During the years between the World Wars, the United States afforded its Jewish inhabitants an unprecedented opportunity to thrive and flourish. Jenna Weissman Joselit has researched the extent to which a visionary group of pioneering and creative modern Orthodox Jews attempted to make the most of what this great nation offered. She describes the process by which Orthodoxy was transplanted to this country, and how it took root and changed the heretofore virtually exclusive full-bearded face of the Orthodox rabbinate and the people to whom these rabbis ministered. This was not, by any means, a superficial transformation. It went to the heart and soul of the traditional Jewish way of life.

Her main thesis is that some influential rabbis were able to adapt numerous facets of Orthodox Judaism to suit the "bourgeois" tastes of their congregants during this period. She may very well have a point in some cases, but careful readers will note that, in presenting it, Joselit paints an image not of congregants who were more secular, sophisticated, and successful than their predecessors, but rather, simply "bourgeois"—clearly a value judgement, and a devaluing one—for reasons we will examine below.

Joselit certainly creates a vivid and comprehensive picture of the way the rabbis of some successful congregations sought to emulate their less traditional Reform and Conservative colleagues in terms of making Orthodoxy and its synagogues as palatial as possible. Although the book is generally well-researched, all too often when the author seeks to criticize these practices and their proponents, she seems to compromise her objectivity, her scientific approach, and her sense of propriety.

This book purports to describe the Orthodox Jewish communities of New York in the interwar years by looking at the Jewish values, customs, institutions, and functionaries of the time. What the book actually does is to focus primarily on the views and practices of only a few individuals who lived in two sections of the same borough of Manhattan, in New York City. To the author’s credit, the people on whom she focuses were influential nationally, and the neighborhoods on which she focuses were noteworthy as well—the Upper East Side and the Upper West Side. These people and neighborhoods reflected creativity, innovation, acculturation, and upward mobility. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the most famous New York neighborhood of all—the predecessor of all others, the historic Lower East Side—is given a much lower profile in this book, and most of the rabbis who occupied pulpits in this neighborhood are hardly mentioned. What might be seen as a snub of the Lower East Side can perhaps be justified, in this context, by this neighborhood’s characterization as a conglomeration of budding American mini-communities attempting to replicate deeply rooted European communities by means of networks of shtieblach and landsmenschaffen.

Notwithstanding the fact that the book’s scope and perspective are much
narrower than its title indicates, the author does indeed arrive at many accurate conclusions and touches on a wide range of subjects—from Jewish education (with overwhelming emphasis on the Ramaz School) to the role of women (especially “Americanized” ones).

Needlessly, however, the book also has something to offend almost everyone. Even the pretentious—however catchy—title of the book excludes and offends Reform and Conservative Jews on one hand, and many non-“modern” Orthodox adherents to the letter of Jewish law on the other hand, by implying that all people to the right or to the left of the author are not fully “Jewish.” She of course has every right to disagree with the views of Jews of the left as well as with those on the right, but she does a disservice when she seems to disenfranchise as Jews anyone whose practices may have departed from those of their ancestors to a greater degree than have those of the “modern Orthodox.”

Incredibly, the author even manages to offend many members of the lone group of Jews she does recognize as Jewish. When she writes about the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, she has trouble consistently getting this organization’s name straight, and declares that the UOJCA’s function was largely symbolic. Yet it was precisely during the interwar years, under the presidency of one of the rabbis who is given a fair amount of attention in this book (Herbert S. Goldstein), that the O.U. most concretely established, for the first time on a national level, a network of kosher endorsements of major American companies and, across the country, a women’s branch, a collegiate branch, youth groups, and more.

Unfortunately, Joselit also stereotypes individuals, attributing implied greedy or monopolistic motives to them without presenting any evidence. When she writes that the older American rabbis who were born and educated in Europe saw themselves as “heirs apparent” to the European rav “and his prerogatives,” and that these older rabbis saw “the new American rabbi” as “an encroacher,” she seems to imply or take for granted that many of the rabbis who lived in America but who had been trained and ordained in the tradition-steeped seminaries of Europe resisted their young American-born counterparts because of turf considerations. The author attributes the opposition of the older rabbis only in part to other factors. Notably, the rabbis born in America were generally not as well-versed in classic texts such as the Talmud and Shulhan Arukh; the older rabbis sought to protect certain Jewish traditions and customs that some of their younger Yankee counterparts were eliminating or diluting; and the older rabbis felt that some of the practices of their younger colleagues were influenced more by their non-Orthodox colleagues than by their European predecessors.

In response to the implied allegation of monopolistic tendencies on the part of European rabbis, it may be noted that virtually all of the Orthodox rabbis who conferred ordination in America during the interwar years—including all of the Talmud instructors on the staff of the rabbinical seminary affiliated with Yeshiva University—were born in Europe, and most of the students they ordained in America were born in America.

Joselit claims that during the interwar years the word halakha (traditional Jewish law) “hardly, if ever,” surfaced in the lexicon of the interwar American Orthodox community. She doesn’t differentiate here between the “old guard” (the Yiddish speaking Jew) and the new (the “modern Orthodox”) in making this sweeping observation, and overlooks the Halakha Commission established by the Rabbinical Council of America, in the 1930s. (The RCA was founded in the interwar years and, from its very inception, consisted primarily of “modern Orthodox” rabbis. It has claimed more young American members than any other Orthodox rabbinical group of its kind.)

Furthermore, few American rabbis in any neighborhood—or any period—wrote more widely and took more public roles in defense of traditional Jewish laws than did the three Orthodox rabbis highlighted in
this book. Since each one is the subject of a separate autobiography or biography, no attempt need be made here to provide a summary of the ways in which they defined and defended Jewish law; rather, a few of the most comprehensive examples will be provided. Rabbi Joseph Lookstein’s writings include Judaism in Theory and Practice and What Is Orthodox Judaism? One area in which he played a most prominent role was that dealing with the law requiring the teaching of Jewish tradition to children. Rabbi Leo Jung’s Essentials of Judaism was reprinted more than ten times and he wrote or edited an entire Jewish Library which consisted of many different books on the relevance of Jewish law and practices. He also played a most important role in the area of enforcement of kosher food legislation. Finally, Rabbi Herbert S. Goldstein serialized comments on all 613 biblical commandments and later published these observations in a book, Between the Lines of the Bible. One area in which he played a most public role was in stressing the importance of Sabbath observance.

Joselit hits another sour note when she casts aspersions on the motives of all cantors. She leads readers to believe that the typical cantor was given “to performing lengthy musical renditions of the prayers more for his own sake than for the sake of heaven.” For heaven’s sake, how can she know?

Joselit even stiffly opposes—and sharply condemns—the age-old practice of swaying to and fro while praying. She herself considers this to be “a particular distraction,” and approves of Elias Solomon’s characterization of the custom as “a great source of annoyance.” (Solomon had demonstrated his appreciation of traditional Jewish values by deserting the cause of Orthodoxy altogether.) The author conveniently neglects to point out that those who sway when they pray still have the final say in many contemporary Orthodox synagogues.

In Jewish law, a community’s obligation to build a synagogue structure is subordinate to its obligation to build a mikva (ritualarium). To Joselit’s credit, she presents an excellent description of the improvements made in “modern” (post-mid-1930s) mikvaot. Unfortunately, she also attempts to water down her excellent presentation by stating that “those who observed the ritual [of mikva immersion] did so grudgingly and unhappily.” What Joselit submerges in a footnote in the back of the book is the fact that she bases this conclusion on the testimony of only two women, both of whom lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and both of whom were born in America—hardly a representative sampling of New York Jewry.

Joselit disparages women’s religious involvement, in particular those who attended Rabbi Lookstein’s congregation, Kehilath Jeshurun (KJ), which receives more of her attention than any other synagogue and which she generally holds in high esteem. She states that “despite the widely received notion that Jewish women were inherently spiritual, women simply did not attend services.” She thus implies that one of the only ways—if not the only way—for women to be spiritual is by praying in a synagogue, rather than in their homes. When she concedes their synagogue attendance, it is with a most unflattering description of the women who prayed at KJ: “[They typically arrived] toward the latter part of the service . . . exchanged the news of the week, chatted about who was in attendance and who was not, and eyed one another’s clothing.” The author was moved to point out, as an afterthought, that “the sanctuary was not merely the setting for displaying one’s finery” (emphasis added). The discussion of the spiritual lives of women would have been greatly enhanced by the presentation of some data on the percentage and dedication of Orthodox women who did indeed pray at home—with or without the classic Tzenna Urenna text that was widely used in many communities (although not necessarily on the Upper East Side and the Upper West Side of Manhattan).

Within the two neighborhoods on which this book concentrates, Joselit focuses on what were regarded, during the interwar years, as New York’s three wealthiest and most influential (though therefore
least typical) Orthodox synagogues: KJ, The Jewish Center (JC), and the Institutional Synagogue (IS). The author’s chief unpublished source is the set of candid, biting, and gossipy diaries of the ever-articulate and prolific Mordecai Kaplan, who was humiliated in the first two of these synagogues, even while occupying their pulpits, and by the rabbi of the third, who publicly denounced Kaplan’s teachings as heretical. Thus fired up and armed with more than one ax to grind against these synagogues, his former congregants, and his successors (not to mention his resentment towards Orthodox Judaism in general), Kaplan established an anti-Orthodox fourth “wing” of Judaism. Yet this is the “authority” upon whose words many of the solemn conclusions reached in this book are uncritically based.

For example, in writing about Orthodox Jews in general, all of whom had personally and/or theologically rejected Kaplan because of his infidelity to some of the basic tenets of classical Judaism, it was none other than this very man who was selected by Joselit to delineate Orthodox Jews’ knowledge of Judaism; it was none other than Kaplan who was quoted by Joselit to the effect that the interwar Orthodox had a “knowledge of Judaism” that was “limited to the ability to read certain portions of the service that are frequently repeated.” Only in a footnote at the end of the book is this general condemnation of Orthodox Jews attributed to Kaplan. Furthermore, the author provides no other point of view on this subject in this context, thereby failing to point out that many American Orthodox Jews knew far more than that. No mention is made here of the Jewish publishing houses, books, and periodicals of the time. Many of the periodicals were published in Yiddish, and not all of them were geared to socialists. Furthermore, no mention is made here of Young Israel programs or of the variety of synagogues—even outside of Kaplan’s affluent neighborhood—that were developing extensive programs of lectures, classes and courses on many Judaic subjects and on many levels.

The same absence of textual attribution (to Kaplan) and of a balanced presentation of another point of view on this subject at this point occurs with respect to the following sweeping statement:

... Middle-class Orthodox Jews lived “an intensely Jewish life without ever giving a thought as to why and wherefore, or making the least attempt to understand its content or spirit. They never open a Jewish book.”

Many readers will undoubtedly consider this excerpt to be self-contradictory. The observations made above in response to Kaplan’s first generalization apply equally to the second.

Joselit’s main oral sources about KJ are three of the people least likely—or able—to be objective in this context (although themselves most likely to employ the language . . . master of the language . . . whose speeches were put to good advantage.” This seems almost counterproductive. While both Rabbis Lookstein deserve and receive high praise, using the son’s statement in this way is unfair both to him and to his illustrious late father.

Rabbi Leo Jung was the spiritual leader of The Jewish Center during virtually the entire interwar period. Although Joselit did indeed give him credit where credit was due, she focused far more extensively on the views and recollections of the ubiquitous Kaplan, the JC rabbi who was pressured to resign in 1922 (only six years after he had founded the synagogue), largely because he “did not want to be bound to upholding Orthodoxy in the Center.”

Most of Joselit’s observations about the third synagogue on which she focuses (IS) and its founding spiritual leader (Rabbi Goldstein) are favorable, and are based on a balanced assortment of written sources. When it comes to oral sources, however, the author fails to attribute quotes—or even paraphrases—to any member of the synagogue, past or present, with only one exception. The author’s only cited interviewee with respect to either the synagogue
or the rabbi was an ex-member who became so biased against the synagogue that he abandoned it in favor of a competing one in the same community.

The author makes a point of referring to Rabbi Goldstein (who was a member of the founding presidium of the Rabbinical Council of America) as an "exceptionally popular" and "sharp" representative of "the ideal type of Orthodox rabbi"; however, she also sees the need to print twice the identical criticism of his preaching style by two obviously biased sources, in different parts of the book. She fails to put this into perspective by mentioning his role as the dean of the Homiletics Department of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, which was affiliated with what is now known as Yeshiva University, and which was and remains the leading institution for the training of American modern Orthodox rabbis. She also feels compelled to criticize a biography he wrote as partly a "fable," and a biography about him as "partisan," without once citing so much as a single alleged inaccuracy or exaggeration in either work.

It is clear that not all of the author's ill-conceived observations reveal ill will on her part; they simply reveal a lack, or possibly a disregard, of basic knowledge about subjects she discusses.

Incredibly, the book refers to "the widespread use of English as the public language of the [Orthodox] prayer service." Not only does this fail to reflect today's reality, but it also does not reflect the reality that prevailed in the years covered by the book. Virtually every mainstream American Orthodox synagogue has used English very sparingly in its prayer services, if at all, and even when English is used, it is only in the prayer for the United States government, in sermons, in announcements, and in reciting a few translations of—or interpolations in—certain Hebrew prayers.

Surprisingly, when Joselit writes that as of 1919 no Orthodox rabbi had been born in America, she demonstrates a careless reading of a book she herself quotes, which indicates that the New York-born Goldstein had been ordained five years earlier in New York and had taught the first class of American-born rabbis who graduated from Yeshiva University's seminary. Going back further, Rabbi Bernard Drachman, who is also mentioned in Joselit's book, was also born in America and was ordained in 1885, although his ordination was not conferred in America.

Oddest of all, Joselit concludes her book, in a postscript, with sentiments that agree—or at least partially identify—with the individuals who mocked the people and views she praises most lavishly throughout her book (although this may be due more to imprecision in her language than to a simple inconsistency or a more complex change of heart). After first describing post-World-War-II American Orthodox Jews as having a "far more negative point of view" of modernity than their predecessors (who in fact had a positive view of many aspects of modernity, and even proudly called themselves "modern Orthodox"—A.R.), the author ends her book with the following observations:

. . . [T]he indigenous American Orthodox were being told point-blank that their collective claim to being Orthodox and wholly traditional was not merited and that their behavior was simply not up to snuff. [The author neglects to insert at this point that what follows is the opinion of many postwar Orthodox immigrants and their students—A.R.] At best, [the "indigenous American Orthodox"] were America's "modern" Orthodox, a subdivision or possibly even a dissident sect of traditional Jews but certainly not the denomination's authentic standard-bearers. Pressured into redefining themselves, the prewar Orthodox had become merely the modern Orthodox. [Again, in this sentence Joselit gives the impression that she is presenting her own conclusion, rather than the conclusion of other people.—A.R.] The authentic Orthodox, the true believers, it seemed, were to be found elsewhere. [Joselit's failure to say that "it seemed to many postwar Jews . . ." represents a third time, within a few sentences, that her words adopt the opinions of the "right wing" postwar Jews.—A.R.]

Since Joselit is generally precise and articulate, the reader cannot help but speculate that perhaps she really has been influenced by some of the arguments put
forth by the postwar Jews, whether or not she chooses to make such a concession.

Notwithstanding the book's shortcomings, it does indeed offer a wealth of accurate facts; the author's selection and interpretation of this data, unfortunately, leave something to be desired. Had the book's title been limited to a study of the behaviors and views of selected Jews in two Manhattan neighborhoods—rather than in all of New York—the book could have achieved less presumptuous and more realistic objectives.


Reviewed by
Elchanan Sabah

The author's choice of title, Parallels Meet, apparently refers to his goal of bringing about a solution to more than a century of conflict over the meaning and purpose of the Zionist movement and the challenge it has presented to traditional Torah Judaism.

This is a comprehensive and well-written work, and is important reading for the religious Jew, both Zionist and non-Zionist. For here is clearly presented the underlying thinking, methods, and goals of the anti-religious founders of secular Zionism. Here, too, are the struggles and ideology of Shmuel Mohlever, as well as the innovative ideas of Yitzchok Reines, all carefully depicted against the full background of anti-religious Zionism. The author's chapters on the work of Rav Kook complete the picture of the two Zionist camps—religious and anti-religious—as they travel on parallel paths through the decades.

This book is at once enlightening and painful, because it strips away fantasies and illusions about the origins of secular Zionism and its dream of a “national Jewish homeland.” Whether in the form of Ahad Ha-Am's or Berdyczewski's version of “Am Yisroel—the spirit of the nation” (a vague concept of kelal Yisrael which tossed overboard surplus baggage such as God, Torah, or mitsvot), the literary output of the early secular Zionists leaves no doubt that whatever their differences may have been, all agreed to one basic concept: that if Jewry is to have a future, it must be disconnected from Torah. Each chapter makes it indelibly clear that these early thinkers visualized the establishment of a new Jewish nation free of the shackles of religion. The only issue over which there was a question was the method by which this was to be achieved: by superficial accommodation to the religion; by outright denial; or by temporary compromise.

The various messages of nationalistic secularism take different forms in this book. Pines argued that “the halacha should be amended quietly without commotion.” Ben-Yehuda and his followers challenged this approach and saw as the aim of Zionism the outright uprooting of all rabbinic authority and religious practice. However, while the debates and ideals of secularists such as Ahad Ha-Am, Pines, Herzl, Ben Yehuda, J. L. Gordon, and Lilienblum are presented in full color and detail, they represent only one of the parallel lines. The other line is not quite parallel.

Specifically, the author falls short when he presents the views of the personalities who led the religious anti-Zionist movement. Here his objectivity fails him. For example, while he describes Jacob Lipschitz of Kovno as the leading religious anti-Zionist who waged constant battle against the secular Zionists, he fails to grant Lipschitz equal time. Instead, he offers tendentious descriptions of Lipschitz's essays, dismissing them as “cheap shots,”
and thus robs the reader of an opportunity to measure the true stature of the religious anti-Zionist movement. Although he describes Lipschitz as a prolific writer, essayist and pamphleteer who succeeded in founding the first Orthodox newspaper in Russia, nowhere in the book does the author provide actual citations from this voluminous material. He chooses rather to state that Lipschitz would study the contemporary Zionist writings with a magnifying glass in order to find “tidbits of blasphemy” with which to alarm the rabbis. (It is hardly likely, however, based on the secular citations in this volume, that Lipschitz needed a very powerful glass.)

The author does admit, however, that Lipschitz wanted to create a united anti-Zionist front of rabbis and Hasidic rebeim in Russia and Poland. To this end he labored to obtain and publish rabbinic opinions which would clearly express the Orthodox leadership’s view of Zionism. In fact, he did succeed in attracting the greatest East European rabbis, whose authority was accepted by most of Orthodoxy: Rabbis Eliezer Gordon of Telz, Hayyim Ozer Grodzensky of Vilna, Elijah Hayyim Meisel of Lodz, and Hayyim Soloveitchik of Brisk. Lipschitz was also able to find common ground with Rabbi Shalom Dov Baer Schneerson, the famous leader of Habad.

While he admits that these rabbis represented the leading rabbinic figures in Russia, the reader looks in vain for an examination of their ideologies. Clearly, Luz has no patience with the antagonists of Zionism regardless of their stature. This imbalance is a major weakness in a work dedicated to an investigation of the respective positions of religion and nationalism. It is unnerving to find the Hafets Hayyim’s heroic and successful attempts to alleviate Jewish suffering in Eastern Europe described as a feeble call to adhere to an ancient faith. The author fails to admit that major successes in alleviating Tsarist oppression were achieved by the intercession of the anti-Zionists types like Jacob Lipschitz and the Hafets Hayyim, who focused world-wide attention on Tsarist cruelty and made it possible to bring some measure of relief to the Jewish community. Another major lacuna in a book about Jewish life in late nineteenth-century Russia is the omission of the universally recognized Jewish leader of the era, Rabbi Yitshak Elhanan Spektor of Kovno, whose impact and influence extended beyond the Jewish community and into the very courtyards of the Tsars. A discussion of his position and thinking would have been most valuable.

Though the author’s description of the rabbinic anti-Zionists is incomplete, he redeems himself in the other sections of his work. The lucid and detailed saga of the Polish Labor/Bundist anti-Zionists, for example, gives a new insight into the mentality of Hayyim Zhitlowsky and the Yiddishist believers. So obsessed were they with the ideal of class struggle that they could not bring themselves to join with other Zionists worldwide in a movement to escape oppression and suffering. To them, the Zionists consisted of a bourgeois class, and they had committed the unpardonable sin of incorporating groups that adhered to the “practice of religion.” For the Bundists, the class struggle apparently blinded them to the life and death issues of the Jewish people. Believing themselves to be loyal to the nation, they pinned their survival as Jews on their devotion to the Yiddish language—an object lesson in idealism gone awry.

This is an absorbing study of the root causes of the conflict between the secular Zionists and traditional Orthodoxy. Despite the occasional myopia of the author, it offers a fascinating glimpse of the author, it offers a fascinating glimpse into a little understood facet of modern Jewish history.

REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

AARON I. REICHEL, a rabbi, lawyer, and editor, is the author and a grandson of The Maverick Rabbi (Rabbi Herbert S. Goldstein).

ELCHANAN SABAH is the pen name of an American Jewish student of rabbinic history.

100