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In Good Faith

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Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal

By Dana Evan Kaplan

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Enter this volume and discover the multilayered story of American Judaism since 1945. Normally, one assumes that the Jews in America are just a part of the stream of modernity, but the author, Dana Evan Kaplan, has pinpointed the aspects of that phenomenon known as American Judaism - both transformed and renewed.

A keen observer of the faith of his people in the US, Kaplan does not hesitate to underline the fact that "the American environment has impacted Judaism." Carrying this further, he emphasized in an interview that "while it is obvious that Judaism in America is an integral part of the American religious landscape, it has a number of unusual and perhaps even unique characteristics. Despite the gnawing sense of obligation to their forbears, Jews in contemporary America are exploring virgin territory and have no idea where it may lead."

One hundred years ago three plays on the theme of intermarriage, the most noted *The Melting Pot* by Israel Zangwill, were being shown on the Broadway stage. There was real criticism of them. In his chapter entitled "Facing the Collapse of the Intermarriage Stigma," Kaplan charts the change of American Jewish attitudes on intermarriage from the end of World War II to the early 21st century. Whereas anti-intermarriage feelings were expressed in every part of the Orthodox, Reform and Conservative sectors 50 years ago, there has been a whittling away of the negativism on this issue in two of the three groups. The feeling of religious freedom in the

US has made it possible for Jews and non-Jews to marry and even become a part of the synagogue community.

Moreover, this particular threat of the dilution and disappearance of American Judaism has made it possible for creative and inventive solutions to be proposed. Kaplan focuses on the "Chismukkah" holiday created by a TV character, Seth Cohen, "as the greatest super holiday known to mankind, drawing on the best that Judaism and Christianity have to offer." The answer to this synthesis is the kiruv programs that use the spiritual talents to encourage intermarried families to affiliate Jewishly and develop a real commitment to the "faith of our fathers and mothers."

As a member of the rabbinate of the Conservative movement, I had the opportunity from 1973 to 1974, with the complete assistance of my synagogue president in Wilmington, Delaware, to develop and implement a study program for the women of my congregation so they could be complete ritual participants in the synagogue services. It worked in a way never expected and women shared all the honors with the men.

Kaplan clearly shows how American Judaism has benefited from the ordination of women as rabbis beginning in 1972. Now American Jewish women are academics in Judaica in rabbinical schools and in colleges and universities. He indicates that this trend is basically in Conservative and Reform Judaism, but he makes the point that some highly educated Orthodox women have become spiritual leaders as well.

What makes this work most fascinating is the various ways Kaplan points out of "doing Jewish" currently. There is the eco-kosher project that reinterprets the dietary laws as a way of defending the environment. There are the bar/bat mitzva observances where the Torah scroll is taken out of the ark, not read but handed from one generation to the other and then to the celebrant. There are the Jews of all ages who identify with the faith by having Hebrew letters tattooed (a sin according to the Torah) on their bodies. There are the "bring your pets" Shabbatot - frequently observed on Parashat Noah.

The author does not hesitate to discuss "the deteriorating relationship between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox." This has developed, intensely, because of the Reform movement's decision in 1983 that a child born to a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother is Jewish. As a result there are thousands of Reform Jews who are not considered Jewish by Orthodox criteria. Kaplan points to this division in American Jewry as one that could lead to many halachic problems. In spite of this, the vitality in American Jewish life, as Kaplan succinctly describes, could lead to a brighter spiritual future.

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