
In a graduate seminar on feminism and reproduction, I read Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970). Building on the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Firestone argues that the key to dismantling the hierarchy that exists between men and women is to separate women from reproduction. Firestone writes extensively about the oppression built into the nuclear family. I recognized “Shulamith” as a Hebrew name, but I had never heard about her in all my years of Jewish education, and I hesitated to ask about her Jewish identity in my otherwise secular classroom. As I read this radical feminist manifesto, it was clear that Firestone was scarred by traumatic personal experiences, and I feared that mentioning her Jewish identity would lead to an antisemitic reading of her work by my peers. My experience in that class speaks to the questions underlying Joyce Antler’s history of Firestone and so many other Jewish women in *Radical Jewish Feminism: Voices from the Women’s Liberation Movement*.

Antler approaches the history of Jewish women in the feminist movement of the 1960s–1980s with the question, How did their Jewish background affect their feminism? To answer this question, Antler probes multiple archives, conducts interviews, and includes in her research women involved in the feminist movement at a conference at New York University in 2011. As just one example, Antler responds to my earlier curiosity by explaining how Firestone’s Orthodox Jewish background shaped her complete rejection of the nuclear family. Firestone was the oldest daughter of six siblings—three boys and three girls—born into a family with traditional gendered expectations. Her brothers were expected to become rabbis, while the girls were expected to be passive and religiously observant wives and mothers. When her older brother,
Daniel, left the yeshiva to study philosophy and Buddhism, he was cut off from the family and later committed suicide. Shulamith was an opinionated and blunt child who often questioned Judaism and her parents. Antler writes that “Shulamith’s intensity and stubbornness pitted her directly against her father, who ‘threw his rage at Shulie’” (82).

Despite the impact that her upbringing had on her life, Firestone kept her Jewish identity private until the 1980s. Antler found this to be true among many of those involved in the women’s liberation movement, and it leads her to explore why they never spoke about their Jewish identities, even when so many of the women involved in the movement were Jewish. Antler offers a few reasons. Some women feared particularizing their struggles, preferring instead to declare the universal nature of their demands. Others feared aligning themselves with a religion, which meant accepting the patriarchy embedded within it. There was no Jewish feminist movement (yet) to challenge the patriarchy within Judaism or the Jewish community; connecting themselves to this patriarchal religious tradition would have challenged their feminist credentials.

Antler divides *Jewish Radical Feminism* into two parts. In the first part, she provides personal and political biographies of Jewish women who were leaders in the American feminist movement. In the second part, Antler tells the stories of women who enacted feminism through Judaism, creating a movement for feminist Jewish theology, ritual, and liturgy. Noting that many historians had overlooked the Jewish identities of these women and the struggle for feminism within Judaism, Antler argues that bringing religious identity to the fore is a way to acknowledge the intersectional nature of identity. Antler draws on the work of critical legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw as she explains that Jewish women, too, were coming to terms with their own “multiple identities” (19).

Firestone is just one example of the Jewish women involved in the women’s liberation movement. Others include “The Gang of Four” from Chicago—Heather Booth, Amy Kesselman, Vivian Rothstein, and Naomi Weisstein; The Boston Women’s Health Book Collective members who authored *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, including Esther Rome, Paula Doress-Worters, Vilunya Diskin, Nancy Miriam Hawley, Joan Ditzion, and Jane Pincus; and New York’s radical women’s movement,
Redstockings, with members including Ellen Willis and Alix Kates Shulman. As Antler delves deeply into each woman’s history, she reveals the many ways feminism grew out of their Jewish backgrounds and how their relation to the broader movement often determined how much of their personal identity to reveal.

One of the great successes of this book is that in all the personal histories, Antler does not attempt to draw a neat summary of how women related their Judaism and their feminism. Instead, she is satisfied with the inconsistencies and the irregularities. Of the New York radicals she writes, “Despite shared elements, there was no common Jewish core that united their experiences” (113). Perhaps Antler is satisfied with this because she recognizes that many of these women were aiming for universalism in their feminist goals. In contrast to the identity politics of today, the feminists of the 1960s and 1970s united to address “more universal problems of sexism and patriarchy,” without being bound by their particular differences (122).

In the second part of the book, Antler uncovers the personal histories of the women in the 1970s and 1980s who challenged the patriarchy within Judaism. Antler distinguishes between religious women who advocated for changes to ritual, liturgy, and theology, and secular women who “rejected the gendered inequities of mainstream Jewish life” (207). Some of the religious feminists were Martha Ackelsberg, Paula Hyman, Judith Plaskow, and Arlene Agus, who were active in Ezrat Nashim and B’not Esh; Laura Geller and Rebecca Alpert, who became two of the first women rabbis; and Orthodox feminists such as Blu Greenberg. Secular feminists include Aviva Cantor, Lilith founder Susan Weidman Schneider, and the women of Brooklyn Bridge and Chutzpah. Antler also includes a chapter on Jewish lesbian feminists, in which she explores how the politics of sexuality intersected with Jewish feminism, and a chapter on Jewish feminism in Israel, in which she examines the global dimension of Jewish feminism.

*Jewish Radical Feminism* is an illustration of the classic feminist credo, “the personal is political.” Many women attempted to keep their religious identities private, but it was clear that these identities shaped their political activism. In this way, Antler’s scholarship is a lens through which to understand the history of the feminist movement. Personal
biographies reveal that antisemitism and anti-Zionism were noticeable within the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s–1970s. As the feminist movement emerged in the period surrounding the Six-Day War in 1967, some feminists, such as Ellen Willis, saw that while they felt vulnerable as Jews for the first time, many of their friends were “unconcerned ‘if Israel went under’” (96). Willis criticized the anti-Zionist agendas of the radical left and the New Jewish Agenda, because she said that these positions were “‘objectively anti-Semitic’ because the demise of Israel would ‘result in the death or dispersal of a great many Jews and encourage an active resurgence of anti-Semitism’” (98n121).

As Antler walks her readers through the personal narratives of Jewish women, we also see how feminism resulted from schisms with other movements. Antler writes that after the Six-Day War, many young American Jews who had previously felt no connection to Israel found themselves joyful at the liberation of the Western Wall. They were proud and relieved that Israel had spared itself from destruction (243). Suddenly identifying strongly as Jews, they left the New Left, where they felt they could not be Jewish or Zionist, and joined a network of Jewish movements that were committed to fighting “broad feminist and social justice struggles while addressing issues of primary concern to them as Jews” (247).

Antler’s scholarship should also be commended for unearthing the problems with a movement composed of activists from similar backgrounds. Perhaps because these backgrounds were often unspoken, or assumed, individuals with different personal histories could not easily enter the fray. For instance, the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective (BWHBC) struggled with racial diversity, due largely to the fact that three-quarters of the initial group were Jewish and white and spoke of their organization as a “family.” Like other feminist organizations, the BWHBC grew out of a group of women with similar class, education, and racial identifications. These similarities resulted in a sense of group solidarity that excluded women of color. Although BWHBC attempted to mitigate power differentials, it was very difficult for latecomers to enter into the tight-knit group, especially when there were layers of co-identification (like Jewishness) that the group itself did not acknowledge. The story that Antler tells of the BWHBC and its internal struggles with
power differentials reflects the struggles of many feminist organizations at the time (and still today).

In my reading of Antler’s thorough history of the Jewish radical feminist movement of the 1960s–1980s, I couldn’t help but notice the many parallels in today’s feminist movement. Take, for example, the controversies surrounding the Women’s March. Although the first march in 2017 garnered widespread support from Jewish women’s organizations such as the National Council of Jewish Women, the Women’s March group received subsequent criticism out of concern about antisemitism and anti-Zionism among its founders. In 2018 and 2019, many Jewish women felt forced to choose between their feminism and their Judaism. Although beyond the scope of Antler’s historical study, I cannot help but wonder whether Antler would find that today’s struggles mirror those of previous generations or see them as distinct from one another.

One of the greatest lessons I derive from Jewish Radical Feminism is that personal differences remain, and they often inform one’s activism. The difficult work of coalition building and solidarity means that to some extent those personal differences must be put aside, at least temporarily, to achieve certain successes. Doing so, however, might pose other challenges, as we are slower to recognize the gaps in our collective experiences and identities if our individual experiences and identities are not front and center. Reading Antler today, we are encouraged to look at our own activism and ask, How are our identities shaping our activism? How do our personal experiences inform which causes we adopt? And importantly, Which identities are we leaving out of the political sphere, at a detriment to the movement?

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The South is the stepchild of American Jewish historiography. Or so some scholars of this particular region have been wont to complain. They have noted how vigorously the Jewish experience in New York (and more broadly the Northeast) has been recorded, seemingly to the detriment of the South, which once brandished all sorts of “firsts.” These included the first Jew in world history (perhaps) ever elected to public office by non-Jewish voters (Francis Salvador in South Carolina), the first Reform congregation to be formed in the United States (Charleston’s Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim), and the first Jewish woman to publish a book of poems in the United States (Penina Moïse, again in Charleston). From the colonial era and into the early nineteenth century, when tiny Jewish settlements hugged the Atlantic coast, none loomed larger than Charleston. The first Jews to represent their states in the U.S. Senate (David Levy Yulee and Judah P. Benjamin) served Florida and Louisiana, respectively. That the importance of Southern Jews has never repeated the impact of their antebellum origins—to be displaced by more vigorous and creative communities above the Mason-Dixon line and west of the Mississippi River—should not detract from the curiosity historians should muster. This region poses the dilemma of how far the processes of assimilation and absorption can go before the regenerative forces of Jewish collective life vanish. The tiny demographic scale of Southern Jewry, embedded in a region that historically demanded a high degree of conformism, tested the limits of the distinctiveness of a people that could trace its ancient lineage to Ur of the Chaldees.

No academic has been more energetic in probing the meaning of the Southern Jewish experience, or championed its study more fiercely, than Mark K. Bauman. No one has demonstrated a greater mastery of the growing bibliography of the field. Nor has any other academic been so pivotal in countering the complaints about the neglect of the South. His influence stems primarily from piloting the annual scholarly journal, *Southern Jewish History*, of which he has served as the first—and to date only—editor, beginning in 1998. But *A New Vision of Southern*
Jewish History is bound to solidify his singular status in the field, and not merely because of its bulk (of which just under two hundred pages consist of endnotes and suggestions for further reading). Even as he has undertaken the editorial tasks associated with the journal, he has maintained an active career of research and writing that have elevated the visibility and pertinence of the field. As the subtitle of this book suggests, Bauman has specialized in political and social history. Though the volume smacks of the monumental, its author cannot cover everything; and not even “a new vision” can profess to be comprehensive.

Thus Bauman neither analyzes the economic arrangements of the Southern Jewish past nor pays attention to intellectual and cultural history—other than religion, in which he has studied rabbinic leadership in particular. Regular readers of the American Jewish Archives Journal are likely to be especially familiar with his work, because five of the eighteen chapters in A New Vision of Southern Jewish History are reprinted from it; and a sixth, a major definition of “The Southerner as American: Jewish Style,” appeared as a pamphlet under the auspices of the Jacob Rader Marcus Center. Bauman has lived within close range of Atlanta since 1972 and has written many articles devoted to the history of the Jews of that city, nine of which are reprinted here. He is indeed more of an urban historian (3) than anything else, as is Georgia Tech’s Ronald H. Bayor, who provides a foreword to this volume. As though signaling that Jews have generally made themselves quite at home in the region, Bauman’s book contains no separate chapter on antisemitism. But he comes to the subject of the Southern Jewish experience neither as a celebrant nor as an apologist, neither as a critic nor as a polemicist. He has not demanded of the puzzles of the past that their solutions speak to the felt needs of the present. What has evidently animated his scholarship is instead an admirably disinterested yearning to understand the past that is consistent with the pursuit of the ideal of objectivity.

Adherence to so elusive an ideal, the author implies, offers the hope of escaping the perils of filiopietism and thus of enabling the field to enjoy the dignity of full inclusion in American Jewish historiography. Yet a paradox lies at the center of this thick volume. Bauman began his career as a historian of American religion; and then the more he studied the American Jewish past, the more he came to appreciate the sheer,
unsurprising character of Southern Jewish life. The five chapters that address historiographical issues tend to amplify his belief that Southerners did not carve out a *Sonderweg* that diverged from their co-religionists elsewhere. Comparisons with the rest of American Jewry led Bauman to conclude that the region has *not* been distinctive. This stance is a little eccentric, because scholars usually risk overstating their case for the singularity of their subject. Rather perversely, Bauman does the opposite, arguing that whatever is assumed to be peculiar about Southern Jewry can be found elsewhere in the nation. Rather boldly, he makes the same assertion about the South itself. Residents of the region are, quite simply, Americans. No one should therefore be misled by the melodious accents or the gracious small-town manners or the insular kinship networks of Southern Jews, whose obliviousness to the sweatshops and trade-union struggles depicted in, say, Irving Howe’s *World of Our Fathers* (1976) should not betray anyone into believing that something exotic separates the South from the rest of American Jewry.

So emphatic an argument is welcome, if only because the exploration of the Southern Jewish past has long suffered from underconceptualization. Nor has Bauman been careless; he has not inflated his case beyond plausibility. He has not denied that “regional differences” exist. But “the search for such distinctiveness has been exaggerated and tends to retard the emergence of a more complete, nuanced and accurate understanding of what it was like for a variety of different Jewish sub-communities to live in the South over time” (328). Dichotomies that separate distinctiveness from commonality, Bauman insists, should be dismissed as “false.” Instead the scholarly disagreement is really over “the nature and extent of the influence” that the region has exerted (335). The sharp bifurcations need to yield to “nuance, ambiguity, depth and breadth of coverage, and truly comparative analysis” (335). What Bauman has called for is undoubtedly exemplified in Lee Shai Weissbach’s *Jewish Life in Small-Town America* (2005), which largely shows how similar the hamlets of the Midwest and New England were in harboring the sorts of Jewish communities that could also be found in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century South in particular. In this sense Weissbach comes down on Bauman’s side of this scholarly quarrel.
But danger lurks in the view that such a debate is mostly a matter of emphasis. Genuine differences can become obscured. Take Bauman’s own specialization of urban history. Until fairly late in the twentieth century, with the emergence of a metropolis such as Atlanta, no Southern city dominated the region with the magnetic force that the teeming neighborhoods of Chicago and Detroit shaped Midwestern Jewry, or that Philadelphia and of course New York affected the mid-Atlantic states. In the South the glacially slow pace of urbanization, along with the decided preference of the impoverished immigrants from Eastern Europe over a century ago to settle elsewhere in America, surely made a significant difference. To cite one example: Neither Yulee nor Benjamin could have defended specifically Jewish interests, even if these Southern statesmen had wanted to. But population density in Northern and Midwestern cities half a century after Appomattox enabled Jewish voters to help elect officials who could advocate for ethnic and religious causes. By the end of the twentieth century, such voters could also do so in southern Florida. Those counties of course constitute a special case in the annals of Southern Jewry, a regional anomaly, an outpost of urban and suburban Northern Jewry that no one would confuse with historic capitals of the Confederacy, such as Montgomery and Richmond. No wonder that, when the Institute for Southern Jewish Life built its online archive of Southern Jewish communities, the ticklish question of Florida was saved for last. (The state is now tucked into the Institute’s *Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities*.) Perhaps southern Florida makes the South more American. Or perhaps the definition of the South is unstable. But in any case, such ambiguities also mean that the argument over the distinctiveness of Southern Jewry is inconclusive and should hardly be dismissed as “nonproductive” or even “counter-productive” (335).

Disagreements over which lines can be drawn to serve as the boundaries of the region, or what identity entails in imagined as well as rooted communities, are useful for another reason. Bauman is an empiricist who claims that his advice to “researchers and especially graduate students” happens to be consistent: “While conducting research, begin by ignoring the interpretations of other historians (including mine) and let the evidence lead you to your own conclusions.” Only afterward should
“the historiography” help “determine where your findings agree and/or disagree with those of others” (6). Yet such advice cannot enhance the prospects for success. In the initial stage of an inquiry, how can a researcher know what sort of historical problem invites a resolution, what sort of mystery in the past needs to be dispelled, what sort of question might offer the hope of an answer? In fact, no one should really begin investigations unencumbered. Though Bauman elsewhere cites The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962), the paradigmatic overview of the history of physics, he misses Thomas Kuhn’s point that “normal science” works within established frameworks (that may be superseded). As social creatures, we do not have open minds. We are, however, obliged to make all of our hypotheses and guesses provisional. At the beginning as well as at the end of research, the value of those inherited interpretations is heuristic.

While Bauman’s work is noteworthy, the publisher should be chastised for the physical aspects of A New Vision of Southern Jewish History. The print is so compact that it might deter some readers. The jacket cover is so dull—a drab gray (Confederate gray perhaps?)—that no designer appears to have been hired for the purpose of trying to attract buyers. The solitary blurb on the back cover offers such scant praise and is so abbreviated an endorsement that it barely qualifies as an enticement. Even though Bauman co-edits a series on Jews and Judaism for the University Press of Alabama, it could not have shown a less imaginative effort to present and promote a work that deserves recognition as an inescapable feature of the scholarship on the Southern Jewish past.

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“Why did you change your name from Tenevitch to Tanny?” I asked my grandfather, born in 1919 in Montreal, Canada, a child of Jewish immigrants from Lithuania. It is a question I remember asking multiple times growing up, and one I asked again as I wrote this review. “Tenevitch was not a good name to have here. It was fine for Russia, but not here,” recalled my 100-year-old grandpa. In the 1940s, “the people in St. Tite [de Bagac, Quebec] wanted to do business with a Tanny, not a Tenevitch.” Although my grandfather mentioned neither Jewishness nor antisemitism explicitly, it was clear to me what he had in mind, a common familial narrative of foreignness and restricted mobility, documented and substantively confirmed in Kirsten Fermaglich’s wonderful monograph, *A Rosenberg by Any Other Name: A History of Jewish Name Changing in America*.

Ashkenazi American (and Canadian) Jewish name changing is a well-known phenomenon, even though most Jewish families did not change their names. It was common enough to have engendered heated communal discussion, and as Fermaglich argues, virtually everyone knew a Jewish person whose family had changed their name. Long after the practice had all but ceased, the stories lived on in family lore, given how much our names are tied to our identities. From the cursory, “Oh, our name is one of those Ellis Island names,” to a more detailed genealogy, most Jews who have inherited a changed name have something to say about it, however inaccurate the story may be.

In *A Rosenberg by Any Other Name*, Fermaglich explodes the numerous myths associated with Jewish name changing, offering the reader a sophisticated window into the construction of Jewish identity in America from the 1930s to the present. Fermaglich highlights the complex place of the Jews in America’s ethnic and racial mosaic, shaped by fears over inclusion and opportunity in a state defined by immigration and the enduring legacy of slavery and segregation. Beginning her investigation with name changing petitions submitted to the New York City Civil Court in the 1930s through the 1950s, Fermaglich expands...
outward, examining how the decision to change one’s name “was neither an isolated nor an individual act,” (2) as it involved entire families, their communities, prospective employers, and ultimately the government, which gradually stepped in to regulate identity with the coming of the welfare state, World War II, and the Cold War. But name changing was neither “a step on the way to forgetting the past” (4) nor a means of “becoming American,” because the name changers were, “by virtually every measure,” already American (5).

They were already American because, contrary to popular lore, Jewish name changers were not newly arrived foreigners who assumed a new moniker upon arriving at Ellis Island, where, in fact, “officials were explicitly prohibited from changing immigrants’ names” (15). Neither did these first-generation immigrants change their names while building up their new lives in America, because there was no need to; a Jewish name was not an impediment to acquiring a working-class job in domestic service or on the loading dock. It was rather the children of immigrants, second-generation Americans, who changed their names. Born and bred in New York and seeking entry into the middle class through education and white-collar occupations, they came to believe their Jewish names were a handicap that would impede their mobility. The rise of institutionalized antisemitism coupled with the need to fill out applications for employment and university admission meant that appearing to be Jewish on paper limited one’s prospects. Name changing allowed American-born Ashkenazi Jews—fortunate enough to have white skin in a country where skin color was indelible and largely determined your fate—to gain control over their ethnic visibility as they navigated their way through the public sphere. Antisemitism severely affected how Jewish Americans imagined their socioeconomic prospects.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that name changing signified a desire to abandon one’s Jewishness and completely disappear into a generic white American landscape. Few name changers converted to Christianity, and most retained ties to Jewish communal institutions and families, as typified by non-name-changing Jews of their generation. They were not self-hating Jews who saw “American” and “Jewish” as antithetical categories, notwithstanding the occasional invective unleashed by Jewish elites in prominent publications and a decidedly negative portrayal of
name changers as inauthentic Jews in literature and popular culture. Fermaglich argues there is no evidence to support this perception; they “were incorporating their name changes into their communal lives as Jews” (81). Rather, it was an attempt to have control over the relevance of one's Jewishness in a given situation, to not let the gentile establishment and the increasingly invasive federal government define one’s identity.

The elimination of institutional antisemitism, the Civil Rights movement, and the rise of American multiculturalism led to the marked diminution of Jewish name changing in the 1960s and beyond. Fermaglich takes up the implications of this for American Jewry in the latter chapters of her book, with particular attention to the ongoing debate over whiteness and white privilege. In this new era, when Ashkenazi Jews can go through life accepted as white Americans irrespective of their names, Jews have no reason not to express their Jewishness in public, thus rendering the history of Jewish name changing—along with the often agonizing and polemical discussions it caused and its importance for appreciating America's antisemitic past—all but unknown. Conversely, “Jews’ past possibilities of escaping racism and achieving a white identity with a name change are much less available to African Americans, Chinese, Latino,” (175) and other visible minorities today. The children of European Jewish immigrants may have struggled for inclusion, but the tools they had at their disposal are not available to all minorities.

*A Rosenberg by Any Other Name* offers an erudite and creative approach for understanding how Jews fashioned their American identities on their own terms, skillfully navigating their way through an ethnic landscape where Jews faced discrimination, which was arduous but ultimately surmountable. But does this remain true now? The uptick in antisemitism since 2017 has reawakened not only the question of Jews and race (something one would have reasonably thought settled a mere five years ago) but whether the invisibility offered by a name change is once again an asset, especially in public spaces such as social media and college campuses replete with political activism. What is the relationship between Jewish legibility and the fragility of Jewish inclusion today, as the achievements of the Civil Rights era seemingly unravel? Is this a pressing matter? The Rosenbergs who became Rose and the Tenevitches who became Tanny in the first half of the twentieth century certainly thought it was.
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If you have heard of American Jewish philosopher Horace Meyer Kallen (1882–1974), it is probably because he is credited with coining the term “cultural pluralism,” the ideological antecedent to what we today call “multiculturalism.” That’s a shame, because Kallen’s intellectual output was much wider than those two words. He was a leading Zionist in the United States, a prominent proponent of philosophical pragmatism, a founding faculty member of the New School for Social Research, a pioneer of adult education, and an author of countless books and articles on topics including consumer cooperatives, art, humor, academic freedom, religion, the environment, and the biblical book of Job.

In his impressive new monograph, Horace Kallen Confronts America, Matthew Kaufman attempted a count: In his lengthy career, Kallen wrote “nearly forty books and more than four hundred articles” (2). Kaufman’s book is an “intellectual biography” (vii), and given the enormous quantity of sources, he had to be selective. The subtitle, Jewish Identity, Science, and Secularism, was a good choice, as it reveals Kaufman’s focus. In six chapters, Kaufman effectively argues that “Kallen devoted his life to the ambitious program of persuading American Jews to adopt a secular, scientific framework to define Jewish identity, and to persuade America that the vitality of her democracy likewise depended on adopting a secular and scientific framework” (9).
Kallen came to secularism early. Born in Berenstadt, Germany (today Poland), the eldest child of an Orthodox rabbi, he moved to Boston at age five and began questioning his religion in high school. As a Harvard undergraduate, he replaced Judaism with atheism but became enamored of the emerging secular Zionist movement and wrote poems for its chief American journal, *The Maccabaean*. He returned to Harvard as a graduate student and helped found the Harvard Menorah Society in 1906, a precursor to the Intercollegiate Menorah Association, which would publish the influential *Menorah Journal*, to which Kallen would contribute.

The guiding idea of *The Menorah Journal* was “Hebraism,” which Kallen understood as a secular expression of Jewishness whose ideal political manifestation was Zionism. As a literary aesthete who wrote drama, fiction, and poetry, Kallen was deeply invested in creating and advancing a modern Jewish culture. Though not a scientist, he was a pragmatist philosopher, and like a good pragmatist, he used science as a tool to justify his advancement of a secular Jewish identity. At first, this meant race-science. In his 1906 article, “The Ethics of Zionism,” Kallen posited Jews were a pure race who transmitted Hebraism through a combination of nature and nurture down through the generations. He had only a loose understanding of the Darwinian theory he championed and relied on phrenology—the study of skulls—and other pseudo-scientific data to prove his point.

As Kaufman notes, Kallen believed in a “a hodgepodge of racial ideas” that today would be regarded as “morally problematic.” Nonetheless, Kallen “rejected notions of racial hierarchy and superiority.” He believed that Jews offered a distinct “moral contribution to world civilization” (25–27). By extension, other groups provided similarly valuable contributions. If there was a hint of Jewish chauvinism in Kallen’s Hebraism, it can be understood given the massive degree of antisemitism Jews faced at the time.

As Kaufman argues, what was significant about Kallen’s early attachment to race science was that it provided a secular rationale for Jewish existence. This countered the Reform view that Judaism should function only as religion, and never as nationality or race. In 1910, Kallen debated prominent Reform rabbis in the Jewish press over this very
issue. While Kallen rejected the Orthodox Judaism of his father, he had even less use for the bland universalism of the Reform movement, which officially rejected Zionism. As a Hebraist and Zionist, he needed a scientific defense of Jewish identity as a secular bulwark against the Reform movement.

Though Kallen gradually moved away from skulls, he came to believe in something he called “psychophysical inheritance,” to further “establish the priority of Jewish secular and cultural identity over a religious one” (55). Kallen was fuzzy on the details of how this worked, but it demonstrated his continuing reliance on the putatively biological and pseudo-scientific to validate the contribution of secular Jewish culture to world civilization.

What made Kallen’s cultural pluralism unique for its time was its relatively nonhierarchical nature. All cultures had an equal right to exist and develop. Furthermore, and despite criticisms to the contrary, Kallen was not an ethnic segregationist. He did not want Jews to be isolated, in America or Zion, but rather advocated that all groups interact, exchange, and borrow. Kallen emphasized cooperation rather than competition between cultures. This led to his famous “symphony of civilization” in the United States, a musical metaphor that comes from his 1915 essay “Democracy Versus the Melting Pot,” where he championed cultural pluralism over racist nativism and supposedly liberal assimilationism. Crucially, Kallen’s cultural symphony was secular. He compared Jews to the Irish, Italians, and Poles, not Protestants or Catholics. Kallen famously wrote, “men may change their clothes, their politics, their wives, their religions, their philosophies, to a greater or less extent: they cannot change their grandfathers.” Ancestry, not religion, was the true source of identity.

This is not to say that Kallen abandoned religion entirely. He applied pragmatic philosophy to the biblical Book of Job, a text that influenced him throughout his adult life. Kaufman examines this influence in the book’s excellent fifth chapter. Kallen argued that the Book of Job had been written by a Jew who had been reading Greek tragedies and in fact had written Job as a tragic drama, only to have it altered into its current biblical form. As Kaufman notes, “Job represented for him an archetypal model of the kind of healthy growth that results from intercultural
exchange” (147). Kallen had no evidence for this theory but held fast nonetheless.

His interpretation of the character of Job was similarly idiosyncratic. In a morally empty universe, human beings must craft their own meaning and ethics. Though he first looked to art, Kallen came to find purpose in the advancement of democracy. He called this “The American Idea,” the secular and pluralistic notion that all religions should be equally tolerated and embraced in a free, democratic society. Believing in “The American Idea” required the same sort of intensity as religious faith. For Kallen, as Kaufman notes, “The American Idea” was a “metareligion,” or “the religion of religions” (177). He advanced this argument in his book, Secularism Is the Will of God, and in extensive epistolary debates with his old friend, the poet T.S. Eliot, in 1955.

The Kallen-Eliot exchange has already been analyzed, but Kaufman is the first to focus more on the philosopher than the poet. Overall, Kaufman has written an excellent book, and his emphasis on science and secularism as foundations for Kallen’s Jewish identity and cultural pluralism bring this important, underappreciated, and increasingly relevant thinker back into the center of conversations surrounding multiculturalism and religion, which is where he rightly belongs.

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As David S. Koffman notes in the introduction to The Jews’ Indian, “Jewish–African American identity dialectics” have received extensive
treatments in scholarship on American Jews, while corollary studies of the interactions between Jewish and Native American subjects and identities have only recently drawn sustained attention (14). His new book seeks to address this and, in doing so, reframes “Jewish immigration history” as a parochial subfield of the broader study of “capitalist and colonial expansion” (219). By reconsidering triumphalist histories of Jewish immigration, economic success, and social acceptance in the context of Indigenous experiences of displacement and subjugation, Koffman ultimately centers “global colonialism” as the leading determinant of modern Jewish life, ahead of “emancipation itself” (19).

Despite Koffman’s global thesis, the bulk of his inquiry focuses on Jewish settlers in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century West and on subsequent generations of American Jewish advocates and anthropologists from the 1930s through the 1960s. The first three chapters focus on the earlier period. Chapter 1 examines Jewish settlers’ strategic use of “the Indian” to claim a (white and masculine) American identity in both contemporaneous writings from the late nineteenth century and later memoirs; Chapter 2 focuses on how Jews “related to and participated in” the violent expansion of the United States empire in contested lands; and Chapter 3 examines Jewish roles (especially as traders and curio dealers) in the extension of capitalist commercial networks that accompanied settler violence. While Chapters 2 and 3 do highlight the material reality of Jewish-Indigenous encounters—ranging from mutual violence to comradely commercial exchange—much of Koffman’s analysis hinges on the symbolic meanings of such interactions and their deployment in Jewish claims to a privileged place in the national colonial project. Chapter 4 moves the story firmly into the twentieth century, comparing Jewish and Native American positions in and responses to the rising tide of nativism in the United States. Koffman argues that white supremacist nativism fostered a Jewish commitment to liberal activism and cultural pluralism that sensitized American Jews to aspects of anti-Indigenous racism, even as American Jews continued to use the figurative Native American as a “mute foil” in pro-immigration advocacy (130). Chapters 5 and 6 build on this tension between empathy and misappropriation, examining the motivations and actions of Jews involved in American Indian advocacy and anthropology, respectively,
from the 1930s through the 1950s. Here, Koffman admirably establishes a pattern of Jewish action on behalf of Native groups (especially during the Indian New Deal and the subsequent Termination Era) without minimizing the shortcomings of liberal pluralism as a lens for addressing settler colonial structures. In the conclusion, Koffman reviews more recent engagements between “Jewish” and “Indian” and returns to his central claim, that global colonialism serves as the inescapable context for modern Jewish history. He addresses the elephant in the room with the assertion that twenty-first-century Jewish interest in Native American topics relates, implicitly or explicitly, to questions about the State of Israel’s contested status as a colonial, anticolonial, or postcolonial state. Rather than stake a claim as to the correct interpretation, however, he makes the case that ongoing debates reflect the historical primacy and ongoing relevance of colonialism as a framework for understanding Jewish modernity.

_The Jews’ Indian_ succeeds on several fronts. Most significantly, Koffman achieves his goal of recasting Jewish history in the American West in terms of settler colonialism, offering a corrective to the triumphalism of Western and American Jewish histories and establishing a template for thinking through Jewish participation in settler colonial projects in other times and places. He also manages to link his examinations of two contrasting Jewish populations—nineteenth-century settlers in the West and twentieth-century progressives from the East Coast—as part of an ongoing arc of (real or imagined) Jewish engagement with Native Americans, through which American Jews wrestled with and staked claims on their own places in a white, Christian, settler nation.

For the most part, the book’s perceived weaknesses relate more to its scope than to the quality of analysis. While some readers might question Koffman’s initial focus on the late-nineteenth-century West, for example, it is the period that offers the strongest source materials, and he draws evidence from earlier periods and other regions as appropriate. Additionally, Koffman acknowledges early on that the book “is about how Jews related to Native Americans,” and not the other way around, although he emphasizes the value of the latter as a project. The one-sided approach risks reenacting aspects of the colonial process by denying Indigenous narratives and agency, but Koffman demonstrates a serious
engagement with Native writers and decolonial scholarship and does not lapse into settler apologetics. As for methodology, the book addresses Jewish participation in the United States’ imperial project as a joint material-symbolic process in which Jewish migrants became American settlers through acts of interpersonal violence, land acquisition, and economic exchange, as well as through representations of those events. In practice, however, Koffman’s analysis of the symbolic and discursive dimensions of this history sometimes overshadows the grounded materiality of Jews’ involvement in westward expansion.

These points aside, *The Jews’ Indian* represents a significant achievement in American Jewish history that addresses a serious gap in prior scholarship and should hold broad appeal for readers in ethnic studies and modern Jewish history. As a bridge between “the literatures on white-Indian relations and Black-Jewish relations,” it deserves consideration for inclusion on graduate and advanced undergraduate syllabi in Jewish identity studies, American Jewish history, and modern Jewish historiography (8). At the same time, Koffman’s research points to the need for ongoing and comparative work on Jewish relationships to settler colonialism and indigeneity in various other geographic and historical contexts.

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In this remarkable compilation of the sermons of Rabbi Leonard Beerman, David N. Myers captures the eloquence, moral courage, and spiritual wrestling of one of the most important rabbinic voices of the second half of the twentieth century. The founding rabbi of an
influential synagogue in Los Angeles and one of American Jewry’s best-known champions of social justice, particularly on the West Coast, Beerman was beloved personally, respected for his aura of quiet dignity and intelligence, and widely admired as a preacher and activist—even as his activism evoked pushback and criticism from some in his own synagogue, and certainly from some in the broader Jewish community.

In the Summer 2019 issue of the CCAR Journal, David Ellenson discusses Marc Saperstein’s significant contributions to the use of sermons as historical sources. In Essential Dissident: Rabbi Leonard I. Beerman and the Radical Imperative to Think and Act, Myers, a widely admired and influential historian in his own right, has produced an exemplar of that field. His introduction alone is a gem—it weaves together seamlessly Beerman’s life; his sermons; the shifting nature and challenges of Jewish life; and the social upheavals of America, Israel, and the world during the years of his preaching, from 1948 until 2014. For those who did not know Beerman and never heard any of these sermons, the introduction vividly captures his personality and his times: from the beginning of the Cold War and McCarthy eras, when he began his rabbinate, to his riveting and controversial final sermon on Yom Kippur morning in 2014. I had the pleasure of attending this sermon, delivered sixty-six years after the first sermon of the book, and discussed it with him afterward. In it, he returned to one of his most prevalent themes: his love of Israel and his deep, abiding concerns over its moral failures and political blunders.

Myers concludes the introduction with a clear description of the book’s structure, dividing sermons into four groups, with each category arranged chronologically. The first section is a single sermon Beerman gave as a rabbinic student. I was blessed in my years at rabbinical school to listen to some of the g’dolei hador of my generation give a sermon or other talk as rabbinical students: Rabbis Shelly Zimmerman, Larry Hoffman, Michael Cook, David Ruderman, Eric Yoffie, and my brother Marc. In its intellectual depth and poetic writing, Beerman’s may be the finest student sermon I have ever heard or read. Myers then turns to sermons that lay out the key theological and intellectual passions and interests of Beerman’s life—difficult issues and ideas conveyed with substance, clarity, and elegant style. The final two sections present the type of sermons for which he was renowned: first the social justice sermons and then the Israel sermons.
Beyond the sermons themselves, the structure of the book offers a few refreshingly novel aspects, including a list of Beerman “sayings” which were found on a paper on his desk, and an exchange of letters with a prominent critic. Myers begins each selection with a concise, excellent introduction that offers historical context to the issues raised, interesting notes on Beerman’s persona, and occasional insights into the impact of and reaction to that sermon from his congregation or the broader community. What is new is that at the close of each sermon, Myers invites an appropriate commentator—including famous figures, politicians, academics, religious leaders, close friends, Beerman’s wife, Joan, and younger colleagues who knew him mostly by reputation—to offer a few paragraphs of response. These reflections connect the sermon’s theme with personal recollections of interaction with Beerman, sometimes an anecdote about him, and occasionally a deep reflection on the central topic or one aspect of the sermon. Never more than a page each, these addenda add to the readers’ engagement with the sermon; taken together, they offer a rich patina to Myers’s introduction, which captures Beerman’s persona and distinctive characteristics.

Although I had heard Beerman preach perhaps half a dozen times over the years, it was only in reading the sermons that I was struck by a fascinating aspect of how he structured his sermons. His elegant language and always interesting, appropriate, concise, and carefully crafted use of literary references and intellectual insights from philosophers and theologians (Jewish, most particularly Spinoza, and non-Jewish)—much more so than, for example, references to classical Jewish texts—were presented in a smooth linear flow: one thought leading to another, to another, to the final thought. In not one sermon of those selected did he resort to the popular mid-twentieth-century “three-part sermon,” where an introduction would be followed by the core middle development of three key points, leading to a conclusion. Yet, listening in person and even more so in reading, one is carried along with the flow of Beerman’s thinking and the graceful language until his final point. It takes great literary talent, intellect, and careful crafting to pull this off so consistently.

Myers’s evocative descriptions raise for me a single disappointment: the absence of seeing his intellectual thought as well as social justice commitments and activities in the context of Reform Judaism’s essential
ideas, ideals, and values. Beerman grew up as a Reform Jew and then flourished as one of Reform Judaism’s best-known “social justice” rabbis, yet there is virtually no reference to the impact of the URJ, CCAR and HUC-JIR leaders and colleagues who inculcated and cultivated those overarching values of Reform Judaism. Myers refers to the “social justice” group of students at HUC that Beerman and his lifelong friend, Rabbi Bob Goldburg—a truly gentle social justice champion—led, but not to the sense of how large the group was or how social justice values in Reform Judaism infused his rabbinical training (beyond his respect for Professor Abraham Cronbach). Myers also writes about a separate group of students to whom Beerman was close at school—the “theology boys” (Eugene Borowitz, Steven Schwarzchild, and Arnold Jacob Wolf—all indeed theologically influential rabbis of their generation)—but no acknowledgement that all three were also well-known social justice advocates. There is barely a reference to Beerman’s Reform rabbinic contemporaries beyond Maurice Eisendrath (a single reference) and Richard Levy. Yet he found common cause on an array of issues with rabbis Roland Gittelsohn, Arthur Lelyveld, Gene Lipman, and the non-rabbi Al Vorspan, all of whose influences nationally and in their communities matched Beerman’s in Los Angeles. The book talks about Beerman’s key social justice allies in Los Angeles, such as Episcopal Rev. George Regas and the great civil rights leader Rev. Jim Lawson, but (with the exception of Richard Levy) little or nothing about equally passionate social justice Reform rabbis in Los Angeles—Al Lewis, Allen Freehling, Steve Jacobs, Laura Geller, Marvin Gross, and Bill Cutter—with whom he shared involvement in an array of social justice causes.

This is a small point in a book that brings alive so compellingly the great causes of Reform Jewry (and most of American Jewry more broadly) from 1948 until today: Israel, social justice, and the meaning of God to contemporary Jewry. To see these issues so vibrantly presented in historical context through the filter of the sermons, speeches, and quips of one of Reform Jewry’s great orators makes Eternal Dissident as fascinating for readers interested in contemporary Jewish history or social justice causes as it will be engaging for rabbis who seek to be inspired by and learn from a master practitioner of both the art of preaching and the work of tikkun olam.
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In the late eighteenth century, the Judah sisters, all unmarried, refused to take their assigned seats in the less desirable places in the women’s synagogue. The dispute made it to the court, where Amelia Judah was fined. After the Civil War, a Southern Jewish woman whined that abolition had ruined her life because she preferred enslaved Black people to white servants. The early-twentieth-century educator Julia Richman declared when she was eleven, “I am not pretty … and I am not going to marry, but before I die, all New York will know my name!” (76). Mamie Pinzer, a sex worker, wrote “I just cannot be moral enough to see where drudgery is better than a life of lazy vice” (125).

Each of these women had her own story, and Pamela Nadell has set herself the task of telling a single tale that honors the diversity among them. In this National Jewish Book Award winner, she has curated a set of brilliant and lively examples that show the lives of Jewish women throughout the centuries—some triumphant and others shameful. The enormous scope of the project precludes it from having a central plot or figures, but Nadell does give recurring roles to several women, such as Grace Mendes Seixas Nathan, Emma Lazarus, Rosa Sonneschein, and Bessie Abramowitz Hillman. Although some readers might miss plot or straightforward chronology in this feminist historical project, they gain other insights, three of which I’ll discuss here: historically grounded discussion of women’s bodies and experiences, attention to less commonly centered themes, and an example of how inclusion creates richer and better histories.

First, America’s Jewish Women foregrounds how women lived their lives as individuals, as members of families, as participants in social
groups, and as actors on political and economic stages. This wide lens—defying any easy division of public and private spheres—creates a story of both the personal and the political.

Nadell’s history attends closely to women’s bodies through the themes of reproduction, child-rearing, birth control, abortion, and intermarriage. The book subtly shows its methodological distinctiveness when it treats them in diachronic, not synchronic, ways. Other American Jewish histories often discuss these topics as if they are confined to one era: a short birth control section appears in a discussion of the 1920s with Margaret Sanger or in the 1960s with legal battles over birth control; abortion appears in the 1970s; intermarriage appears in the 1980s and 1990s. Nadell’s approach instead returns to these themes throughout her book. The result is not simply more information—though it is that too—but a transformation of how we understand these issues. Women experienced abortion differently before the Civil War than they did in the 1920s or the 1990s. The stakes of birth control varied in different times and places and for women of different classes. Intermarriage means something different today than it did in the early republican period when, “by one calculation” that might surprise some readers, “more than a quarter of American Jews intermarried” (78). These questions are fundamental to the project of understanding American Jewish history because they show how women’s bodies shaped and were shaped by historical context.

Second, focusing attention on women creates space for themes that tell us more about how we should understand American Jewish history in general. For example, much of Nadell’s history takes place in homes. As even the dullest student of history can observe, most people live large and formational amounts of time in homes, and yet home life often flies under the radar of historical inquiry. Moreover, as Nadell shows, home life was never a quiet, isolated space, whatever reigning ideologies might have prescribed. For American Jews—and not just Jewish women—domestic and economic realms are fundamentally intertwined.

Also, less predictably, Nadell’s women-focused sources and analysis help readers better see the history of Zionism in the United States. Perhaps this is in part because of Hadassah and the vibrant, articulate women who ran it. But whatever the reason, Nadell’s discussion of
the relationships among Zionism, socialism, politics, antisemitism, and personal lives provides a more complex and compelling portrait than is typical for American Jewish history.

Some themes, however, go under-explored, though these are not necessarily because of the book’s focus on women. America’s Jewish Women could benefit from more explicit discussion of race—not just Jews and whiteness, but the larger picture of U.S. history in which Blackness has been central. Nadell commendably discusses slaveholding Jews as part of American history, rather than an exception to it. But after the Civil War, Blacks and anti-Black racism almost fully disappear from the story. The Civil Rights Act appears only as part of one-sentence examples of discrimination in general, and racism (apart from racist antisemitism) is nearly absent. Even apart from the importance of Jewish women in what is often problematically called “Black-Jewish relations,” the book could benefit from more discussion of race in the United States because the paradigmatic form of racism in the United States is anti-Black, and that form of prejudice informs others. Furthermore, Jews have never been the primary racial “other” in the United States, so a more substantive discussion would help create context.

Third, though Nadell has written a book about women, it isn’t always just about women. In some ways, this is a response to the impossible task of telling a long arc of history of a group that isn’t really a group, and certainly never a self-contained one. Women lived with men, talked with men, and did business with men. When they voted, they often voted for men. Sometimes they even prayed with men. In fact, they lived lives that intertwined with people of all genders, and so isolating women would be impossible. In another way, though, Nadell shows that this impossibility implies a greater historical point: Men’s histories should be likewise impossible tasks. Histories of “American Jews” that focus almost entirely on men are less good not only because of ethical reasons but also because of data-driven ones.

On a related note, of all the synthetic histories of American Jews, Nadell’s makes the most of the lopsided available data. In her hands, fewer documents and material objects from the colonial era do not mean silence, but instead prompt discussion of what we can and cannot know when archival materials preserve little of women’s voices or lives. This,
too, serves as an example for broader synthetic histories.

In short, Nadell offers a highly readable narrative collection of Jewish women’s stories that also serves as an example for other scholars.

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When Mordecai Menahem Kaplan died on 8 November 1983 at the age of 102, the New York Times obituary described him as “a towering figure in the recent history of Judaism, contending that Judaism should be a unifying and creative force by stressing the cultural and historical character of the religion as well as theological doctrine and adapting it to modern society.” ¹ An obituary can hardly predict the future—much less the lasting influence of a particular person on a culture—but today, thirty-seven years after his death, one can certainly argue that Kaplan’s life and thought have been even more influential than anyone could have predicted. Until recently, the most complete picture of Kaplan that students of American Judaism in the twentieth century could discern came from more than sixty years’ of his many published works and recorded lectures. But the recent publication of two volumes of his journal (with a third forthcoming) titled Communings of the Spirit: The Journals of

Mordecai M. Kaplan, reveal a much more complete and complex figure. The two volumes of the edited and annotated Kaplan diaries cover the years 1913–1934 and 1934–1941.\(^2\)

*Communings of the Spirit: Volume I* was edited, annotated, and carefully analyzed by Mel Scult, Kaplan’s chief biographer and former student. The volume leads the reader on a journey to a deeper understanding of the American Jewish community coming into its own with the establishment of major institutions and seminaries and thinkers. It also enables the reader to understand more deeply what motivated Kaplan to write his magnum opus, *Judaism as a Civilization*, and offer such a different view of Judaism, one that was radical—and perhaps too radical—for its time. A reader can become immersed both in the complexity of Jewish institutional life and the vibrant, if not terrified, mind and soul of a rabbinic leader and thinker in New York and Palestine on the eve of World War II and the establishment of the State of Israel.\(^3\)

Scult has thus far created two volumes of entries, carefully annotated with a huge volume of clarifying details to enable the reader to understand Kaplan’s thinking. In addition, each volume includes not only a full introduction to Kaplan and his thought and to the sociohistorical context, but Scult also created an extensive glossary of all relevant terms and names that are mentioned. This is a significant endeavor that enables each entry to take on the power of the moment, the mood, and the religious significance that Kaplan’s writing embodies.

This review will focus primarily on the second volume of *Communings of the Spirit* and several—but not all—of the major themes of the volume: (1) the responses to and aftermath of the publication of *Judaism as a Civilization*; (2) Kaplan’s thinking about God, salvation, prayer, and ritual; (3) Kaplan’s conception of and work regarding Jewish peoplehood and the need for the creation of a new movement; and (4) Kaplan’s responses to the realities of the Jewish people in America, Palestine, and around the world, including the rise of Nazism and Hitler’s conquering of Europe and Kaplan’s sense that the “the world is closing in on us

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\(^2\) The original of the whole diary can be found online at www.Kaplancenter.org.

Jews." The volume ends with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and America’s entry into World War II—events that must be addressed in a separate essay.

In addition to the introduction, glossary, and extensive notes that clarify the historical and personal events Kaplan alludes to, Scult also cross-references Kaplan’s other writings. These resources, combined with the thorough index to each volume, enable the reader to focus on particular issues, personalities, events, or ideas in the Kaplan diaries. Taken together, the carefully researched resources are invaluable to the reader of any discipline or background. Of relevance to students and scholars of American history are the many analyses Kaplan offers of world events as an American Jew.

An early but telling example of Kaplan’s influence can be found in a particular burst of letters written to Kaplan and the leadership of JTS in 1927 as the students and the public learned that Kaplan left JTS to move to the Jewish Institute of Religion (before it merged with the Hebrew Union College) headed by Stephen S. Wise. When the word got out that Kaplan had resigned, he was inundated with a flood of letters from people at the Seminary imploring him to reconsider his resignation. They argued that his teaching and his thinking were essential to their ability to lead in their current reality. They also understood that Kaplan’s leadership ultimately affirmed a deep optimism about Judaism and human civilization.

Since the very early days of Kaplan’s published writings, he expressed great concern about the future of Judaism in America. “What Judaism requires at the present time is not subtle reasoning,” Kaplan wrote, “but the fearless facing of facts, together with a keen sense of reality.” Kaplan’s understanding of the reality at the time encouraged him to believe that

4 Entry from Wednesday, 7 December 1938, 117ff.
5 From a 1927 letter from JTS Rabbinic students regarding Kaplan: “Preeminently our teacher and guide, we feel that the departure of Professor Kaplan will leave us utterly divorced form the things most worth learning without the guidance toward those values which we believe Conservative Judaism ought to conserve and create.” In Mel Scult’s Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century, A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 274.
“Judaism would be in entire conformity with the best American ideals thus far formulated [of Americanism].”6 And yet he had many doubts:

I am still struggling with the question of whether I am not deceiving myself that there is hope for Judaism in this country. Should not the state of loneliness with regard to Jewish life and interests into which I am plunged at the very moment that I am engaged in teaching and lecturing have convinced me that this country, with respect to Judaism, is a desert and a wasteland? It swallows and destroys every remnant of our identity?7

His thirst for reading, writing, and creating new ideas is never satiated. In one September 1940 entry, Kaplan writes: “If I had been in my youth as eager to write as I have come to be in recent years, I would have published by this time a whole library of books. A day in which I do not write down some new thought seems to me wasted” (287).

Kaplan wrote extensively on Zionism in his journals, especially in Communings, Volume II, and in nearly every book he published, Kaplan sought to explain how Zionism would revitalize American Jewry and why the two communities must be mutually reinforcing. But on a personal level, his journal entries reveal a deep inner struggle with where the future lies and where he should “cast [his] lot”:

Indeed, I think that ultimately factors of the era and of will power [sic] will themselves force me to draw the conclusion that, if I want to achieve any satisfaction in my life, I must dedicate what is left of my energies to our people in Erets Yisrael. Only there lies any hope for our future. Is it not better for me to cast my lot with those who have life in their future rather than with those who are doomed to die? Were I still young I would certainly move my residence to the Land of Israel, but now it is almost too late. I will, therefore, try to send the fruit of my thoughts to Erets Yisrael (78).

Among his many reflections on Jewish existence in the Land of Israel are the struggles of the Jewish residents there and the attacks they faced on

6 Entry from Wednesday, 7 December 1938, 117.
7 Saturday night, 22 August 1936, 78.
a regular basis. Kaplan considers privately the theological and political basis for the roots of antisemitism and anti-Zionism. On 31 August 1936 he writes:

Two things, which we raised and cultivated, have turned into a weapon against us. We gave the nations our concept of God, and they have used that very same concept to prove that we have rebelled against our God and are deserving of destruction. We emphasized the importance of nationalism and raised it to the level of religion, but the result has been that the nations have learned to develop their feelings of nationalism in such an intensive manner that they can only look upon the nationalism of their neighbors with hostile eyes. We the Jews, are thought of as strangers in lands where we have lived 1000 years or more and whose cultures have penetrated into our souls (80).

As World War II progresses, Kaplan writes regularly of the “threatening International situation.” In May 1941, he writes:

In spite of preoccupation with our own immediate affairs, we cannot possibly forget what is going on in Europe these days. The mind is simply paralyzed with dread of the outcome of the rout which the Allies are suffering at the hands of the Nazis…. What is going to happen to us Jews, to Palestine, to all our hopes and dreams?... Despite the worst that may befall, we have to plan and work as though life had meaning and a future (234).

Kaplan’s journals reveal the daily striving of a man to find salvation for himself, his community, and his people through teaching ideas, engaging in rabbinic interpretation, and reimagining prayer and ritual. The reader is also witness to a rare portrayal, over decades, of Kaplan’s ongoing spiritual wrestling with his tradition and with himself. Thanks to the comprehensive editing and annotating of Scult, the careful reader of Communings of the Spirit has the rare opportunity to witness a great mind engage daily with ideas—great and small—as he seeks to create and develop new ways of thinking about the challenges of modernity and religion. Out of his deep commitment to the future of the Jewish people, Kaplan was consistently attune to the changing realities and possibilities of the people he sought so passionately to influence. Communings of the Spirit also reveals a Jewish thinker striving to envision and create a new future for the Jewish people in America.
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