elie Kaunfer's book, *Empowered Judaism* (on Kehilat Hadar, the first of these minyanim in New York City), Kaplan's chapter is quite relevant. The two books indeed complement each other well.

More generally, Kaplan's description of synagogue renewal efforts begs the question of impact. He adopts the leaders' perspective, for the most part, particularly in his description of the considerable effort individual congregations have devoted to creating institutional change. Implicitly, Kaplan suggests the need for more books like Kaunfer's, which document the degree of success these synagogues experience as a result of their initiatives.

It is difficult to discern Kaplan's personal assessment of contemporary American Judaism as far as its "spiritual health" is concerned. He is quite successful at divorcing his own religious perspective (that of a Reform rabbi) from his analysis. Kaplan firmly believes that the American Jewish community is becoming increasingly polarized, with the "middle ground"—once considered Conservative Judaism—all but obliterated (381). Perhaps "cautious optimism" would be an accurate description of the tone on which Kaplan ends his volume. He is acutely aware of the problems facing American Jewish leaders by the hybrid and fluid identities that characterize today's young Jews. On the other hand, he is at least a little bit confident that some of the initiatives he describes may be starting to address their needs.

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