

BOOK REVIEW

Rachel B. Gross, *Beyond the Synagogue: Jewish Nostalgia as Religious Practice* (NYU Press, 2021), 272 pp.

Reviewed by
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Many of us still recall the period decades ago when American Jewish life was riven by battles between denominations. The Orthodox world, which objected to the ordination of women and was appalled by the changing standards around conversion in the Reform and Conservative communities, drew lines in the sand. In the liberal Jewish world, it was Orthodox rejectionism that evoked ire. Reform rabbis were angered that some Orthodox leaders would not refer to them as rabbis, sit on panels with them, or partner on programming with their synagogues. The battles were principled, but also acrimonious; at times the toxicity was repelling, no matter where one stood on the spectrum of these issues. Numerous voices warned that the divisiveness inside the Jewish world could lead to its demise. Today, those challenges seem almost quaint.

While positions on those issues may not have shifted much, the vitriol has largely subsided. The reasons are complex, many of them beyond the scope of this brief essay. But one fundamental change does merit our attention. In those arguments of yesterday, at least what was at stake were issues of religion. Inter-marriage, conversion, standards of kashrut, who is a rabbi, and more, were divisive, but even if the divide was acrimonious, there was at least a general agreement that Judaism as religion mattered. That is decreasingly the case.

As the recent Pew Research Center's survey of Jewish Americans in 2020 notes, what is striking about American Jews today is how little religion matters to many of them. If they were once exercised about different religious standards between streams of Jewish life, today what separates them is the question of whether religion matters very much at all. And the demographic growth is on the edges of the spectrum. Among American Jews 65 and older, only 3% self-identified as Orthodox, while among those 18–29 years of age, 17% do. The shrinkage is affecting the “center,” the segment of the Jewish community that is not Orthodox, but still cares about religion. Among those 65 and older, 69% self-identity as Reform or Conservative. In the 18–29 cohort, that number is 37%.

Jews are also noticeably less engaged in religion than are their American Christian counterparts. Only one-fifth of American Jews

polled (21%) claim that religion is very important to them, compared with 41% of American adults. While only 12% of American Jews report that they attend religious services weekly or more often, in the general American public the number is 27%. Among Christians, the number is 57%.

Harking back to the 1980s and 1990s, many of us also recall the much-fretted-about “Continuity Crisis,” sparked by the claim in the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey that of those American Jews getting married, 52% were marrying a non-Jewish person. Many elements in the Jewish community revved their engines to try to address the challenge, certain that if the trend could not be reversed, American Judaism as we knew it would not survive.

Were those efforts successful? Pew suggests not: “Among Jewish respondents who got married since the beginning of 2010, 61% have a non-Jewish spouse, compared with 18% of Jews who got married before 1980.” If anything, the numbers are likely to continue to worsen, because the children of intermarriages themselves, at least half of whom are halakhically Jewish, intermarry at a much higher rate. “Among married Jews who say they have one Jewish parent, 82% have a non-Jewish spouse, compared with 34% of those who report that both of their parents were Jewish.”

What the new Pew portrait makes clear is that liberal Judaism in America has failed in its attempt to reverse the trends to which the 1990 NJPS pointed some 30 years ago. Sadly, while the lowered flames of interdenominational strife marks a pleasant change, it also masks something much more troubling. Even more worrisome than each side ignoring the other is the way in which much of the Jewish world has responded to this gnawing failure to stem the tide over the last three decades. The response, especially among Jewish academics, has been to move the goalposts by changing the definitions of success. If intermarriage is rising, then intermarriage cannot be a problem. If religiosity is evaporating, then by definition it must be less important than we once imagined.

Until 2018, Steven M. Cohen was widely regarded as one of the leading sociologists of American Jewish life. As indicated by the titles of some of his articles, his markers for assessing the vibrancy of Jewish life were fairly standard. He concluded his “Lessons Learned from Orthodoxy’s Dramatic Growth,” which appeared in *The Jewish Week* in 2015, as follows: “The Orthodox have shown that the price of intensive Jewish living has its rewards. The question is how many others will be willing to pay the PRICE to assure a rich Jewish life for themselves, their children, and

their grandchildren.”¹ While not Orthodox himself, Cohen’s traditional measures of Jewish demographic success were no different from those of standard Orthodox analysis.

In “Can Intermarriage Lead to an Increase in the Number of Jews in America?” which Cohen wrote that same year in *Mosaic Magazine*, he noted that “Jews today can and do intermarry without an expectation of severing ties to the Jewish people, and very few of them report being made to feel unwelcome in the Jewish community. Because of these changes, the present and prospective impact of intermarriage on Jewish self-identification looks better than it used to.”² But then Cohen suggested that such optimism was fundamentally unjustified:

Here’s the rub: projecting a growth in Jewish numbers is mathematically sound for the present moment, but a convincing long-term prospect only if you count all Jews equally. From the point of view of Jewish continuity, however, not all Jews are alike. The Pew survey in fact provides a rough tool for measuring the extent and depth of Jewish identity.

In 2018, when Cohen was dismissed from his positions at Hebrew Union College and the UJA Federation of New York amidst accusations of years-long serious sexual harassment and misconduct, a wave of academics used his absence from the academic space over which he had held sway for decades as an opportunity to distance not only him but his ideas as well. Cohen’s alleged sexual improprieties, it was said, reflected an attitude to women that characterized much of the sociological scholarship on American Jewish life. Ronit Stahl and Kate Rosenblatt asserted that the sexual harassment allegations “reflect the troubling gender and sexual politics long embedded in communal discussions of Jewish continuity and survival, the focus of Cohen’s work.”

¹ Cohen coined the acronym PRICE, not only to wink at the high financial cost of an engaged Jewish life, but to enumerate the following characteristics of adherents to such a life: “Passion about Jewish norms and purpose. They perform numerous religious Rituals. They maintain high rates of Informal association (more spouses, friends, and neighbors who are Jewish). They engaged in Community — be it in synagogues, organizations, charities, or political-like activity. And they undertake Educational activities, be it learning groups for themselves or sending their children to day school, overnight camps or to Israel for a very influential gap year.” See Steven M. Cohen, “Lessons Learned from Orthodoxy’s Dramatic Growth,” *The Jewish Week* (November 30, 2015).

² These sentiments are founded upon research published as Steven Cohen, Jacob Ukeles, Ron Miller, *Jewish Community Study of New York 2011: Comprehensive Report* (UJA Federation of New York, 2011), available at www.bjpa.org/search-results/publication/14186.

"These norms make it okay to tell women how to use their bodies, whom to marry, when to have babies, and how to allocate their time," they further asserted. "They have also told people who fall outside of the parameters set primarily by men that their ways of being Jewish are not valued or valuable."³ While the behavior of which Cohen was accused was obviously inexcusable, using the accusations against him as a means of resetting the markers of Jewish demographic survivability, and reorienting American Jewry's commitment away from continuity as a long-held value, was a radical and troubling step that few bothered to spotlight.

Instead, claims like those made by Stahl and Rosenblatt were greeted with a sigh of long overdue relief, with a sense that the sexist underpinnings of Jewish sociology had finally been exposed. Deborah Dash Moore, professor of American Jewish history at the University of Michigan, said, "Stop assuming that there are gradations of being Jewish that make one better than the other, that intermarriage is a bad thing or that intermarriage is a good thing."⁴ She is obviously entitled to advocate that change, but those who know that it is a mistake, for either halakhic or demographic reasons (such as those confirmed by the recent Pew study), ought to be equally entitled to argue the opposite. However, in the current American intellectual climate, pushback was understandably fairly muted. When Keren McGinity, professor at Brandies, and one of Cohen's accusers, argued that "by placing the onus of Jewish survival squarely on women's shoulders, the continuity paradigm reinforced existing gender dynamics that excused Jewish men from the unpaid labor of domestic Judaism," few people felt compelled to reply to the obvious absurdity buried in that claim.⁵

The jettisoning of the markers employed by Cohen and others, dumped like ballast keeping the balloon of imagined truth from rising aloft, illustrated the ways in which American Jewish academics are working to redefine images of Jewish communal survivability to cohere with their ideological commitments. A recent book by Rachel B. Gross, of the Department of Jewish Studies at San Francisco State University, illustrates a similar trend not with regards to intermarriage or birthrates, but instead, to what constitutes religiosity in the first place.

Gross' book appears at a time when the evidence is mounting that religion—no matter whether Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, or

³ As reported in Ben Sales, "The Fall of a Top US Sociologist Could Change the Field of Counting Jews," *The Times of Israel* (August 5, 2018).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Keren R. McGinity, "The Unfinished Business of the Sexual Revolution," *American Jewish History* 104:2 (2020), 208.

other—matters less to American Jews than it ever did before. This, too, the Pew study makes abundantly clear: “About one-in-ten Jewish Americans (12%) say they attend religious services at least weekly in a synagogue, temple or less formal setting—such as a havurah or independent minyan—compared with about a quarter of U.S. adults who say they attend religious services weekly or more (27%).” The synagogue attendance issue is a sign of a deeper disconnect: “U.S. Jews are also less likely than the overall U.S. public to say religion is ‘very important’ to them (21% vs. 41%). Slightly more than half of Jews say religion is ‘not too’ or ‘not at all important’ in their lives, compared with one-third of Americans overall who say the same.”

Just as some contemporary sociologists of American Jewish life claim that intermarriage and birth rates are not the best way of measuring Jewish flourishing, Gross essentially does the same thing with religion in general. In *Beyond the Synagogue: Jewish Nostalgia as Religious Practice*, she argues that ritual and liturgy are not the only way of measuring American Jews’ religious engagement. No less important is “nostalgia.” She suggests that visits to places that evoke a Jewish world lost, such as the Museum at Eldridge Street in New York’s Lower East Side, or eating traditional Jewish foods, should be understood as American Jewish *religious* practices. These practices are not “merely” cultural, she believes; they are actually religious. This redefinition of what constitutes “religious” allows Gross to assert that the sociologists and historians who have asserted that American Jewish life is in decline are simply incorrect; they are just measuring the wrong thing. Gross proposes a different measure, arguing that four Jewish behaviors—conducting Jewish genealogical research, visiting Jewish historic sites, purchasing books and toys that teach Jewish nostalgia to children, and seeking out traditional Jewish foods—are the new and authentically religious ways in which contemporary American Jews are making meaning in today’s American Jewish life.

Interestingly, though many young scholars now refuse to cite his work even in passing, Steven Cohen figures in Gross’ argument, if only to be parried. Gross cites *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America* (Indiana University Press, 2000), by Cohen and Arnold Eisen, formerly of Stanford and then Chancellor of JTS, who argue that heightened individualism in American Jewish life could well “contribute to the dissolution of communal institutions and intergenerational commitment,” weakening Judaism. But Gross sees such concerns as “catastrophic imaginings” (17), born of obliviousness to other forms of religious life that Cohen and Eisen, like many others, neglect.

To make this argument, Gross is forced to redefine the terms not only of religious engagement, but Judaism itself. “For American Jews,” she tells us, “nostalgia for Eastern European Jewish past functions as a mitzvah.” She then explains that “Mitzvot (plural of mitzvah) are the building blocks of Jewish religion. According to rabbinic tradition, there are not only ten commandments, but 613 divinely commanded mitzvot articulated throughout the Torah, forming the basis of halakha, Jewish law” (7). While technically not entirely incorrect, that brief introduction to what constitutes mitzvah is so anemic as to be woefully misleading. It is a particularly ironic definition given that she mentions the “rabbinic tradition.”

Throughout the book, one senses a profound lack of awareness or understanding of the substance or essence of Jewish tradition, which paves the way for her redefinition of virtually everything Jewish. Taking great liberty with the gradual evolution of Jewish tradition, Gross asserts that “Expanding upon biblical commands to honor one’s parents and to remember certain biblical stories”—with which the exception of Amalek is of dubious “mitzvah”-status—“Jews have come to understand honoring their ancestors and remembering Jewish histories as mitzvot” (8). As her source for this assertion, Gross cites the contemporary Yehuda Kurtzer. The serious theological engagement in which Jewish philosophers have engaged for centuries about what constitutes a mitzvah and what might be the sources of its authority receives no mention anywhere in the book—if they did, Gross would have a much more difficult time tying “nostalgia” to any meaningful sense of Jewish expression.

As for that other “mitzvah act,” researching one’s family tree, we are told that Jewish genealogists, “honor the elderly and demonstrate respect for others by listening to their stories. They honor the dead by visiting cemeteries. They ask historical questions, emulating the questions of Talmudic rabbis... inspiring humility” (45). That description of the world of *Hazal* can only be made by someone for whom the Talmud is foreign territory.

Dozens of other examples could be adduced here, but the point is clear. The project on which Gross embarks in this book, because she does not want to accept Cohen and Eisen’s “catastrophic imaginings,” is no less radical—or illogical—than claims that birthrate cannot be relevant to the Jewish future since they lay the burden of unpaid labor on women.

Ironically, it is McGinity who actually comes much closer to correctly diagnosing the problem in a compelling way. “Intermarriage is used as the lightning rod,” she said. “But in reality it’s lack of Judaic knowledge. So it’s not people who intermarry, people who fall in love with people of

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other cultures, faiths or backgrounds, it's the challenge of greater access to, and matriculation into, Jewish education.”⁶

Beyond the Synagogue is proof of McGinity's claim about Jewish education and literacy. One can only be nostalgic for something about which one knows something. We might miss or romanticize an earlier period of our lives; if asked what it is that we miss about it, we could wax eloquent. If we couldn't, we would likely feel no nostalgia. Jews who eat pastrami sandwiches are not doing so out of nostalgia, any more than are those who visit the Museum at Eldridge Street. They cannot say anything at all meaningful about the life that Eldridge Street evokes, and still less about the world from which those Lower East Side Jews hailed. Visits to such museums possess a mild sense of belonging or curiosity, but to call them nostalgia—to say nothing of religious—is to bend terms beyond anything resembling their actual meaning.

Gross is part of a larger movement seeking to argue that American Judaism is not in decline, by redefining what Judaism is. Most ironically, and tragically, is that in the process she confirms the very prognostications that she calls “catastrophic imaginings.”

We need not imagine the catastrophe; it is already here.

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⁶ Ben Sales, “The Fall of a Top US Sociologist.”