

Prospects for American Judaism

BY LANCE J. SUSSMAN

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN JUDAISM: TRANSFORMATION AND RENEWAL

by Dana Evan Kaplan

Columbia University Press, 446 pp., \$34.95

Walk down the hallway of any long-established suburban Reform or Conservative synagogue where the photographs of each year's confirmation class are mounted and you will be reminded of the dramatic changes that have taken place in these institutions over the past half-century. Fifty years ago, in many of the larger congregations, ninth and tenth grade classes regularly exceeded one hundred students and sometimes even reached two hundred. By the late 1960s, the students' hair was getting longer, and by the mid-1970s the classes started getting smaller. Today if a Reform congregation of a thousand families can muster a confirmation class of thirty students, rabbis and educators are not only relieved but feel a small sense of victory.

This is but one reflection of an undeniable reality. With the exception of a number of Orthodox communities and a few other bright spots in or just off the mainstream of Jewish religious life, American Judaism is in precipitous decline. Not only is enrollment in non-Orthodox Jewish religious educational programs down, so is synagogue affiliation. Philanthropic giving in the religious sector of the Jewish community is also declining. For rabbis, Jewish educators and leaders, it is a difficult moment. Jews are flourishing in America but organized, institutional Judaism is in deep trouble, particularly after the recent economic crisis.

Why is this happening? Can anything be done to remedy the situation or are today's non-Orthodox synagogues on the same path to obsolescence as the Jewish labor unions of a century ago or the old Borscht Belt resorts? Are Day Schools the answer or should the broader Jewish community concentrate on welcoming and retaining the ever growing mixed married population? Can Jewish communal and institutional efforts really do anything to control long-term American, Jewish, and global historical processes? Before one attempts to address these questions, as Dana Kaplan does in his new book, *Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal*, one needs to know how we arrived at this historical moment.

Jacob Rader Marcus, the greatest American Jewish historian of the twentieth century, described the religion of colonial American Jews as "the Orthodoxy of salutary neglect." The German Jews who began arriving in ever increasing numbers after the War of 1812 were generally no more enthusiastic about practicing Judaism than were their Sephardic predecessors. The Eastern European immigrants who came next were people whose ties to a God-

fearing, learning-based, mitzvah-driven Judaism were already frayed by the time they set sail for America and, for the most part, only continued to weaken after their arrival. The return of hundreds of thousands of these people's essentially secular children and grandchildren to the synagogue in suburbia after World War II was an anomaly. As Kaplan observes, in the post-war period "the emphasis was ... on affiliation rather than participation or theological commitment."

American Judaism may have experienced a "Great Awakening" at the end of the nineteenth century, but the expansion of synagogue-based denominational Judaism after World War II was not a "Second Great Awakening." Other trends and

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issues, including interfaith activism, support for Israel, Holocaust awareness, and rescue of Soviet Jewry, moved American Jews of the period more deeply than religious faith. The Jewish federations and their political and social services became the "heavy industries" of American Jewry while religion became one of its "light industries". Above all, it was secular American ideologies, especially liberalism that shaped Jewish life.

Dana Kaplan, for his part, appears to be of the opinion that the new Jewish spirituality of the late twentieth century was the primary cause of the "fall of American Jewish Denominationalism" (the title of his third chapter). It seems to me, however, that the roots of the problem are much older and deeper. The new interest in spirituality has been and remains marginal in the lives of most American Jews. Kaplan's pervasive and disproportionate emphasis on the development of Jewish Renewal, pop mysticism and non-denominational synagogue renewal takes the place, in his book, of a serious analysis of his ostensible subject, contemporary American Judaism. It appears that his real interest is not in drawing a comprehensive portrait of current realities but rather in describing those "Jews in contemporary America [who] are exploring virgin territory and have no idea where it may lead." Everyone and everything else gets short shrift.

Most perplexing is Kaplan's cursory and inadequate treatment of contemporary Orthodox Judaism in this country. He does have a sub-chapter entitled "The Surprising Survival and Revival of Orthodox Judaism." But is it really so very surprising, in view of the world-wide revival of old-fashioned religion, including the tremendous growth of American Protestant fundamentalism? What is truly surprising is the scant attention that he gives to Orthodoxy, especially in view of his observation at the end of the book that "relations between Or-

thodox and non-Orthodox Jews have been steadily deteriorating." and that the two groups are rapidly moving toward a complete schism. While Kaplan briefly reviews the course of centrist or modern Orthodoxy, he fails to report on the recent history of the fervently Orthodox, particularly the communities they have built in Brooklyn, Monsey and upstate New York, Lakewood, Baltimore, and elsewhere. It is only in the contexts of outreach and mysticism that Kaplan goes into any depth at all about Judaism's most dynamic religious sector today in America. And nowhere does he take up the challenge thrown down by Jonathan Sarna in his *American Judaism: A History* to examine this sector's deep weaknesses, including a lack of first-rate leadership and shaky institutional finances.

Closer to his (and my own) spiritual home, Kaplan also fails to critically examine Reform Judaism. Instead, he generally echoes the movement's own triumphalism. His brief discussion of "contemporary Reform Judaism" concentrates on the pre-World War II era before focusing on the movement's new religious flexibility as its most salient characteristic. In his discussion of the 1999 Pittsburgh Platform, Kaplan concludes that despite tremendous conflict throughout the movement over its original "traditional content, the final result was relatively innocuous." In fact, the adoption of this platform represented a significant compromise balancing the expressions of Renewal Judaism with the historical beliefs, practices and personalities of the Reform movement. By contrast, the widely accepted new Reform prayer book, *Mishkan T'filah* (2007) clearly institutionalizes mysticism, feminism, and neo-traditional liturgical practices to a greater extent than any previous Reform siddur and represents a religious victory for the Renewal wing of Reform Judaism.

The demographic situation of American Reform Judaism today is hard to assess, in part because the movement stopped publishing statistical information about itself a decade ago. Professor Steven M. Cohen, a leading sociologist of American Judaism and a professor at the Reform movement's flagship Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, talks about 850,000 Reform Jews. Similarly, *Reform Judaism* magazine reports a circulation of approximately 300,000, which would yield a total affiliated Reform population at well under one million adherents. In other words, the Reform movement has probably contracted by a full third in the last ten years! The impact of this reality on its finances has been felt by Reform synagogue boards across the country and can be seen in the dismantling of almost the entire regional office system of the American Reform movement and the extraordinary efforts during the past year on the part of the Board of Governors of the Hebrew Union College to keep all four branches of HUC-JIR open. Of this increasingly desperate situation the reader will learn very little from Kaplan (or, for that matter, from the

book's preface, written by David Ellenson, the president of HUC-JIR).

Kaplan does pick up on some of the themes of Sarna's now decade-old *American Judaism*. He greatly expands his discussion of mixed marriage, for instance, and, perhaps more controversially, formulates a new framework, "inclusivity," to discuss the changing role both of gender and sexuality in the post-war Jewish community. But his most significant contribution to the story of Judaism in America appears in his book's last three chapters. These chapters focus on "Radical Responses to the Suburban Experience," "The Popularization of Jewish Mystical Outreach," and finally, "Herculean Efforts at Synagogue Renewal." Here, Kaplan is clearly breaking new ground and writing a new narrative for twenty-first century American Judaism. For the most part, however, his account is descriptive. He neither makes an historiographically defined argument nor places his report in the broader context of American religious history.

The picture Kaplan paints of efforts to renew and spiritualize Judaism in America is colorful. Kaplan yokes together discussions of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, the grand rebbe of the Jewish Renewal movement, and Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, "the father of the new Jewish music," with reports on the outreach work of Aish HaTorah, the "Ba'al Teshuva Phenomenon" and ArtScroll books among others. In his discussion of what he calls "mystical outreach," Kaplan mostly examines the meteoric rise of Chabad-Lubavitch in America, its international impact and its internal messianic conflict. Finally, Kaplan looks at various attempts at synagogue renewal with special focus on well-known and well-funded projects like the STAR (Synagogue: Transformation and Renewal) "synaplex" initiative led by three large Jewish Foundations: Bronfman, Schusterman, and Steinhardt (the rise in importance of the independent Jewish foundation is another recent phenomenon that merits more attention).

Kaplan's account of these endeavors is sympathetic but not exactly upbeat. Where "American Jewish religious belief and practice" are headed is something he does not profess to know. *Contemporary American Judaism* is an ambitious book that seeks to tell a big story. But it tells only part of that story in an incomplete manner, without a clear thesis or historiographical framework. It is, in essence, a traveler's report from a community, which might be on the verge of a vast implosion. Perhaps current efforts at transformation and renewal are the birth pains of a new "Yavneh moment" in American Judaism, a historical comparison provided by Kaplan himself in his closing statement. But before that happens, if we borrow his analogy, many Temples may yet have to fall while isolated communities of modern-day Zealots hold out in their own spiritual fortresses.

At the end of his narrative, Kaplan approvingly quotes the distinguished cultural historian David Biale, who calls on American Jews to face the future not with trepidation but with enthusiasm. Biale recommends that we regard intermarriage and other seemingly disintegrative trends "as creating new forms of identity, including multiple identities, that will reshape what it means to be Jewish in ways that we can only begin to imagine." Kaplan neglects to mention that Biale is also a leading exponent of secular Judaism who presumably can observe the decline of the Jewish religion with at least some equanimity. It is strange, then, to encounter him as an encouraging voice at the very end of a book animated by a concern with the fate of institutional Judaism in America. But what is even stranger is what follows the conclusion of Kaplan's narrative: an Afterword by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi.

While Kaplan is guarded in his assessment of the strength of the transformation and renewal he has described in his book, Schachter-Shalomi, who happily takes credit for a great deal of it, is enthusiastic about the future of Judaism in America. "I'm

optimistic," he writes, "that something will emerge, you know. I'm as optimistic as I am when I see a newborn baby." He is less than completely candid, however, in his less than completely literate explanation of why he feels this way. Referring to insights that he gained while working on his recent book, *The Paradigm Shift*, he proclaims that "we have to abandon the Deuteronomic point of view of Jewish triumphalism that mashiah is coming and then all the goyim finding out they were wrong to knowing that we are looking at something that is a lot more organismic." What is less than clear here, aside from the syntax, is that his new paradigm calls for relinquishing the very idea of God as Father, King, and Judge, as well as the notion of Torah as legislation. Perhaps Schachter-Shalomi felt that he ought to soft-pedal his radicalism, for consistency's sake, in a chapter where he lauds Chabad (a movement to which, as Kaplan has reminded us, he once belonged but was eventually forced to leave).

Why Kaplan has attached an opinion so much more positive than his own to the end of his book not as an appendix illustrating the strengths and weaknesses of the Renewal Movement but as a full-fledged Afterword is a bit of a mystery. Perhaps the editors at Columbia University Press have a post-modern taste for first-person narratives and hybrid texts. Perhaps they perceived the need for a "happy ending." Or perhaps Kaplan himself could not help but give voice in the end, in some fashion, to the optimism about the future with which the Jewish religious tradition has for so long been imbued.

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Faith in Doubt

BY NOAH EFRON

IN PRAISE OF DOUBT

by Peter Berger and Anton Zijderveld
HarperOne, 179 pp., \$23.99

Every Saturday last fall, dozens of men and boys, followers of Rabbi Yitzchak Tuvia Weiss, the aged Chief Rabbi of the ultra-Orthodox organization *Edah ha-Hareidis*, converged in anger on the Intel factory in Jerusalem to protest management's decision to keep production lines open on the Sabbath. The factory lies on a small campus that borders a Haredi, or ultra-orthodox neighborhood, and though etching computer chips is not particularly noisy, its operation was an affront to the devout observance of the day. Intel security ringed the grounds with razor

wire, and police set up a perimeter, holding the protesters who spat and cried, "Nazis! Nazis!" and "You Zionists caused the Holocaust!" Maxine Fassberg, general manager of Intel Israel, announced that if the protests continued, "the company will be forced to close it and may also decide to leave Israel," taking with it 6,500 good jobs. That's what happens, one blogger observed, when you put "Yentl Inside."

The Jerusalem silicon kerfuffle was just one episode in last autumn's harvest of religious conflict in Israel. Religious demonstrators showered rocks on cars making use of a city-owned parking lot, recently opened on the Sabbath. In November, a young woman was arrested for wearing a *tallit*, or prayer shawl, traditionally worn only by men, and carrying a Torah beyond the restricted zone that Israel's Supreme Court has delegated for non-orthodox prayer at the Western Wall. That weekend, four

thousand Israelis rallied in downtown Jerusalem, demanding to "take back the city for secular Jews" and put an end to the coercion of fundamentalist "Ayatollahs." (My fourteen year old daughter, who herself can sometimes be found wrapped in a prayer shawl cradling a Torah scroll, traveled an hour to be among them.)

Everyday events in Jerusalem constantly force those of us who live in Israel to consider just what is the rightful place of religious convictions, and other strongly held beliefs, in the public square. This is the sort of question that Peter Berger and Anton Zijderveld set out to answer in their brief but ambitious new book, *In Praise of Doubt: How to Have Convictions without Becoming a Fanatic*. Berger has been an intellectual celebrity among sociologists and others since at least 1967, when he and Thomas Luckmann published an extraordinary book called *The Social Construction of Reality*. He is