Nothing Left

Douglas Rushkoff
Nothing Sacred:
The Truth About Judaism
Crown, 265 pages.

Reviewed by Benjamin Balint

Ever since the 1990 National Jewish Population Study revealed high levels of assimilation, disaffiliation, and intermarriage among American Jews, alarmed leaders and institutions have struggled to stem the community-wide erosion of religious and national identity. They sponsored trips to Israel, built community centers, trained leaders, commissioned studies on how to promote Jewish commitment, and shepherded funds to day schools, adult-education courses, and outreach programs. But according to Douglas Rushkoff, a representative member of the very group they target, these efforts are at best wasted, and at worst terribly un-Jewish.

Rushkoff's attempt to explain why this is so sets in motion the tumble of irreverences that make up his latest

book, *Nothing Sacred: The Truth About Judaism*, a personal account of what he takes to be the failures and longings of a divided, dysfunctional Jewish people. In the wake of its publication, Rushkoff, a 42-year-old media theorist at New York University and commentator for National Public Radio, has been hailed by the *Forward* as a "latter-day Baruch Spinoza… [whose] interactive approach to Judaism's sacred truths has found a receptive audience among the Internet generation," while the feminist author Naomi Wolf called his book "uncompromising and honest and brilliant and true." He has become a featured speaker at synagogues and other Jewish venues across the United States, and his iconoclastic message seems to have struck a chord among a large number of Jews like himself, who wonder how they "can belong to a religion that is so hopelessly entrenched… with values we abhor."

That these Jews have received Rushkoff's message so eagerly is no surprise. His is the language of today's progressive intellectual discourse, with its breezy dismissal of authoritative truths and its insistence on the relative nature of all values. Such, at least, is the ideology that guides Rushkoff's other works, including *Cyberia: Life in the Trenches of Hyperspace* (1994), and *Playing the Future: What We Can Learn from Digital Kids* (1999), which extol the Internet-age counterculture of the "screenagers," hackers, and cyberpunks who challenge the narratives previous generations have employed to understand the world.

In *Nothing Sacred*, Rushkoff turns his attention to a somewhat older subject, and in so doing provides a fascinating if unsettling view of the growing "silent majority" of disenchanted or estranged young Jews who ordinarily do not write sweeping manifestos on Judaism. To understand Rushkoff is to understand them.

A self-described "lapsed" Jew, Rushkoff suggests that it is Judaism itself that has lapsed, becoming all the time "more racist, patriarchal, parochial, and homophobic." In its place, he seeks a Judaism in his own image: Iconoclastic, secular, pluralist, untethered, and "post-Jewish."

To this end, Rushkoff advocates a Judaism that would mirror recent changes in computes technology. He calls for an "open-source religion" that would work "the same way as open-source software development," adding that "the writings and ideas of Judaism are not set in stone, but invitations to inquire, challenge, and evolve." Indeed, he writes, "Everything is up for debate." Reaching this degree of interpretive freedom, however, requires that Judaism be stripped

of its classic attachments—and of three big ones in particular: The God of Israel, the State of Israel, and the people of Israel.

Rushkoff's deconstruction of Judaism begins with a dismissal of biblical and rabbinic authority, and a warning against a "dangerously presumptuous" confidence in the objective truth of one's own conception of God. (This is somewhat surprising in a volume subtitled, "The Truth About Judaism.") Yet this is only a step toward a more radical overcoming of classic notions of faith. At its highest level, Rushkoff explains, the Jewish belief in God actually dissolves away. "Abstract monotheism is not the process by which a people finds the one true God," he writes, "but the path through which they get over their need for him." What fills the place of this God once he is "gotten over"? Nothing; or, as he puts it:

> We hold no single conception of God, but rather maintain an open, empty space in his place.... To maintain Judaism is to maintain a kind of nothingness that in turn allows for limitless possibilities of growth and awareness.

Similarly go Rushkoff's views on Israel, whose "militaristic and provocative policies" have been an "impediment" to his relationship to the faith of his fathers. He pronounces himself repelled by the Zionist project, which he thinks has uglified, especially since 1967, into "a holy war" waged by "crazed Brooklyners who follow the edicts of Meir Kahane and move to Hebron, gun in hand." He likewise blames the Six Day War and its aftermath for having caused American Jewish education to retreat "into the ethnocentric propaganda of Zionism and racial preservation." In fact, the Jewish state has worked to disfigure the religion itself: "Efforts to find a theological support for religious Zionism," Rushkoff avers, "turn Judaism into a kind of Christianity, but without the peace and joy of salvation."

The solution to this distressing joylessness? Abstract Israel out of existence. Rushkoff knows the cost of this, and seems eager to pay it: "We lose the Zionist claim over a patch of sacred soil, but get to claim the entire planet as a kind of Jerusalem." Judaism, he writes, has always insisted on "transcending the obsession with physical territory and focusing instead on the supremacy of time and the realm of ideas." According to Rushkoff, the best such idea—the foundation stone of his global Jerusalem—is that of social justice, which he takes in a straight line from the Exodus ("a labor resistance movement") to the Jewish builders of

Soviet Communism, the American Federation of Labor, and the NAACP.

If Rushkoff's heterodoxy calls for a God who has become emptiness and a land that has become idea, it demands even more insistently a people without peoplehood. Certain that the urge for self-preservation is imprudent and unattractive, he declares himself fed up with "establishment" Judaism's obsessive demographic pulse-takings, population surveys, and anti-assimilation task forces, and ascribes to them cynical motives. As he explained in a recent article in the *New York Press*,

> The institutions that should be helping [Jews] conquer their ignorance are instead stoking it to further solidify their grasp on Judaism's future. The darker the picture they paint of Judaism's plight—the further synagogue membership dwindles, the greater Israel's peril—the more money they raise. Every suicide attack on Israel and each negative report on intermarriage statistics lead to a surge in donations.

Rushkoff thus argues for a dramatic change of tactics: Instead of forcing "continuity" on Jewish communal life, Jewish institutions must acknowledge that "assimilation is treated throughout the Tora as a blessing"—a claim he apparently derives from the biblical injunction, "Love the stranger, for you were strangers in Egypt." He then counsels that we treat it as such today, since "what appears to Jewish separatists as assimilation and dissolution is actually the transmission of Jewish values to the culture at large." Since Judaism's highest form is its own overcoming, we ought ultimately to "give up the notion of 'peoplehood' altogether." "Racial identity, statehood, and organized Judaism itself," Rushkoff concludes, "may be vestiges of a collective defense and entirely inappropriate for people—such as the American Jews—who are no longer fighting for their survival."

For all its confident subversiveness, however, *Nothing Sacred* remains surprisingly unlettered about the tradition it purports to critique. Embarrassing sloppiness results. Rushkoff claims, for instance, that Maimonides, the same medieval philosopher who set down the thirteen articles of faith, "attempted to demonstrate [that]… Judaism is not a set of beliefs." He writes that God told the patriarch Abraham that the Jews would become "a light unto the nations," but this phrase, in fact, appears in the book of Isaiah, which depicts a period nearly a millennium after Abraham lived. Rushkoff avers that Jewish mysticism "finds its origins… in a myth developed by a medieval rabbi named Isaac Luria,"

although Luria, who lived in the sixteenth century, in fact contributed a relatively late chapter to the history of the kabala.

Also questionable is Rushkoff's dogged attempt to use what he calls "the first Jewish renaissance"—the ancient transformation of pagan ideas into Jewish ones—as a precedent for his own project of rebirth. To show that "radical reinvention was… the ongoing and defining character of the Jewish experience," he traces the Jewish holidays to pagan roots, asserting, for example, that the Sabbath derived from a "pagan quarter-moon festival," Rosh Hashana from "a Canaanite New Year's scapegoat festival," and Purim from the fertility myth of Marduk and Ishtar—and the name of the villainous Haman "from the same root as the word *hymen*." Well, maybe.

Rushkoff's "radical reappraisal" astonishes, too, in its ignorance not only of the tradition from which it dissents, but also of the long tradition of dissenters that precedes it. Much of his criticism is to be found—albeit with far deeper erudition and without the Jew-in-the-Linux pretensions to hipness—in the challenges to Jewish law, biblical authority, Zionism, messianism, and chosenness variously made by Haskala thinkers in the late eighteenth century, reformers like Abraham Geiger in the nineteenth century, and Mordecai M. Kaplan's Reconstructionism in the twentieth. Rushkoff mentions none of these, and to judge by his revolutionary airs, one wonders whether he has read them.

This is not to say that Rushkoff's views are identical with theirs. The difference lies not only in the fact that each of these rationalistically minded precursors actively sought the truth about God and history, whereas Rushkoff's post-modernism inclines him to believe that there is "nothing sacred" because nothing is really true; it is also that, unlike Rushkoff, these reformers retained a strong sense of peoplehood even as they attempted to redefine or "reconstruct" Judaism. They intended both to stem the flow of disaffected Jews and to improve the religion's image, within and without, by digging broad channels to connect Judaism with modernity. In so doing, they demonstrated that a reappraisal of Judaism need not require a total rejection of its fundamental tenets—a rejection that is, for Rushkoff, a prerequisite for the Judaism of the future.

One is tempted to dismiss *Nothing Sacred* as bogus pamphleteering. And yet, despite its many flaws, Rushkoff's work has met with enthusiastic applause among a sizable number of American Jews with

whom it resonates very deeply. In other words, his main achievement has been to give voice to a fairly widespread audience—one that is uninformed, self-validating, and vaguely attached to the title "Jewish" but committed to few, if any, of the ideas for which that designation has historically stood.

In the end, what has earned Rushkoff lofty praise is not any eloquent reformulation of Jewish faith, but his daring to dismantle the basis of faith in the name of Judaism. In the process, however, he has shown us that the rejection of Judaism can only be as profound as one's knowledge of it. In the past, successful reappraisers of Judaism forged a powerful intimacy with the tradition, a closeness and a knowledge that informed their departures from it and transformed their leave-takings into eloquent acts of love. In contrast, Rushkoff's abandonment of something neither known nor loved leaves him with the very nothing he so assiduously seeks.

Benjamin Balint is Assistant Editor of Commentary.