



BY DANA EVAN KAPLAN - MAY 9, 2011

TATTOOS, CREMATION, PERSONAL SPIRITUALITY: THE JEWISH WORLD IN TRANSFORMATION

What inspired you to write *Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal*? What sparked your interest?

I grew up in New York and my family belonged to the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue and later Rodef Shalom, both Reform temples on the Upper West Side. My parents sent me to the most religiously liberal Jewish day school they could find, Ramaz School on East 85th Street, which was Modern Orthodox. There was a rather stark contrast between the worldview taught at the Orthodox Zionist school as opposed to the perspective on religion and ethnicity held by the liberal congregations. By the second or third grade, I was already obsessively trying to figure out why my synagogue and my school seemed to present Judaism so differently. That is a question that has followed me all of my life.

I left Ramaz after the sixth grade, but I chose to have my bar mitzvah at the Jewish Center, a large Orthodox synagogue on West 86th Street. After my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, my sister and I moved to Waterbury, Connecticut where we lived with my aunt and uncle, Ruth and Herman. I spent many hours discussing the state of the Jewish community in Waterbury with my Aunt Ruth, and although the ideas presented in this book differ radically from what I was arguing at the time, I owe much to her enthusiastic debating. If she was alive today, I think she would be somewhat shocked by my changes in orientation.

What's the most important take-home message for readers?

We are at a transformative moment in Jewish history and creative leaders can and should respond with an equal amount of transformative zeal. Any such moment of revolutionary transformation is fraught with peril but it doesn't do us any good to condemn sociological patterns that we don't like. Rather, it is far more constructive to respond creatively to what are at this point inevitable social processes. We can only hope and pray that things work out. Over the past decade, I have been warning that the Reform movement can only survive if it becomes more

serious, more intense, more focused on a specific theological viewpoint. But I want to balance my fears with hopes.

I was inspired by the words of Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi, one of the founders and the most influential spiritual guide of the Jewish Renewal movement, who was gracious enough to write the afterword to the book. He wrote the Judaism is like an ancient tree. The core of any mature tree is old wood. The old wood is crucial to maintaining the tree structure but it is no longer growing. The growth is only taking place in the outermost ring. We today are that outermost ring and we are the ones responsible for growing Judaism. We need to listen to the voices of the past in order to absorb ancient wisdom which, with a little imagination, is still applicable today.

But some things the past cannot teach us and our task is to respond to the challenges of today and tomorrow. Reb Zalman is totally confident that we will be able to do so. He closes his afterword by saying, “And so when I’m saying I’m optimistic, I’m optimistic that something will emerge, you know. I’m as optimistic as I am when I see a newborn baby.” I wish I could share his optimism and I wanted my readers to come away with a sense of hope for the future of American Judaism.

Anything you had to leave out?

I had to leave out many, many things. And the biggest frustration was that I had to leave out an entire subject which had formed half of a chapter because of legal reasons. My lawyer allowed me to put in a description of the episode and so you can read about it in the book. I was in Bogotá Colombia that summer and I rewrote that half of chapter literally dozens of times but in the end I couldn’t use it anyway. In addition, there were thousands of programs, organizations, personalities, controversies, debates, dialogues, responses and so forth that I just didn’t have room for. The main purpose of such a book is to help the reader to see the broad trends. Too much detail can make it almost impossible to see the roadmap. On the other hand, I am very cautious in terms of drawing conclusions.

One reviewer was horrified that I refused to take strong interpretative positions on broad trends that are still developing. I accept that criticism but I was more comfortable interpreting the individual parts of the story while leaving it up to the reader to connect the dots. If they read carefully, there’s no question where I stand on the various interpretive questions, but I like to force people to think about what I write. Getting the reader to engage with the material is a tremendous challenge but I think it’s actually more important than simply communicating a particular partisan position.

What are some of the biggest misconceptions about your topic?

Some people believe that there is only one way to look at Judaism. My book is an attempt to show how American Jews have taken some of the same religious concepts and practices and done very different things with them depending on their perspective.

I am not writing this book from a theological perspective so I am not necessarily arguing that this is religiously authentic behavior, but the fact that I describe it in loving detail implicitly suggests

that I approve of the mushrooming of creative pluralistic religious responses to contemporary life. One neo-conservative reviewer savaged me for what he saw as my support for attitudes that he believes are nonsensical and destructive. But because the review was so ideological, I was actually quite amused and had it distributed in advance of my speaking at Baylor University in October so that the primarily evangelical Christian students there could get a sense of the other side of the argument.

I think some outsiders still think American Judaism is divided into Reform, Conservative, Orthodox. In recent decades, it has become much more pluralistic, with several additional groups that could be seen as fledgling denominations and many others that are floating somewhere between institutional categories. On the other hand, some insiders believe that the American Jewish religious denominational structure has collapsed. While there is no question that it has weakened, there will still be separate religious movements for the foreseeable future. I hope I did not contribute to this misperception by entitling one of my chapters “The Rise and Fall of American Jewish Denominationalism.”

The sages of the classical rabbinic tradition reinterpreted biblical commandments in order to reinvent contemporary Judaism for their times. I implicitly argue that we need to do the same thing now. The denominational structure which may have served us well in the late 19th and throughout the 20th century is clearly no longer enough. I am planning to argue that we should create new divisions based on clear theological differences rather than preserving denominational organizations which represent divisions that are no longer meaningful. But I haven't published this argument yet so I shouldn't say too much about this.

Did you have a specific audience in mind when writing?

I am trying to write for everyone who might be interested in contemporary religion. To do so, I have spent a great deal of energy making my writing as accessible as possible. I tell stories and try to insert colorful asides. I also put in my somewhat dry sense of humor, which is not always appreciated. One of the anonymous readers labeled one of my attempts at humor “speculative” because I was suggesting that an historical personality might have done something amusing. I was trying to make a joke but the reader thought I was being dead serious. So sometimes you can try too hard.

The greatest gratification that an author can receive after a book is published is to get detailed responses from people who are deeply engaged in activities that relate to the book. So it has been wonderful to get so many emails from people active in various segments of American Judaism as well as those looking from outside but involved in American religious life.

Are you hoping to just inform readers? Give them pleasure? Piss them off?

I am trying to write a reasonably comprehensive current history of contemporary Judaism. But there are so many things happening so it is clearly impossible to cover everything. I am also making a series of arguments, particularly relating to the impact that the concept of personal spirituality has had on organized American Judaism. Americans today feel much freer to explore ceremonial and ritual practices that intrigue them regardless of what their community thinks of

those particular ideas. This has allowed Jews to move in a number of different directions, including seemingly contradictory ones.

I found some of these contradictory impulses fascinating. For example, there have been a lot more young Jewish people getting tattoos, including many who choose Jewish symbols or Hebrew letters. Now of course the *halacha* prohibits getting a tattoo, and in earlier generations, a Jew who got a tattoo was in open rebellion against the tradition. That is not so obviously the case anymore.

Another such example that I write about in my book was of a woman in northern California who asks to be cremated after her body is ritually purified and most of the traditional Hebrew prayers have been recited. Again, this is behavior that would have been inexplicable to a traditional Jew from a previous generation. I am hoping that my readers will find these internal contradictions as fascinating as I did and want to explore the changing contours of American Judaism through my book. I do like to be controversial, as long as my criticisms are based on a solid footing.

I did irritate some of the subjects talked about in the book.

What alternate title would you give the book?

That is an excellent question. I have tended to give my books broad titles on the theory that it will attract more of the possibly mythical “general readers.” However, at least two reviewers turned rather hostile in large part because they felt the book did not adequately cover the topic as they understood it from the title. While the book is called *Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal*, the reader has to look in the preface to learn that the focus is on how American Judaism has changed since 1945. Specifically, I describe the decline of what has been called “historical familism” and rise of personal spirituality.

Historical familism is the idea that Jews see themselves as part of an extended family. Familism in its original context refers to a social pattern in which the family assumes a position of ascendance over personal interests. Regardless of what a parent, child, aunt, or uncle may want for themselves, they have to subordinate their own wants and needs in the interest of what is good for the family as a whole. As a society becomes more affluent, it becomes harder to pass on familial values because the younger generation will not see a pressing need to subordinate their interests to that of the family’s.

That’s one explanation for many of the sociological changes that we have seen taking place over the past three decades. So one alternative title might have been “From Historical Familism to Existential Spirituality.” In place of institutional religiosity, many Jews became drawn to experiential spirituality. This experiential spirituality places primacy on personal experience rather than belief systems. Because of this dramatic change in orientation, some have called for the creation of new maps when the traditional methods of describing religious behavior no longer seemed to capture what is happening in our society. So another alternative title might have been “New Maps of Contemporary American Judaism.”

How do you feel about the cover?

The cover is an American flag with alternating five- and six-pointed stars designed by Frances Baca for Columbia University Press. The drawing symbolizes the integration of Jewish values into American values as well as the reverse process of association of American values as Jewish values. I would love to claim some of the credit for thinking up the idea or sketching out the graphics, but unfortunately I had nothing to do with it. Designing a cover is a very special skill and I was appreciative that the press had experts who were good at it.

Is there a book out there you wish you had written? Which one? Why?

If I was a religious studies scholar rather than strictly a specialist in Judaism, I would most like to have written some of Rodney Stark's books such as *Discovering God: the Origins of the Great Religions and the Evolution of Belief*, *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism*, or *The Churching of America 1776–1990: Winners and Losers in our Religious Economy*, which was co-authored with Roger Finke. Stark has been one of the most prominent exponents of applying the rational choice theory to religious affiliation and, although he tends to take on more than he can handle, I have found his books to be stimulating and entertaining.

What's your next book?

I am returning to my original field of endeavor, Reform Judaism. There are tremendous changes occurring in the Reform Movement today. Many of those changes are a result of threat—there is the threat that the movement will decline numerically, there is the threat that the movement will not be able to finance its institutions, there is the threat that the state of Israel will intensify its rejection of Reform Judaism as a legitimate form of the Jewish religion.

The Union for Reform Judaism recently announced that Rabbi Rick Jacobs will be nominated to become its next president, a tremendously challenging position given the ideological, demographic, financial, and organizational difficulties that the movement faces.

Since this is a subject that is developing as we speak, I hope many people—including some of your readers—can help me with ideas and feedback. Right now I'm trying to come up with what to call the new book. If anyone has a suggestion for a good title, please let me know.

[LINK: <http://religiondispatches.org/tattoos-cremation-personal-spirituality-the-jewish-world-in-transformation>]

Dana Evan Kaplan

Dana Evan Kaplan is the rabbi of Congregation Kahal Kadosh Shaare Shalom, the United Congregation of Israelites, in Kingston, Jamaica. He also teaches Judaism at the United Theological College of the University of the West Indies.

He studied in Israel at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, where he was ordained as a Reform rabbi in 1994, and Tel Aviv University, where he was awarded a PhD in Jewish History in 1997.

Dana's books include *Contemporary American Judaism: Transformation and Renewal* (Columbia University Press, 2009), *The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), *American Reform Judaism: An Introduction* (Rutgers University Press, 2003), *Platforms and Prayer Books: Theological and Liturgical Perspectives on Reform Judaism* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002) and *Contemporary Debates in American Reform Judaism: Conflicting Visions* (Routledge, 2001).