

# Thinking About Male Jewish Identity

*Searching for My Brothers: Jewish Men in a Gentile World*

Jeffrey K. Salkin

(New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1999), xiii + 235 pages

*From Your Father's House . . . Reflections for Modern Jewish Men*

Kerry M. Olitzky

(Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 1998), xxv + 108 pages

## REVIEWED BY LAWRENCE BUSH

Judaism is not only a civilization, as Mordecai Kaplan taught — it is a civilizing civilization. Its economic laws aim to civilize the *yetzer hara*, the “evil” or lustful urge. Its laws of *kashrut* aim to tame the survival-oriented instinct to gorge on whatever edibles are available. Its sexual laws are intended to curb promiscuous impulses. “Modesty, mercy and benevolence” — these are the ideal characteristics for Jews put forth in the Midrash (*Deuteronomy Rabbah* 3:4) — characteristics that defy baser human instincts and the “might makes right” logic of history.

### Channeling Macho

For Jewish men through the centuries, the pursuit of these virtues

has demanded both spiritual transformation and the channeling of “macho” into Jewishly acceptable pathways. Intellectual innovation, economic overachievement and heroic social activism have been among the fruits of this transformation/sublimation process. In our own time, however, the “alternative” masculinity proposed by Judaism has been eroded by at least four powerful cross-currents: assimilation and the loosened hold of Jewish traditions and community; the devastating, emasculating impact of the Holocaust; the compensatory Zionist pioneer/warrior mystique; and the challenge to patriarchal culture, including Jewish culture, led by our own wives, sisters, mothers and friends. Many Jewish men of the baby-boom generation have been stranded on the shore,

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alienated from the mainstream of “hard” masculinity but without a Jewish alternative to call their own. The books under review empathize with this complex identity crisis and offer resources from Judaism and Jewish history for the reconstruction of Jewish masculine identity.

## Feeling of Fraternity

Kerry Olitzky’s *From Your Father’s House . . . Reflections for Modern Jewish Men* is a pocket-fitting volume of forty-five essays, most only a few paragraphs long. Olitzky begins them with quotations from a wide range of scriptural sources, and seems to take for granted a level of unambivalent Jewish commitment and religiosity among his readers. This stance limits his reach but also establishes a nice feeling of fraternity.

The brevity of the essays precludes much in the way of analysis or even anecdote; the book is more a packet of “seeds of thought” than a harvested crop. It might best be used by men’s groups or synagogue brotherhoods “to open up discussion, to stake out the territory,” as the author writes in his own preface. A friendly, 12-page introduction by Rabbi Shawn Zevit provides an overview of the contemporary Jewish “men’s movement” (called the “brotherkeeping” movement by one of its leaders, Yosaif August) and adds some necessary grounding and context.

Jeffrey Salkin’s *Searching for My Brothers* is a considerably more substantial and personally revealing book

about “Jewish men in a Gentile world.” Salkin covers a lot of ground in a short space. He writes about heterosexuality (“The question, ‘Was it good for you?’ is a religious question”); about anti-Semitism (a “symbol of Jewish vulnerability . . . is the frequent inability of Jewish men to defend their women”); about fathers, sons and father-in-laws (“The Moses-Jethro relationship is probably the most important [human] relationship in the entire Torah.”); about bar mitzvah (“In Europe, bar mitzvah was a *comma* — a comma in the long, run-on sentence of Jewish life and responsibility. In America, it has become a *period*.”); about contemporary Israel (“It was as if a bodybuilding manual had arrived at our doorsteps.”); about Jewish history, biblical lore, circumcision, work and ambition, the Yiddish language, modern theology and more.

Despite this wide range and Salkin’s talent for sound bytes, *Searching for My Brothers* never wears thin or feels superficial. Salkin keeps it moving with high narrative energy and unpretentious erudition that extends from arcane Judaica to popular American culture:

Only in a post-Israel world could we encounter someone like the current reigning World Championship Wrestling heavyweight champion. He is a six-foot-four-inch, 285-pound man known as Goldberg. His real name is Bill Goldberg, a thirty-one-year-old son of a Harvard-educated doc-

tor and classical musician. He was once a defensive lineman for the Atlanta Falcons. He wrestled his title away from Hulk Hogan. . . . His signature finishing move is a body slam called the Jackhammer. . . . Wrestling is no longer a 'goys will be goys' phenomenon."

## Missing Voices

Salkin also gives voice to several women, Laura Geller, Mary Daly, Rachel Adler and Alice Miller among them. Entirely missing, however, from both his and Olitzky's books are the voices of post-baby-boom men — the MTV, AOL, *Tattooed Jew* crowd, who likewise seem largely absent from synagogue life and most other Jewish communal settings. What are they making of the regression to macho masculinity and hyper-violence in American culture? How have their own identities been shaped by AIDS, by "girl power," by campus sex codes, by extraordinarily raunchy movies, by *The Man Show* on Comedy Central, by queer politics, by Ecstasy and raves, by the intense corporatization of American culture? How far has the "Cool Judaism" (Jonathan Schorsch's phrase)<sup>1</sup> of heavy metal Hasidic rock and Jewish characters on *South Park* gone

toward healing post-boomers of Jewish shame? How much do they identify with the "warrior mystique" of Israel, and to what extent has it neutralized what Salkin calls the "anti-Semitic iconography" of "the Pathetic Jewish Male"?

Baby-boom men could be likened to the generation of Moses: We were "freed from Egypt" by the feminist movement, which directly transformed our marriages, our sexuality, our experiences of fatherhood, our cooking skills and our sense of privilege and possibility as we grew into manhood. Both Kerry Olitzky and Jeffrey Salkin (and, before them, Harry Brod, editor of *A Mentsh Among Men*, and Rami Shapiro, author of *Embracing Esau*) have worked well to distill the turmoil of this generation and give new dignity to the Jewish paradigm of masculinity. The lessons with which we are grappling will not have staying power, however, unless we educate — and learn from, and give voice to — the next generation of men, the generation of Joshua. Mentoring, even more than brotherkeeping, should be the next step for the Jewish men's movement.

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1. Jonathan Schorsch, "Making Judaism Cool," *Tikkun*, March/April 2000, 33.