



The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America

(Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, Indiana University Press, 2000, 255 pp, \$27.95)

In the academic field of Jewish Studies, it has fallen to the social sciences to unlock the mystery of American Jews. Every new quantitative study, however, raises inevitable questions about what the numbers really measure, and what they capture about the lives of American Jews. Steven M. Cohen, a sociologist, and Arnold M. Eisen, a religious studies scholar, have set out to do just that in a highly readable and fascinating book titled *The Jew Within*. This collaborative work draws on fifty lengthy interviews and a national survey of more than 1,000 Jews. From this data, they learned what a significant sector of American Jews does and believes, as well as how, where, and with whom they practice their Judaism. What they learned about American Jews is provocative, perhaps not surprising, but neither is it simply predictable.

One of the unique features of this study is its focus on the group that they define as the most "typical" of American Jews, the "moderately affiliated." These baby boomers belong to Jewish organizations, most likely synagogues, which they attend occasionally. They are not leaders, nor are they among the more religiously observant. They are most likely to be married with children, and have a Jewish spouse.

Eisen and Cohen learned that the moderately affiliated Jews are deeply committed to their Judaism, but the nature of that commitment is precisely what calls for analysis. Their "subjects" describe their Judaism as a journey, and they travel through it overwhelmingly in the company of the nuclear family, both as children and as parents. Only "the sovereign self" is the arbiter of what happens on that journey, because these American Jews are little moved by the authority of God or the normative tradition in their behavior and attitudes. They seek a Judaism that is meaningful to them and, therefore, requires a degree of personal investment that is high in the private sphere of the family where emotions are deep.

The Jews of the new century are less committed than any previous generation to either communal expression of Judaism or the Jewish people. Although they continue to feel a special connection to other Jews, the boundaries that separate them from non-Jews is far more porous than previously experienced. While these Jews would oppose their chil-

dren choosing another religion, that may be the last frontier of absolute difference for them in American culture.

The privatization and deep personalism of this Judaism seems to have affected a significant change in these Jews' attitudes toward Israel, which they regard with a mixture of criticism and attachment; that criticism has very much limited the extent of that attachment. Similarly organizations that often linked Jews to Israel, like the Federations, are currently viewed by most as alienating and unappealing.

These Jews feel a strong attachment to God, but they do not anticipate encountering that God in the synagogue. They are not disappointed, according to Cohen and Eisen, when God does not appear. The rituals, activities, and events from which they derive the most meaning involve family members. Their zeal to pass on this Judaism to their children is profound, but they do not want to be told what is an acceptable or legitimate form of Judaism.

The rich narratives that make up much of *The Jew Within* go well beyond these key findings. They are testimony to all that is involved in a journey, its struggles, power, and disappointments. What is even more significant than the nature of the journey is how it is different from their parents' sojourns. If both generations can be described as "pick-and-choose Jews," it is the baby boomers who are less concerned with consistency than their parents. Their expectation for personal meaning is greater and their experience of community and collective responsibility is far weaker.

The authors raise powerful questions and conundrums. Have they described a Judaism that is close to running its course, since nearly two generations that follow the baby boom are in or moving toward adulthood? *The Jew Within* emphasizes the link between Jewish identity and family perhaps more fully and complexly than any recent study of American Jews. It is a major contribution to the study of Jewish identity. Families, however, continue to change. Is the Judaism of journey tied to the rather traditional forms of family life described in this book, or will Judaism become the religion only of such families? While Jewish practice continues to grow in the

soil of Jewish commitment and observance, the freedom to choose among *mitzvot* and the yearning for meaning have created not a new formulation of Judaism as much as a new version of an increasingly secularized Judaism.

It is precisely these powerful tensions, if not contradictions, that *The Jew Within* brings to our attention. This book will serve as a mirror into

which American Jews will gaze for many years, if not decades, puzzling out who we are and how we got here.

Riv-Ellen Prell, an anthropologist, is Professor of American Studies at the University of Minnesota. She is the author, most recently, of Fighting to Become Americans: Jews, Gender, and the Anxiety of Assimilation.

Looking Backward and Forward

Looking at an issue of Sh'ma on Jewish education from September 1978, it feels as if I am looking at an old photo album with snapshots of people with visions of hope for our community and its future. Many of these writers are today well-known educators. In 1978 they were stepping at times on untrodden soil; today in Jewish educational life many of them are leaders. The Sh'ma Archive includes 30 years of Jewish thinking on significant issues that pushed the times. The following are clips from several of the articles of that 1978 issue. The essays are available in full online at www.shma.com. We hope this retrospect will serve not only to measure our accomplishments but also remind us of the impact of visionary thinking. — SB

New Alternatives in Jewish Education

Isa Aron, Joseph Reimer, Cherie Koller-Fox

Quiet changes have been underway at the "grass-roots" level. A new generation of Jewish educators has come into its own, a generation dedicated to the Jewish tradition but also inspired by new developments in secular education. By linking up with members of the older generation these people have created a new climate within the field itself, a climate of hope and growth...

Maximizing Parent Participation

Jerome Raik

The parents in the Havurah Schools come from varied backgrounds, ranging from strictly Orthodox to anti-religious secularist, with all shades of belief and affiliation in between. Virtually all of them came to the schools with a deep ambivalence about Judaism, and serious questions about its role in their own lives and the lives of their children. Their yearning to touch or re-touch bases with their Jewish past was qualified by a distaste for and even a fear of the methods and attitudes of established Jewish institutions, with which they had varying degrees of familiarity...

Jewish Assertiveness Training

Richard J. Birnholz

Five years ago, I was confronted with a seemingly isolated problem. One of my students in my tenth grade Confirmation Class decided to

forgo Confirmation. She said she was not really sure she wanted to be Jewish. Christianity was much more appealing. My attempts to change her mind were unsuccessful, so I let her drop out of the program...

The Great Training Robbery

Joel Lurie Grishaver

There are perhaps two dozen of us who regularly ride the circuit providing teacher training workshops to Jewish teachers in various settings and cities across the country. My teacher, Dr. William Cutter, refers to this as "the great training robbery." Often, sitting alone in a hotel room at the end of a day of workshops, I have the feeling of being a patent medicine salesperson. I have run into a town, opened up a bag of new or old tricks, told teachers how effective they can be if they use them in their classrooms, and— come the next morning—I'll be gone...

Experimentation and Survival

Steve Stroiman

The narrow, tree-lined dirt road looked more like a path than a private driveway. At its end was a large white house flanked by a barn and surrounded by 120 acres of field and forest. On the kitchen door was a sign which read "24-hour kosher service here." A handful of teenagers were busily preparing dinner for erev Shabbat...

Please go to www.shma.com for the continuation of these and other articles.