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INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century, thus far, has not been an auspicious era for religion in America. After surveying the national scene in 2015, the Pew Research Center concluded that the American public is becoming less religious “at least by some key measures of what it means to be a religious person.”¹ These measures include “the percentages who say they pray every day, attend religious services regularly and consider religion to be very important in their lives; [all] have ticked down by small but statistically significant margins” since 2007—and that followed several decades of decline on all these measures. Cumulatively by 2015, close to one-quarter of Americans claimed they were unaffiliated with any religion. The erosion of membership was especially sharp in the once-dominant liberal Protestant denominations.²

Religion, moreover, has fallen into no small amount of disrepute in recent decades. First came the widely broadcast scandals involving clerics of different faiths: not only were individual priests, ministers, and rabbis accused of dreadful crimes, their religious organizations temporized, when they did not engage in cover-ups. Then came the upsurge in religiously inspired violence around the globe, highlighted by terrorist attacks such as the murderous events of 9/11. No less damaging, the so-called culture wars pitting contemporary sensibilities against traditional religious teachings have perplexed, if not alienated, the faithful. To add insult to self-inflicted injury, outspoken atheists, particularly among the academic and intellectual elites, have taken to the media to pronounce religion passé and denounce believers as deluded.

To be sure, countervailing trends are also visible. Even though the mainline groups have been in freefall since the 1970s, Protestant denominations of a more conservative bent and the Catholic Church are holding stable. Some take heart from this, though one wonders whether to celebrate along

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with *Christianity Today* when it trumpets the good news with a headline reading “Evangelicals Stay Strong as Christianity Crumbles in America.”³ Megachurches continue to attract many hundreds if not thousands of worshippers to weekly services and other programs. And all kinds of independent churches, unaffiliated with any specific denomination, are springing up across the country, experimenting with new musical, choreographic, and artistic forms.

Even in this time of decline, a sizable number of Americans, it would seem, harbor a *wish* for stronger religious involvement that surfaces at times of stress. In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the United States, houses of worship registered a temporary uptick in attendance, though that fizzled out after a few months.⁴ A hunger for religious connection was on display again when Pope Francis visited the United States in 2015, not only in the hearts of the faithful who thronged to his outdoor masses, but among even larger numbers of non-Catholics who attended to his words with great curiosity.⁵ Religion is certainly not as marginal to society in the United States as it is in European countries, but neither is it as robust as it used to be nor can it count any longer on the kind of official imprimatur that President Dwight Eisenhower bestowed upon it in 1953 when he famously pronounced “our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don’t care what it is.”⁶ Despite the evidence of continuing faithfulness in certain sectors of American society, then, it is hard to escape the conclusion that ours is an era of religious recession.

Not surprisingly, given this broader context, American Judaism too has suffered declining numbers of adherents and flagging observance—even as pockets of strength are evident.

Observers of the Jewish religious scene unsurprisingly are divided over which is more significant—plummeting rates of participation or higher levels of energy among those who are engaged. Some, in fact, reject the notion that American Judaism is in decline, but rather contend it is merely undergoing a transition: the Jewish religion is being transformed, not abandoned, they contend. Most heartening to such commentators is a new spirit of inclusiveness and innovation. Whereas synagogues in the recent past primarily

attracted conventional family units, today they welcome all kinds of family configurations. And for those who prefer alternatives to synagogues, it is possible in most large and midsize Jewish communities to find options for congregating geared to millennials or baby boomers, singles and childless Jews or empty-nesters, and many other types of Jews meeting in unconventional settings.

Moreover, the extension of leadership opportunities to once marginalized populations is widely regarded as a boon to Judaism. Heterosexual men no longer monopolize positions of religious leadership. Now women and men—both “straight” and gay or lesbian—serve in the rabbinate and cantorate and in positions of educational and denominational leadership. It is assumed that their ascendance makes it possible for different sensibilities to be brought to bear on religious issues, which, in turn, opens new avenues for reinterpreting sacred texts. Even within the Orthodox world, the sector most committed to traditionalism, much rethinking about questions of gender and sexuality is evident—leading at times to changes in policy.

Also of note to those who see the glass as more than half full is an evident spirit of religious experimentation in all sectors of Judaism. Synagogues have been refashioning their religious services, paying a good deal of attention to the atmospherics and music at times of prayer. Building personal relationships in congregations, even in synagogues with membership in the thousands, is a high priority of clergy. And the mixing and matching of all kinds of spiritual practices with conventional prayer is ubiquitous. Textual study, long understood by rabbis as a religious act, is attracting new learners and benefitting from new technologies. All of these developments point to a nascent revival of Jewish religious life—or so some have argued.

And yet surveying the same scene, other commentators on the national scene find evidence of considerable weakness and vulnerability in Jewish religious life. Rates of intermarriage have spiraled upward, while declining percentages of intermarried Jews claim to be raising their children exclusively in the Jewish religion. Over two million individuals of Jewish parentage no longer identify as Jews, and many others who do claim to be Jewish eschew identification with the Jewish religion, choosing instead to define themselves

in cultural or ethnic terms. And outside the Orthodox community, rates of childbearing are depressed relative to the recent past, leaving observers to wonder who will populate Jewish religious institutions in the future.⁷

Not a few commentators have linked these developments to declining participation in Jewish religious life. A Conservative rabbi of my acquaintance confides his fear that his bustling congregation, which hosts a day school enrolling hundreds of children, may be overwhelmed by a cultural “tsunami” primed to sweep away everything he has labored to accomplish. He is hardly the only rabbi to worry about building on quicksand. Analyses of recent survey data seem to buttress these anxious prognostications. They show that each of the religious movements in American Judaism has experienced dramatic changes in its fortunes, with the largest ones facing the likelihood of considerable membership losses in the years to come.

Depending on which sets of evidence they deem most compelling, observers set forth diametrically opposite prescriptions for what is needed to ensure a thriving religious life in the near future. Those who focus on the rich panoply of attractive options and the collapse of barriers to participation call for more of the same. They take heart from these developments and regard American Judaism as poised for renewal.⁸ Simultaneously, there is no shortage of commentary explaining why each religious movement must change in order to survive, why synagogues are in desperate need of reinvention, and why Judaism itself must undergo “radical” revision or else continue to lose active participants.⁹ Needless to say, some observers advocate for both prescriptions simultaneously.

Before rushing to celebrate the new era of Jewish religious diversity or launching far-reaching reforms to stave off further losses (or both alternatives), some stock taking is in order. What do we know about the lived Judaism of American Jews, the religion of ordinary Jews? What in Judaism resonates with individual Jews and their families? For those Jews who seek to participate in the religious sphere, what is on offer? And what is happening when Jews gather for public worship in congregations and unconventional religious settings?

The short answer to this last question is that a good deal is happening. Despite or perhaps because of the evident signs of decline, those Jews who *are* interested in religious life are actively rethinking how they pray, study, and express their Judaism, where they meet for religious congregating, what can inspire intensified religious participation, and how more Jews can discover transcendent meaning for their lives in Judaism. It's not that all this activity can mask or somehow make up for the erosion of religious life that has already taken place. At best, the many new initiatives are designed to stem the losses, and perhaps to win back some of those Jews who have ceased to be active practitioners of their religion. But the vitality and investment of energy are no less real or important than the evidence of decline.

This book takes it as a given that Jewish religious life in this country has endured a recession. Evidence of this decline has been widely reported in news articles about synagogues forced to close their doors or merge with other weakened congregations, the drop in membership within many congregations that continue to keep their doors open, declining numbers of synagogue members who attend with any frequency, and the dramatic increase in the proportion of Jews who do not identify with Judaism.

There is no shortage of efforts to explain these patterns: some have cited the role of capitalism,¹⁰ and America's hyper-individualistic culture;¹¹ others have placed these developments into the context of a broader societal shift away from civic participation;¹² still others have highlighted the low levels of literacy about Judaism among wide swaths of American Jews;¹³ and still others would cite the triumphalism of secularists, especially in the academy and elite cultural circles, who neither value religion nor claim to understand it.¹⁴ The turn to postmodernism in the academy, moreover, has percolated down into other sectors of society; with its relativization of truth and insistence that all human endeavor is socially or subjectively constructed, postmodernism has further undermined religious truth claims.¹⁵ Put succinctly, whereas mid-twentieth-century American culture strongly encouraged at least token religious participation, by the early twenty-first century the American culture with which most Jews identify is highly skeptical, if not dismissive, of such involvement.

All the more remarkable, then, are the countervailing trends: several million Jews still claim to be adherents of the Jewish religion, attend some kinds of religious services, continue to learn about their religious traditions, and invest themselves to an extent in the renewal of Judaism. Their experiences, their practices, their struggles with and for Judaism, and the efforts of their religious leaders to remix Judaism in order to entice them into vibrant settings for religious gathering are at the heart of the story this book tells.

It's a tale of surprising juxtapositions and contradictions. Even upon casual inspection, Jewish religious settings present some remarkable, if at times jarring, tableaux. Who would have imagined just a few years ago, for example, that in a number of Reform temples members are invited to prostrate themselves, with heads to the ground, during a portion of the Yom Kippur service they refer to as the "Great *Aleinu*"? In the recent past, strict rules of decorum in Reform synagogues curbed perambulation but instead confined congregants to fixed pews. Bowing to the ground was seen as a practice only hidebound Orthodox Jews perform on the High Holidays. Today, in many Reform temples, the emphasis has shifted to swaying, clapping, dancing, and movement. Describing her response to the Great *Aleinu* practice of her synagogue, one congregant enthused that it "has become possibly my favorite moment of the whole grand liturgical experience . . . , and I always wish I could pause time and just stay there, in that posture, in that relationship to God."¹⁶ Were this practice unique, it would not warrant much attention, but across the spectrum of Jewish life, Jews are finding meaning in once rejected but now reappropriated religious traditions.

Turning our attention to a Conservative synagogue, we find the premier congregation of its denomination in Washington, DC, moving in a different direction. The synagogue sponsors a Jewish Mindfulness Center. Its menu of options includes meditation practices, healing services, yoga, Jewish mysticism classes, and immersion in the ritual bath (*Mikveh*). Though the last is a traditional practice usually associated with women's purification after their monthly menstruation period or a way for men to prepare themselves for the Sabbath and holidays, here the emphasis is on body image and is particularly addressed to teenage girls.¹⁷ The panoply of practices offered by this Conservative synagogue—Eastern prayer devotions mixed with New Age and

Hasidic teachings plus contemporary self-help guidance—would have been inconceivable in synagogues of any denomination just a few decades ago, but now clergy in a range of settings are reconsidering how to infuse the experience of prayer with heightened intentionality.¹⁸

The texture of Orthodox congregational life is no less in flux. Torah study, always a feature of such synagogues, is now attracting far larger numbers of regular learners. Of particular note are the numerous men engaged in daily Talmud study. In Orthodox synagogues across the country, members gather daily to join with hundreds of thousands of mainly Jewish males around the world studying a daily page of Talmud prescribed in a synchronized curriculum—the *Daf Yomi*, or daily folio;¹⁹ those who complete the cycle will cover the entire Babylonian Talmud in the course of some seven years and five months. These classes are supplemented by others focusing on different sacred texts, works of Jewish thought, and religious guides to self-improvement and other topics.²⁰ Despite the clear lines of gender differentiation in Orthodox synagogues, women are assuming new roles in these educational activities—both as learners and as teachers. In some congregations, women serve as clergy, offering classes and functioning as religious guides to male as well as female congregants. They also are studying Talmudic texts, long regarded as the province of males alone. None of these developments was conceivable just a few decades ago.

If we train our eyes only on conventional synagogues, we will overlook unexpected developments at the margins. Indeed, what characterizes the current religious environment is the declining influence of the major denominations and the rise of religious start-ups. Jewish religious life today, as distinct from the mid-twentieth century, is far more likely to feature synagogue hopping, enabling Jews of different backgrounds to study together in Orthodox outreach centers or self-styled pluralistic settings, and a relaxed approach to crossing denominational boundaries to attend a variety of religious services. Labels and neat categories are deemed artificial and therefore expendable, while a spirit of innovation and tinkering is stimulating the creation of hybrid forms of Jewish religious identification. Once dismissed as passing fads on the periphery of Jewish life, unconventional approaches to Judaism now are flourishing—and increasingly influencing the core.

Take, for example, the ease with which today's American Jews create their own do-it-yourself forms of Judaism. On the most basic level, this has led increasing numbers of Jews to eschew synagogues and rabbis in favor of ad hoc arrangements they make for themselves and their families. The Bar or Bat Mitzvah, to take a prominent example, came into vogue in the middle of the twentieth century as a very public embrace of Jewish responsibility by young Jews in the presence of an entire congregation; today many families have privatized the milestone, celebrating the event only amid family and friends and severing it from any communal connection. On another level, this DIY mentality has led to the easy merging of traditions and religious expressions drawn from multiple sources. If as a result of intermarriage family members stem from different backgrounds, holiday gatherings will mix and match prayers and rituals from different religions. The same is occurring at marriage ceremonies joining in matrimony a Jew and a Gentile.

Leaders are no less likely to favor hybrid approaches. As already noted, so-called New Age practices are combined with Hasidic Jewish meditation. Jewish clergy are also eagerly studying church practices to learn what is attractive to worshippers. And visits to megachurches have become *de rigueur* for synagogue renewal experts.²¹

Internally, there is also much cross-fertilization. The once sharp boundaries between Hasidic Jews and their arch-antagonists, the Mitnagdim, are rapidly collapsing in the so-called Ultra-Orthodox sector. (Emerging in the eighteenth century, these two sectors of Eastern European Jewish society were bitter foes; time and common enemies—such as secular and non-Orthodox Jews—have brought them closer together.) At the Lakewood Yeshiva, a bastion of Mitnagdic Judaism, young Hasidim and their erstwhile fierce opponents now study side by side, with some of the latter eagerly reading Hasidic texts, an act that had been anathema in the past. So too in the non-Orthodox sectors of American Judaism, the wisdom of Hasidism and the Mussar movement, a product of the Lithuanian Mitnagdim, is eagerly absorbed by Conservative and Reform Jews.²² In some instances the direction of influence is reversed: Orthodox religious educators are adopting pedagogical methods developed by their Conservative and Reform counterparts. And though harder to prove, one suspects that feminist readings of Jewish texts pioneered by

non-Orthodox women have had an impact on the outlook of some Orthodox thinking.

The obverse of this boundary crossing is the spread of highly idiosyncratic approaches to Judaism. Cafeteria religion, picking and choosing only those morsels of Judaism that seem personally appealing, is the new—and perhaps only—norm among most Jews. This leads to odd juxtapositions: a Conservative rabbi, for example, reports on a congregant who boasts of never having missed a day when wrapping *tephilin* (phylacteries) is required, but the same congregant also makes no bones of his utter scorn for the Jewish dietary restrictions (the laws of *Kashrut*): to him they are too “ridiculous” to observe. Religious skepticism has made such deep inroads that Conservative rabbis have produced an official responsum weighing whether an openly avowed atheist may serve as a prayer leader (*shaliach tzibbur*). (The responsum says no, but in practice it is ignored in many synagogues.) Reform rabbis, in turn, marvel at the willingness of congregants to abandon almost every aspect of Jewish practice, but when it comes to death rituals, they demand adherence to the gold standard of *traditional* ritual observance. With no rhyme or reason, one Jewish ritual is observed punctiliously, while another is dismissed with contempt. Picking and choosing is not a surreptitious exercise, but boldly announced.

The spirit of what the late social scientist Charles Liebman labeled “personalist” religion has triumphed. “My brother,” reports an Orthodox rabbi, “is a wonderful, socially conscious Jew . . . married to a non-Jewish woman. He does holidays with us and calls me every week to wish me a *shabbat shalom* [a good Sabbath]. This year he called and said, ‘my wife and I have a wedding on Saturday when it’s Yom Kippur, so I am going to do my fasting thing on Wednesday; that will be my Yom Kippur.’” As is the case in many Jewish families today, one sibling may embrace a more traditional approach to Judaism and another will observe the religion idiosyncratically or not at all. And also in line with the new personalism, even the most sacred day of the year is now subject to rescheduling if it doesn’t fit one’s busy schedule. Not surprisingly, news reports are proliferating about families shifting the Passover Seder from its Hebrew calendar date to the weekend before or after, whenever guests find it more convenient to gather.²³

But the trend is not only toward radical innovation. Some Jewish adults are embracing traditional practices they had never seen enacted within their families while growing up; some are becoming *more* punctilious in observance. Individuals who had once been minimally connected Jews find their way to study halls where they stretch their minds to grasp the flow of Talmudic reasoning. A learning center in Chicago, for example, offers Talmud for adult beginners “from a Queer perspective.”²⁴ Long abandoned religious practices, such as the immersion in a ritual bath (Mikveh), are attracting non-Orthodox Jews. And in synagogues where the early autumn holiday of Sukkot had barely registered a few decades ago, members vie to invite each other to their decorated booths. The new personalism can lead to the discovery of meaning in rituals once deemed arcane.

These seemingly anarchic developments are not occurring in a vacuum. Just as the spirit of experimentation has captured the imagination of some Jewish groups, the larger American scene is exploding with new forms of religious expression: churches no less than synagogues are paying more attention than ever before to the musical and choreographic dimensions of public worship;²⁵ independent churches, like their synagogue counterparts, are eschewing denominational affiliation so they can invent their own liturgical forms; growing numbers of Americans are floating between different houses of worship and unconventional settings of religious gathering; and the new vogue is *bricolage*, a term sociologist Robert Wuthnow appropriates to refer to the tinkering especially evident among millennials who “join together . . . seemingly inconsistent, disparate components.”²⁶ Even as bar churches are springing up, rabbis are launching “Torah and Brew” conversations in local pubs.²⁷

Broader patterns of disconnection also mirror what is happening in some sectors of the Jewish population. Just as there has been a spike in the population of “Nones” who identify with no Jewish religious outlook, increasing numbers of Americans call themselves nonbelievers or “Nones.”²⁸ In Protestantism and Judaism, once leading religious denominations have fallen on hard times, even as formerly marginal ones are gaining adherents. Church attendance is down, and so are the numbers of regulars in synagogues. Patterns of Jewish religious life are being shaped in the larger spiritual market-

place of America—one that, as we have noted, is in a religious recession, even as experimentation and remixing are widespread.

Given all these contradictory developments, the task of describing and explaining the current Jewish religious scene has grown more complicated. In the past, the dominant mode of reporting on the condition of American Judaism concentrated sharply on denominational developments. In such a reading, the pronouncements of national leaders and the vitality of their movements are the stuff of high drama. Taking pride of place in recent accounts were the battles raging within denominations over the participation of women, LGBTQ individuals, and the Gentile spouses of Jews in Jewish religious settings. The ideological struggle of rabbis for the soul of their respective denominations is another dramatic story line: it seems that self-styled progressives are forever warring with self-styled traditionalists. And then there is the question of numbers: which movement is gaining or losing members?²⁹

These themes are not irrelevant to the lives of average Jews. But even taken together they offer only a partial accounting of what is happening in American Jewish religious life. This point was driven home to me in a very personal way as I reflected in recent years on my own book-length contribution to the study of American Judaism. Roughly a quarter of a century ago, I wrote an analysis of “Judaism in Contemporary America.”³⁰ *A People Divided*, as I titled my study, focused heavily, though not exclusively, on the changing policies and positions of the major Jewish religious movements, and how those shifts brought the movements into heightened conflict. With the passage of time, it has become clear to me that the much-publicized debates over denominational policies, though riveting to some, actually obscured far more important subterranean developments. If we shift our attention from the national organizations to local communities, a very different picture of American Judaism emerges.

To make sense of the current Jewish religious scene, I therefore resolved to attend in this book as much as possible to developments affecting the lives of ordinary Jews in their local communities rather than the preoccupations of the elites at a far geographic remove from the folk. But how does one learn about nonelites, those conventionally referred to in Jewish parlance as *amcha*

(literally meaning God's people and figuratively a term for the Jewish folk)? Ideally, one would engage in ethnographic studies in multiple religious settings, observing how attendees participate and then interviewing them on what Jewish religious practices mean to them³¹—or, to use the language of sociologist Nancy Ammerman, one would listen to the “sacred stories” they tell to make sense of their religious lives.³² Though a small number of such studies have appeared, there is little research to date on the religious lives of congregants as told in their own words, perhaps because of the practical challenges of finding the resources of time and money to engage in a wide-ranging ethnographic study encompassing Jews across the country.

I've embarked on a different course. Over a period of some years, I have conducted hour or longer interviews with over 160 rabbis of all types in every region of the country. Almost every interview focused on two key themes: the interviewees' perceptions of the religious lives of the Jews they encounter and the steps taken by clergy and laypeople to address the religious needs of those Jews. Quite a few of the conversations took surprising turns as my informants spoke openly about subjects close to their hearts. Some of the most illuminating insights emerged from conversations that veered off topic and wandered down unplanned byways. I am mindful, as were the rabbis who graciously took the time to speak with me, that these leaders are not omniscient. There are things about their congregants' religious lives they probably do not know. But what was more striking to me was the frankness of my interviewees about the congregants they do encounter, their struggles to strengthen the religious experiences of those congregants and their self-conscious awareness of their own limitations.

In choosing my interview subjects, I aimed for a cross-section of rabbis and other observers from different regions of the country, serving in urban and suburban settings, and of course in congregations of different denominations and also in nondenominational settings. My preference was to speak with rabbis who had at least a decade of experience since completing their rabbinical studies, but generally I did not include many who are within a decade of retirement. I came away from most interviews energized by the thoughtfulness and intentionality the rabbis bring to their work—and also their sobriety in grasping the nature of the challenges they face.

My sources of information were not limited to rabbis. I have spoken with several dozen knowledgeable observers of the American Jewish religious scene, in some cases for the purposes of eliciting information about specific developments, in others to hear perspectives about more open-ended questions. I also have personally attended several hundred synagogues over the years, as a visitor or guest speaker, and those visits provided me the opportunity to speak with ordinary Jews in different types of settings. Positioned as I am at a training institution for future Jewish leaders and educators, I have learned a good deal from my students about the communities they know.

Sprinkled throughout the coming pages are vignettes and perceptions drawn from these encounters. They are not, however, attributed to named individuals. Because I opted to conduct “on background” interviews with a promise of anonymity, I am asking readers to put a good deal of faith in my reliability in those sections of the book that draw upon unattributed statements. This is hardly an unknown research practice, although it may be a bit unusual in that my sources are knowledgeable observers who describe the activities of others, not only themselves.

Most of this study, though, is based on information readily available in the public domain—sermonic materials, news accounts, survey data, online articles, and various reports and scholarly books and essays. With the aid of Professor Steven M. Cohen, I have drawn extensively upon data collected by the Pew Research Foundation for its 2013 study of Jewish Americans. Though the published report of initial data has been widely cited, for the purposes of this study a good deal more data were run to get at specific questions of religious involvement. I have also tapped the rapidly expanding blogosphere for insight into how Jews of different outlooks think about religious issues. By meshing these easily verifiable and cited sources with findings from off-the-record interviews, I hope to present a rounded portrait of Jewish religious life unavailable through written sources alone.

This book scrutinizes Jewish religious life in today’s America through three distinct lenses. Its opening section focuses on the lived religion of ordinary Jews. Here we encounter differences between the range of non-Orthodox Jews, including those who claim no religious identification but nonetheless

participate in some activities. Another chapter examines the so-called Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi Jews), Modern Orthodox, and Sephardi Jews. (The latter are virtually invisible in almost all studies of American Jewish life.) Among the questions discussed are the following: What do Jews believe about God? How frequently do they participate in religious activities? Which religious rituals resonate the most? And which have been reinterpreted in recent years to strike contemporary chords? Care is taken to analyze how Jews of different denominations, genders, geographic regions, and age groups vary in their religious participation.

The second section looks at religious life through the lens of denominational life. Successive chapters on Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Judaism delineate the strengths and weaknesses of each religious movement. The emphasis in these chapters is not on denominational pronouncements, but on internal tensions and the responsiveness of these movements to local congregations. The concluding chapter of this section examines why each of these movements has become a leaky vessel and what might be done to shore all of them up.

Religious renewal lies at the heart of the third, and final, section. Successive chapters address the three main arenas of religious renewal in our time—efforts to renew worship services in synagogues through innovative approaches to music, choreography, study, meditation, and individualized attention; the massive, and underreported, growth of Orthodox outreach efforts, which now touch the lives of several hundred thousand non-Orthodox Jews annually; and innovative programming geared toward Jewish millennials and those unaffiliated with the major movements.

My own posture in this volume also warrants comment. I am simultaneously an academic observer of American Jewish life and also a practicing adherent of Judaism. In the former capacity, I have endeavored to survey the entire scene and not limit my purview only to those expressions of Judaism I find personally congenial. But I also have written critically, asking hard questions about how well different groups have succeeded *according to their own standards*. No one group is idealized in this volume, and yet I hope no group will feel it has been treated unfairly. In writing critically, I have been influenced by my own understandings. It cannot be otherwise about a con-

temporary phenomenon: I am implicated in this story and am deeply concerned about its outcome. In writing this book, I have tried to find a sweet spot between a posture of Olympian detachment and one of subjective opinion.

Here, at the outset, it is necessary to address a number of definitional questions. To begin with, what do I mean when I refer to “Jewish religious life”? First, let’s distinguish between religion and religiousness.³³ The former often entails a set of doctrines about correct belief and behaviors; the second is about the actual practices of religious people. The first is what the elites teach as the true requirements of the religion; the second is how ordinary Jews, often described by sociologists of religion as the folk, enact their religious lives. This book does not ignore religion. The middle section is all about the organized Jewish denominations and their changing views and policies. But the primary purpose of this volume is to examine the religious activities of ordinary Jews and identify what is being made available to those who seek religious involvement. Those themes are addressed in the first and third sections.

It should be clear from the foregoing that I understand the category of religion in a formal sense. Colloquially, one often hears people say that Israel is the religion of America’s Jews because of the strong passions it arouses; or allegiance to one of the major political parties is the religion of large sectors of the population, as in the quip about Reform Judaism being “the Democratic Party with holidays thrown in.”³⁴ No doubt, quite a few American Jews are more passionate about the welfare of Israel or the state of American politics than about the requirements of Judaism, however understood. But these commitments are not the subject of this volume. Instead, I adhere to the dictionary definition: “religion is an organized system of beliefs, ceremonies, and rules used to worship a god or a group of gods.”³⁵ This, as we shall see, is a sufficiently complex topic.

For example, some of the categories routinely employed to study the religious lives of American Christians cannot be applied readily to their Jewish counterparts. Conventionally, the religious behavior of Americans is understood through the prism of belief and worship: Do you believe in God? What

kind of God is that? What about angels and miracles? How often do you attend public worship services? These are obvious questions that apply to Jews no less than to Americans who identify with other religions. But for Jews, religious observances and ritual performance are far more important than matters of belief, and even prayer.

Rabbinic Judaism has long stressed the importance of all 613 commandments identified in the Torah by the rabbis, the long catalog of “dos and don’ts.”³⁶ These range from Sabbath and holiday observance to dietary restrictions, from modest dress to purity laws, from publicly enacted ethical imperatives to private acts of kindness. Survey questionnaires usually ask about only a handful of these commandments: lighting candles as the Sabbath begins and partaking in a Passover Seder, fasting on Yom Kippur, desisting from handling money on the Sabbath, lighting candles to celebrate Hanukkah, and giving to charity. Critics are wont to dismiss these as “ghetto measures” of Judaism, claiming they are long outdated and too parochial. For many Jews they are not. Still, in an age of highly idiosyncratic religious practices, inquiring about the standard items alone may miss entirely what some Jews regard as their most important Jewish religious rituals—engaging in acts of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) through good deeds, social justice work and advocacy, charitable giving, reading certain types of books or blogs, performing spiritual exercises, communing with nature, observing Jewish mourning rituals, to take a few examples. There is no commonly agreed upon list of required religious practices any longer. The first two chapters of this book will go beyond the standard measures, but given the idiosyncratic nature of religious living today, they can’t possibly cover all forms of Judaism practiced by ordinary Jews.

A word in this connection about spiritual practices: A large sociological literature tries to distinguish between religion and spirituality, and tends to view them as antithetical, or at least as operating in very different spheres. The former is “organized, traditional and communal”; the latter is “unique to each person” and interior. Rich traditions of spiritual meditation exist within Jewish religious traditions, even if they have not been the dominant modes.³⁷ This study therefore does not dismiss the new Jewish spirituality as irrelevant, but to the contrary attends to some experimental efforts to connect

ordinary Jews to the wellsprings of Jewish spirituality through meditation, the study of Hasidic and Mussar texts, and even Jewish mysticism. That said, as a study of *Jewish religious life* in America, this book does not examine spiritual practices with no discernible relationship to Judaism. No doubt, many Jews find it meaningful to commune with nature, derive uplift from viewing natural wonders, engage in Eastern meditation practices, or in other ways “do” spiritual things. There is no reason to doubt these are acts of spirituality, but there is no good reason to assume they necessarily are acts of Jewish religious activity, that they are connected to teachings and expectations of a religious system known as Judaism. Just because Jewish people engage in a practice does not mean their behavior is an expression of Jewish religious activity. (The same reasoning will be applied mutatis mutandis to reports of Jews engaged in social justice and political activism.)

It can be argued, of course, that a simpler method to gauge religious behavior would be to study the teachings of the various Jewish denominations.³⁸ Each of the movements offers a spectrum of approved practices and, to some extent, disapproved ones. The expectations of Orthodox or Conservative or Reform Judaism would establish parameters—the first committed to the broad range of observances, the third offering the greatest latitude, and the Conservative movement maintaining a middle ground. There may have been a time when this schematic approach would have worked because adherents strove to live within the approved range—although with only limited success. Under current circumstances, though, denominational positions offer little guidance: first, the intensely individualistic ethos of our times means that what the denominations suggest is just that—a suggestion; second, increasing numbers of Jews do not subscribe to any denominational identification; and third, the denominations themselves are no longer as clear about their expectations. Reform Judaism, for example, used to mean that the observance of Jewish dietary laws and head coverings for males in synagogue were forbidden. Now, both are optional. The Conservative movement, as we shall see, has a broad range of adherents, some of whom could fit fairly easily in the Orthodox camp and others in the Reform camp; its majority and minority opinions, moreover, leave a great deal of confusion as to preferred practices. And within Orthodoxy too there is a wide spectrum of

observance and belief not necessarily consonant with the official ideologies of its institutions.

Because religious performance is so variable, we now face an additional challenge: where to look for it. Certainly, the home and places of worship are the most obvious sites. But religion may be found in the workplace or supermarket or on a sports field. Some scholars of religious life have gone so far as to claim it can be “hidden in plain sight.”³⁹ The challenge is to learn more about what takes place in unconventional settings, as illustrated by the apocryphal story about a Jewish man who was running late for an important business appointment and frantically circling to find a place to park his car. “Please, God,” he prayed, “if you help me find a spot I’ll come to synagogue with greater regularity.” Still circling, he added a second vow: “God, if You help me find a spot, I’ll don *tephilin* [phylacteries] daily. God, you have to help me out.” Just then a car pulled out of a parking spot. “Never mind, God,” he blurted out, “I found one myself.” Does this “prayer” rise to the level of a religious act? And if it does, how can we possibly know how frequently Jews offer such prayers? We cannot, and this book will not be able to document such private acts. But we ought to bear in mind the larger point: religious activity can occur in many settings, not just in houses of worship.⁴⁰

Further complicating the task of studying religious life is the question of how narrowly to define Judaism. It’s hardly a simple matter to disentangle the religious dimension of Jewish life from ethnic and cultural connections. To describe the Jews as adherents of a religion is to minimize, if not ignore, important aspects of Jewish identity—and to impose upon Jews a set of categories drawn from other cultures and religions. For much of their history, Jews did not have a word for their “religion,” and, as Leora Batnitzky, a professor of Jewish thought, has contended, the characterization of Judaism as a religion is itself a modern invention. Moreover, as she aptly notes, it is a problematic conceit because it seeks to force Jewish life into the procrustean bed of Protestantism. The Protestant notion, she observes, “denotes a sphere of life separate and distant from others, and . . . is largely private not public, voluntary not compulsory.”⁴¹ For much of their history, the Jews have understood matters differently: religion was intertwined with folk culture;

Judaism required participation in public spheres; and there hardly was anything voluntary about it, for even Jews who trampled upon or ignored the sacred practices of the Jewish people were still regarded as Jews—including those who wanted no part of Jewish religious life.

In our time, applying the category of religion to Jews is even more problematic. What can be more “religious” than sermons and public references to God’s will in houses of worship? And yet, anyone who attends synagogue services will note how little God is invoked in sermons or conversations, as distinct from prayers. In most places of Jewish gathering, explicit references to God’s will—often described as “God talk”—are absent. This is true also in the private sphere: a friend described to me how his father managed to live as a fully observant Orthodox Jew yet never spoke about God in earshot of his son, and the latter confessed he had no idea what his father’s theological beliefs were. This is hardly uncommon, largely because Judaism stresses ritual performance and deeds over belief. Rabbinic thinking appreciated that belief and religious fervor wax and wane over the life course—and perhaps even within a single day; punctilious observance of the *mitzvot* (commandments) therefore was seen by the rabbis as the necessary stable factor.

The Jewish religion, moreover, differs from Protestantism in its inseparable connection to a specific people. An old joke tells about Goldberg who attends synagogue to speak to God and about his neighbor Levine who comes there to speak to Goldberg. Both types of Jews can be found in almost every synagogue of any Jewish denomination. Being a Jew means to be tied to the fate of a particular people in all its habitations—and that too is deemed a religious imperative. To capture this aspect of Jewish identification, writers refer to “Jewish peoplehood,” a neologism partially invented to capture a dimension of Jewishness without a parallel in Christianity.⁴² (A Google search of the word “peoplehood” reveals that more than half the web page options refer to Jews.)

Why then write a book about Jewish religious life, rather than the totality of the contemporary Jewish experience? Why not cast a wide net to include the ties American Jews feel to one another and to Jews in other lands, notably the special bond with Israel? Why not refer to Jewish art, music, literature, dance, material culture, philanthropy, and politics, among other

possible dimensions of American Jewish life? To ask the question is to answer it: the subject is too broad for a single volume.

But there also is a more substantive reason. Evidence is mounting of declining group solidarity within some sectors of the Jewish populace, a phenomenon also noted among other American ethnic groups. Already in 1985, the sociologist Richard Alba described “the twilight of ethnicity” among Italians whose ancestors arrived in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴³ Other social scientists like Herbert Gans have continued to trace the declining influence of ethnicity upon other populations far removed from their immigrant forebearers. Writing about “the ethnic structures and cultures” of today’s fourth- and fifth-generation Americans, Gans found that “European ethnicity has virtually disappeared or at least is no longer visible.”⁴⁴ To punctuate the point, he writes of “terminal ethnic identity” among “late generation ethnics.”

Most American Jews trace their ancestry to immigrant ancestors who arrived during the period Gans describes, and there is little reason to believe Jews depart from the general pattern he observes. Peoplehood alone will not keep Jews engaged in Jewish life with any measure of intensity. Though I personally resonate strongly with the obligations and satisfactions that come with a strong connection to the Jewish people, ample evidence attests to the weakness of peoplehood *alone* as an instrument for the transmission of a strong Jewish identity from one generation to the next. Particularly in the absence of overt discriminatory anti-Semitism, families find it extremely difficult to transmit a strong Jewish identification to succeeding generations. Sacred religious practices, holidays, rituals, and commandments keep the Jewish people Jewish, a point noted already over a century ago by the Hebrew writer Asher Ginzberg when he famously observed, “more than Jews have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath kept [guarded] the Jewish people.”⁴⁵ And conversely, Jewish families without religion don’t stay Jewish for very long.

This is not to suggest that religion is a magical amulet consistently able to protect American Jews from disappearing into the larger society. The numbers of Jews who choose to distance themselves from Jewish life despite their religious upbringing are hardly negligible. Religion is not a guaranteed antidote to assimilation. But it still is the strongest predictor of Jewish in-

volvement. Judging from the evidence we currently have, Jewish religious identification and participation correlate strongly with all other forms of Jewishness. The more ritually observant Jews are and the more often they attend synagogue, the more likely they are to invest themselves and their financial resources in sustaining all forms of Jewish life.⁴⁶ And conversely, declining religious participation usually is associated with weakening peoplehood connections. Why, then, write a book about American Judaism? Because aside from anti-Semitic persecution, nothing is likely to play a larger role in determining the future of Jewish life in this country than the lived religion of ordinary Jews.

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