



Reviewing

Contemporary

American Judaism

Authors

Judaism in Crisis, Judaism in Transition: A
Review of Dana Evan Kaplan's
Contemporary American Judaism

Dana Evan Kaplan's comprehensive book on contemporary American Judaism begins with an odd caveat: "This book is a popular overview of how American Judaism has changed since 1945, with the focus on the last couple of decades. It is not a work of original research, nor is it an attempt to argue a boldly innovative central thesis. Rather, it is a broad description of how American Judaism has been molded by Jews and other people in response to societal trends and attempts to highlight some of the most important changes."(xv). Every part of this sentence is true. This is the book's strength. This is also its weakness.

Kaplan's book is exhaustive in detail and broad in scope, touching on the fundamental challenges to contemporary Judaism in America from intermarriage, conversion, and the end of religious

denominations to questions of ethnicity, spirituality, Israel, and the Holocaust. It mixes literature, theology, popular culture, music, and the arts. It generously uses social scientific data, works of theology, history, and popular literature as well as extensive use of email correspondence with many scholars, clergy, and Jewish lay leaders. It is a well-constructed and well-formed skeleton.

What the book lacks is a nervous system; it has no real underlying thesis or argument. Kaplan diffuses this criticism in the first sentence of the book by telling us what it is not ("a work of original research, nor...an attempt to argue a boldly innovative central thesis.") and what it is ("a popular overview of how American Judaism has changed since 1945, with the focus on the last couple of decades"). Yet, in his conclusion, he reflects back on his work and writes, "The question that I implicitly raise in this book is how [contemporary struggles with Jewish identity] might affect the future contours of American Jewish belief and practice. The answer to that is unknown." (384). The problem is that this question, a good one, is never really asked, not even implicitly. If such a question were asked and re-visited throughout the book, the reader might have a better sense of what the book was really about.

Don't misunderstand. This book contains valuable information and explorations in areas of Jewish life few scholars have examined in detail. Kaplan should be commended for a herculean task of gathering information. What the reader does not know is what the author thinks about all this stuff. And, by extension, what she should think about all this stuff.

Crisis or Renaissance?

Implied in this book is that contemporary American Judaism is either in a state of extreme crisis or undergoing a creative renaissance. In fact both are true, the latter being largely impossible without the former. Kaplan aptly shows that the very foundations of Jewish identity that have existed for centuries are crumbling in America: ethnicity, religious cohesiveness, community, controlled exogamy, reflexive attachment to Israel, the memory of the Holocaust, etc. In short, what is implied is that American Judaism is in a free-fall. And it is. But there is something quite interesting that is happening in this free-fall. Detached from old models of Jewish identity largely constructed on the foundation of anti-Semitism (real or imagined) and marginalization, American Jews are in the process of what I would call creative and untraditional dissassimilation.

No longer needing old models of identity, they are reaching back to the past without the heteronomy of the past. They are creating new Judaisms in an environment without fear, either externally generated (anti-Semitism) or internally motivated (fear of anti-Semitism). One of the fundamental conditions of this crisis/renaissance is the success of American Jewry's "Americanization" coupled with the significant diminishing of anti-Semitism in late twentieth-century America as a determining factor of Jewish identity. In such a case, even when there is a return to tradition, it is a tradition already transformed.

The project of Americanization that began in the nineteenth century has largely run

its course. Jews and Judaism have become an integral part of the American mainstream. This is true in high culture, i.e. fashion and the arts (Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein, Isaac Mizrahi, George Gershwin, Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Miller, Normal Mailer, Saul Bellow, Elie Wiesel, Phillip Roth, Woody Allen, Steven Spielberg), in popular culture (Barbara Streisand, Jackie Mason, Jerry Seinfeld, The Coen Brothers, Mattisyahu) in law and science (Albert Einstein and Louis Brandeis) and even in crime (Meyer Lansky, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, Ivan Boesky, Michael Milken, Jack Abramoff and of course Bernard Madoff). Judaism has even been made popular by non-Jews such as Madonna and Roseanne Barr, the Hasidic hip-hop of Mattisyahu is now being produced by a major record label and the Klezmatics and John Zorn's Zaddik Records have an audience that extends far beyond American Jews. Jewish Studies in American universities are some of the most successful programs in the academy and figures such as Harold Bloom, Stephen Greenblatt, Ronald Dworkin, Michael Waltzer and Judith Butler have contributed to their respective fields as "out" Jews whose Jewish identity is an integral part of their scholarly work.

The pride many Jews take in these accomplishments should not veil the dangers they produce. Jews are no longer outsiders in America and, as such, the community as the primary structure that perpetuates Judaism is in deep crisis. Individuals who can achieve wealth and fame outside the Jewish community clearly don't need that community to succeed in secular life. Jack Wertheimer and Steven Cohen's essay "What Ever Happened to the Jewish People?"

(Commentary Magazine, June 2006) is an apt description of Jewish success in America, not Jewish failure. Many Jews want it both ways, to have secular success and a tight-knit inward-looking community. Sadly, this is not readily possible.

While Kaplan never addresses this irony in his book, many of the trends he describes support the idea that we are witnessing something quite distinctive: not the destruction of the Jewish people in America, but its deconstruction. American Judaism is not being destroyed from the outside nor eroded from the inside; it is being transformed as a result of its success. As it seems to fall aimlessly like the opening human shadow in “Mad Men,” new sprouts have taken root.

Twenty-first Century Judaism

We now find “inclusive Judaism” (synagogues that fully include non-Jews into their worship) “Big Tent Judaism” and “panculturalism Judaism.” A virtual community called Half-Jews.net that services children born of inter-marriage who want to identify as Jews but also identify with the ethnicity of their non-Jewish parent. Kerry Olitsky’s Jewish Outreach Institute caters to non-Jewish women married to Jewish men (who choose not the convert) who want to bring their children up as Jews and Edmund Case’s InterfaithFamily.com is a support group for inter-married couples and their families. Even the notoriously “conservative” Conservative Movement recently published *A Place in the Tent: Inter-marriage and Conservative Judaism* (2004) a guide- book for rabbis about how

to integrate the non-Jew into the Jewish community and synagogue life.

Even among Jews born and married Jewishly, there is an increasing interest in reaching out beyond the Jewish community, spiritually and secularly. There are now spiritual communities of Ju-Boos, Hin-Jews, new Jewish Sufis, and psycho-Semitic souls. The social justice world has seen the rise of urban kibbutzim led by expat Israelis in American cities devoted to poverty relief not directed specifically to Jews. Jewish social justice organizations like the Progressive Jewish Alliance, JCUA, Jewish Funds for Justice, and AJWS all focus much of their economic justice work outside the Jewish community.

Many of these movements, groups, and communities mentioned above appear in Kaplan’s *Contemporary American Judaism*. And many more not mentioned appear there as well. My complaint is simply that Kaplan doesn’t tell us what he thinks is going on here. Is this the beginning of some new construction of community, a new frame of post-ethnic identity, a new form of Judaism that services not only “Jews” but anyone in America who feels moved by Jewish texts and practices?

For example, how would Rabbi Shulweis’ controversial call for Jews to proselytize “unchurched” Christians (would this now also include “unmosqued” Muslims?) fit into this new paradigm? Kaplan’s admission at the end of his book, “I don’t know,” is surely true for any study of a contemporary phenomenon, but insufficient after almost four hundred pages of details of the American Jewish “free-fall.” In the end, there must be

something between “I don’t know” and “I have nothing to say.”

One other lacuna in this book is that this complex web of radical changes in American Judaism is not situated in the events of the larger society that made them possible. While some events enter into Kaplan’s analysis, one could come away thinking that these changes are largely self-generated. Diasporic Judaism is almost always reactive, absorbing societal changes and refracting them through its own literary tradition and ideational world. It is true that American Judaism may be somewhat different because, through successful assimilation, Jews have contributed handily to these larger societal changes and thus Judaism, largely in secular forms, is a more integral part of American society than other societies in which it lived. But more attention to the larger context of American Judaism’s crisis/renaissance would have been helpful. An excellent example of this can be found in Jonathan Freedman’s *Klezmer America: Jewishness, Ethnicity, Modernity* (Columbia University Press, 2009).

Looming Challenges

American Judaism will face significant challenges in this century. Zionism and the Holocaust, the two pillars of Jewish identity in the twentieth century, will likely no longer be so in this century. In the next thirty years, perhaps even before, the last Holocaust survivor will die. A child born today may never know a Holocaust survivor when she reaches adulthood. The Holocaust will move from being memory to history, as is the case with all events, and this will likely change the role it plays

in Jewish identity. Zionism has become a much more complex idea for a generation who only know Israel as an occupying power. Moreover, globalization is quickly changing Israel as well, making it less a well-spring for Jewish identity for Americans than it was in the heady years of the 1950’s and 1960’s. The challenges of ethnicity loom large in American Jewry. We are experiencing the end of a multiculturalism which has been “good for the Jews” and the beginning of a post-ethnic world where ethnicities are no longer the primary anchors of identity. As a result of sustained exogamy, a majority of Americans are either multiethnic or have immediate family members who are. Barak Obama is not only the first African-American president; he is the first multi-ethnic president. This is the case for American Jews as well whose intermarriage rates are more or less equivalent to many other ethnic minorities. Conventional notions of peoplehood will be significantly challenged as intermarried families and their multi-ethnic progeny continue to take part in the Jewish community.

As important, American Jews in this century will need to construct their identity without the “aid” of anti-Semitism. By this I mean that while anti-Semitism has not disappeared in America, it is thankfully no longer strong enough to function as a solidifying force to keep Jews together or to keep Jews attached to some form of Jewish identity. This is a mixed blessing. In an essay some years ago entitled “Galut,” Arthur Hertzberg argued that the lack of anti-Semitism is, in fact, more dangerous to Jews than the (controlled) existence of anti-Semitism. The former requires Jews to creatively

construct forms of identity without the aid of an external threat. He used this to argue that contemporary Zionism in America should be viewed as the inverse of the classical Zionism of Herzl. Herzl offered Zionism as a solution to the problem of anti-Semitism in Europe. Hertzberg suggested that American Zionism (by this he meant aliyah) is a solution to the problem of the lack of anti-Semitism in America.

This seems true. How many secular American Jews make aliyah to insure their children will have a Jewish identity and marry a Jewish spouse and not because they are afraid of the safety of their families? Yet Hertzberg's call for American aliyah is unlikely to unfold. Jews will probably not immigrate en masse to Israel from America for a myriad of reasons. But Hertzberg is correct that the absence of anti-Semitism is a new paradigm that Jews must take seriously when they consider how individual and collective Jewish life can thrive in a country without the resistance of their host culture.

Finally, one of the great lacunas in my view in contemporary American Judaism is the lack of any vibrant Jewish secularism. Most of the great Jewish advances in modernity were the result of various Jewish secularisms that generated new forms of identity. Zionism, Yiddishism, socialism, philosophy, literature, theater, and the arts were all products of Jewish secularisms in Europe. More than that, even some of the great religious movements, for example, the spiritual Zionism of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, were forged in response to – but not the rejection of – Jewish secularity. Laura Levitt's thoughtful essay "Other Moderns,

Other Jews: Revisiting Jewish Secularism in America," (in *Secularisms*, J.R. Jakobson and A. Pellegrini eds. 2008) is a fine example of how to begin to examine this issue. I think we are witnessing some creative new forms of Jewish secularism in contemporary American but they are much less Judeo-centric and much more open to syncretism, fusion, and the inclusion of non-Jew. In short, they are looking very much like American Jewish families. While the data in *Contemporary American Judaism* certainly lends itself to some of these issues, it never quite moves beyond informed reportage and into the grittier realm of making sense of what it all means.

In sum, *Contemporary American Judaism* provides a much-needed companion to books such as Jonathan Sarna's *American Judaism* (Yale University Press, 2005) as Sarna only deals with the contemporary scene quite briefly. One crucial difference, however, is that Sarna advocates a very strong thesis about the survival of Judaism and Jews in America, a thesis he argues with great historical skill. The same is true of Hasia Diner's work which pays closer attention to the "American" quality of American Judaism. Kaplan is not doing either of these things as he makes quite clear at the outset. This book is nonetheless a tremendous resource. However, the book on contemporary American Judaism that can provide some answers or at least a theoretical framework through which we can begin to understand what is actually happening is yet to be written.

[Contemporary American Judaism](#) is available from *Columbia University Press*