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## Assimilation's Retreat

*Samuel G. Freedman*

**Jew vs. Jew:  
The Struggle for the Soul  
of American Jewry**

*Simon & Schuster,  
385 pages.*

*Reviewed by Jeff Jacoby*

For much of the twentieth century, traditional Judaism in America appeared to be a hopeless cause. Nearly one million Jewish immigrants arrived in the United States between 1899 and 1910, but only 305 of them were rabbis. When the chief rabbi of New York died in 1902, no one was recruited to replace him. In an editorial a few years later, *The*

*American Hebrew*, a weekly newspaper, lamented “that wretched state of religion which is symptomatic of the life of so many Jews”—like those, it said, who never set foot in a synagogue except on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. “Religious indifference with them is not the result of deep and serious thinking,” the editorial concluded. “It is due to chronic mental and spiritual deadness.”

On the eve of America's entry into World War I, there were 3.5 million Jews in America, but only five religious day schools. In 1930, only one American Jew in three belonged to a synagogue, and three-fourths of Jewish children received no religious education. Outside New York, *mikvaot* (ritual baths) were very few and far

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between. Kosher butchers served a tiny clientele. As late as 1955, one prominent sociologist saw Orthodox Judaism in America as “a case study of institutional decay.” With good reason, it seemed, had the Orthodox rabbis of Eastern Europe discouraged immigration to what they considered not a *goldeneh medineh*, or “golden land,” but the *treif medineh*—the “unkosher land.”

Yet half a century later, religious Judaism in America is thriving. Classic yeshivot exist in major cities nationwide. From five in 1917, the number of Jewish day schools has exploded to nearly 700. And though they account for only 10 percent of American Jews, the Orthodox exert great influence on Jewish culture, politics, and commerce. Just how far their clout extends became apparent in 2000, when the Democratic Party nominated an Orthodox Jew, U.S. Senator Joseph Lieberman, as its candidate for vice president.

“The Orthodox renaissance,” writes journalist Samuel G. Freedman in his absorbing and thought-provoking book *Jew vs. Jew*, “stands as the most striking and unexpected phenomenon in modern American Jewish history.” That renaissance has been the cause of countless effects, from the vast array of classic Jewish texts now available in English translation to the abundance of packaged foods bearing

a certification of *kasbrut* that can be found in any American supermarket. It has also been the catalyst in “the struggle for the soul of American Jewry,” the subtitle and subject of *Jew vs. Jew*.

Freedman introduces his subject starkly. “From the suburban streets of Great Neck to the foot of the Western Wall,” he writes, “I have witnessed the struggle for the soul of American Jewry. It is a struggle that pits secularist against believer, liberal against conservative, traditionalist against modernist even within each branch [of Judaism].... It is a struggle that has torn asunder families, communities, and congregations.” *Jew vs. Jew* illuminates this struggle in a series of six case histories, each marked by the deep reporting and sympathetic narration that distinguished his earlier books, including *Upon This Rock: The Miracles of a Black Church* (1993) and *The Inheritance: How Three Families and America Moved from Roosevelt to Reagan and Beyond* (1996).

He begins in Kinderwelt, a summer camp in the Catskills that was once a showplace of secular Labor Zionism—the kind of Jewish environment in which Yiddish conversation was highly prized but Tisha B’av, the most sorrowful day on the Jewish calendar, “consisted of little more than...

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the Kinderwelt children forgoing swimming for the day.”

By the 1960s, it was clear that Kinderwelt was losing its appeal; in 1971 it closed for good. Meanwhile, just two miles away, the Satmar Hasidim were founding the all-Orthodox community of Kiryas Joel. It quickly became a boom town, growing from 525 residents in 1977 to 12,000 in 1998—and with families averaging nearly seven children each, it seems certain to flourish, and to perpetuate its intense religiosity, for years to come. “More than anything,” Freedman reports, “Kiryas Joel poured its resources into inculcating the next generation with the Satmarer way, creating a system of thirteen schools overseen by four hundred teachers and administrators and teaching five thousand children.”

From the Catskills, Freedman turns to Denver, where in 1977 a group of Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform rabbis created a joint program for conversion to Judaism. Prospective converts were required to take a twenty-week class in basic Judaism, to undergo immersion in a *mikveh*, and to accept a list of duties called the “Ten Commitments.” Much of this list was kept deliberately vague. Converts committed to keeping a Jewish home, for example, but what that entails was not specified. “Did a Jewish household have to be *shomer*

*shabbos*, Sabbath-observant? Was it permissible to drive or watch TV on a Saturday?” The rabbis didn’t say.

Indeed, it was “a rule of the rabbinical council, a foundation of its comity, not to discuss halacha,” traditional Jewish law. But under Orthodox doctrine, a convert’s willingness to accept the yoke of halacha is indispensable. Before long, the participating Orthodox rabbis began to feel like frauds, giving their approval to what were essentially Reform conversions. Within six years, the joint program fell apart.

In subsequent chapters, *Jew vs. Jew* takes up a Conservative congregation’s skirmish over the insertion of feminist language in the *amida* prayer, tells the story of an Orthodox Jew so outraged by the Oslo peace process that he planted a bomb in a Florida synagogue to disrupt a speech by Shimon Peres, and revisits the case of five Orthodox students who sued Yale University in 1996 over its requirement that all freshmen live in a coed dormitory.

In his longest case study, Freedman describes the heated battle that erupted in Beachwood, Ohio, an affluent and largely Jewish Cleveland suburb, over an Orthodox plan to build two synagogues, two *mikvaot*, and a religious school for girls. Beachwood’s Reform Jews, determined to preserve what some of them called

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“the secular nature of our city,” went to war to block the project. If it were to be built, they warned, even more Orthodox Jews would pour into the city. “You started to feel pushed, crowded,” one of them told Freedman. “You didn’t want Beachwood to be a ghetto.” They fretted that the city would turn into a “little Jerusalem” and that the public school system—which the Orthodox tend to shun—would go “down the toilet.”

There was some hypocrisy in the vehemence of the Reform opponents. More than four decades earlier, their own plan to build a synagogue, Beachwood’s first, had been bitterly contested. Then, too, the claim had been that the city’s quality of life would suffer—but in 1952 that argument was made by anti-Semites anxious to prevent “an alien influx” of Jews. Now it was being made by Jews to keep out other Jews. “Not in a hundred years,” writes Freedman, summarizing the feelings of one of the Orthodox leaders, “would Beachwood’s Jews have blocked a church the way it was blocking the campus. Only when it came to Orthodox Jews were they willing to carry on like bigots.”

**A**mong contemporary American Jews, Freedman suggests, such hostility has reached crisis proportions—a “civil war,” he calls it at one

point. His narrative is sprinkled with examples of ugly name-calling and worse. To mention a few: A secular Jew screams obscenities at the Lubavitcher Hasid who approaches him outside Madison Square Garden with a pair of *tefilin*. Alumni of Camp Kinderwelt revile the Orthodox Jews of Kiryas Joel as “greasy Jews” who “smell like cholera.” A group of black-clad American haredim, or “ultra-Orthodox” Jews, assault a gathering of Conservative Jews holding an egalitarian prayer service near the Western Wall.

Such episodes are disgraceful, but they hardly add up to civil war. In trying to prove that an “overarching climate of division” is pitting Jew against Jew, Freedman overstates his case. He goes so far as to open his prologue with the Talmud’s famous declaration that the destruction of the Second Temple and the terrors that accompanied it were caused less by the Romans than by the Jews’ own *sin’at hinam*, groundless hatred. Disputes may roil the American Jewish community, but they do not come close to that level of bitterness. Even Harry Shapiro, the Florida Jew convicted of planting a bomb in a synagogue, insists he had no intention of actually hurting fellow Jews. (The bomb never exploded, and Shapiro claimed it was only a dud.)

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Contemporary journalism gravitates toward conflict, so this emphasis on rampant Jewish strife may come naturally to Freedman, a former *New York Times* reporter who teaches at Columbia's School of Journalism.

But the evidence he offers doesn't back it up. Yes, Jews in America brawl, and sometimes their brawls get ugly. But other American Jews work to end brawls and promote unity. One of the book's most dramatic passages occurs in the chapter on the Beachwood controversy, when the senior rabbi at Fairmount Temple, the city's largest Reform synagogue, pleads from his pulpit for Jewish harmony. "Jews must take care of other Jews because no one else will," Rabbi Joshua Aaronson tells 2,000 High Holiday worshippers. "All of you can call to mind the voluminous list of incidents in Jewish history that irrefutably proves this point.... We cannot turn away this group of Jews. All Jews must be prepared to accept other Jews into their midst."

*Jew vs. Jew* is an attention-getting title, but it is belied by Freedman's own examples of the "various efforts and programs afoot that seek Jewish community"—rabbis from different branches of Judaism learning together in Westchester County, the building in San Antonio peaceably

shared by four very different Jewish organizations, the adult education program in Washington taught jointly by Orthodox and Conservative clergy. These efforts are "so striking," he writes, because they "stand so lonely."

They aren't lonely. There are a myriad of similar efforts—from Project SEED, which sends yeshiva students to towns across America so they can study with Jews from all backgrounds; to Cleveland's Beyachad ("togetherness") Committee, which facilitates dialogue among Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and secular Jews; to the hundreds of Hillel Houses on campuses nationwide, where Jewish students of every description meet for religious services, social activities, educational programs, and kosher meals.

Freedman's attempt to depict American Jewry as a community mercilessly ripping itself apart is not just unconvincing, it is unnecessary. And it distracts from his much larger, much more important theme: The demise of secular Judaism as the basis of Jewish identity.

Of course, conflict and disharmony plague the American Jewish community, as they have plagued Jewish communities from time immemorial. But look beyond the infighting, to the social and demographic backdrop

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against which it is taking place, and it becomes clear that what has been so extraordinary—and consequential—about the Jewish experience in America is not the hostility of Jews. It is the love of gentiles.

According to the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, 52 percent of married American Jews have non-Jewish spouses. For Jews in the United States, marrying outside the faith has become the rule, not the exception. This marks a shift of seismic proportions.

Paradoxically, intermarriage was close to nonexistent during the first half of the twentieth century, the decades when Jewish religious practice was so minimal. “From the early Twenties through the late Fifties,” Freedman notes, “the share of such marriages crept up only from 1.7 to 6.6 percent; such shame was attached to ‘marrying out’ that Jewish parents often observed the mourning ritual of *shiva* for a child who did so.”

But as anti-Semitism receded, as the Jewish quotas at elite colleges faded, as white-shoe law firms and posh country clubs began welcoming Jews, the barriers that used to obstruct social contact between Jews and other Americans came down. *Abie’s Irish Rose*, an early twentieth-century Broadway hit about an intermarried

couple, depicted a novelty. By the 1970s, Freedman remarks, “such a scenario looked more like documentary realism in the television sitcom *Bridget Loves Bernie*.”

To many Americans, in fact, marriages between Jews and gentiles came to be seen as a positive good. As the historian Jack Wertheimer has written, such marriages “are, after all, symptomatic of increased tolerance and equality, the twinned ideals that in our age seem to trump all other competing values. How better to show the harmonious mingling of America’s heterogeneous population than through the union of individuals of diverse backgrounds?”

This attitude is widespread, as an intermarriage rate of 52 percent might suggest. In the American Jewish Committee’s annual survey of Jewish opinion in the United States in 2000, 50 percent of respondents agreed that “it is racist to oppose Jewish-gentile marriages.” Only 39 percent agreed with the statement “It would pain me if my child married a gentile.” Asked to characterize their feelings about Jews marrying non-Jews, 56 percent said either that they were neutral or that they favored such marriages.

A 1995 poll of teens who had recently celebrated their bar or bat mitzva in a Conservative synagogue—in other words, young people with

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some measure of Jewish involvement—were asked whether “it is okay for Jews to marry people of other religions.” Nearly two-thirds answered yes. It seems safe to conclude that for the great majority of American Jewry, the once-powerful taboo against intermarriage—a fundamental prohibition in Jewish law—no longer carries much weight.

In truth, it seems safe to conclude that for the great majority of American Jewry, Jewish law in general carries little weight. When American Jews were asked in the AJC survey to name the quality they consider most important to their Jewish identity, only 16 percent pointed to religious observance. Forty-five percent answered vaguely, “Being part of the Jewish people”; 34 percent, even more abstractly, chose “a commitment to social justice” or an undefined “something else.”

For non-religious Jews, then, what *does* it mean to be Jewish in America? The answer to that question, says Freedman, is what “the struggle for the soul of American Jewry” is really about.

For most American Jews, Jewish identity has typically come down to “Jewishness,” a solidarity based on ethnicity and social bonds. In Camp Kinderwelt, for example, Jewishness meant Yiddish songs and the pioneering spirit of Zionism. To Bill Pluss, a

doctor whose fiancée underwent the Denver joint conversion program, it meant mostly food. “If Judaism as a faith offered little to Bill,” Freedman writes,

Judaism as a culture suffused him. His best friends were Jewish.... He spent summers at JCC camp.... More than anything, Jewish culture meant *shabbos* dinner.... Aunt Nellie always made gefilte fish or chopped liver or brisket, and also the dishes that harked back to childhood poverty—*miltz*, which was spleen, and a sweet-and-sour cow’s foot called *fees*. Then came peach pie and a stroll through the neighborhood and finally Uncle Lou’s home movies. So what if Julius Pluss had drifted far enough from his own Orthodoxy to work on most Saturdays; so what if Rose Pluss periodically sneaked bacon onto the family menu? What were rules compared to all the heart the Plusses put into their Sabbath table?

One of the Reform protagonists in the Beachwood battle, Si Wachsberger, tells Freedman that he doesn’t know if he believes in God, but he certainly believes in being Jewish. “It’s a common culture,” he explains. Being “surrounded by friends and relatives who are Jewish. Having Passover dinner together, going to synagogue on the High Holidays—enjoyable things you did with the people you loved.” In short, “the experiences and beliefs you share without even thinking about it.”

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A sketch of a “praying Hasid” hangs on the wall of Wachsberger’s home office; in the dining room is a lithograph of “an Old World rabbi with flowing beard, a Bible in his palms.” But when a real-life Orthodox Jew sees him tending his garden on Saturday and asks, disapprovingly, “On *shabbos* you have to work?” he is resentful. What offends him about that question—what offends him about the Orthodox surge into Beachwood—is “the sense... of being judged, scorned, found deficient as a Jew.”

A similar resentment gnaws at Betty Trachtenberg, Yale’s dean of students and the named defendant in the lawsuit of the Yale Five. When the freshmen insist that the university’s residential policy is repugnant to the Jewish faith, what does that imply about her own Judaism?

“I don’t like to think of myself as an enemy,” she says. “Here I am, a person who identified as a Jew... I didn’t want anyone to call into question who I was. When they filed this suit, it wasn’t against ‘Betty Trachtenberg, granddaughter of Velvel and Sophie,’ but that’s part of who I am. I honor the memory of my grandparents, and I feel that my memory has been compromised.”

Freedman writes about Wachsberger and Trachtenberg with compassion and respect. But they are

swimming, he says, against a tide they will not be able to overcome.

For in the struggle to define Jewish identity, to determine what “authentic” Judaism means, the secularists have been unable to sustain themselves. American culture is too decent, too comfortable, too embracing to withstand without the protective barrier of Jewish law and ritual. Inter-marriage and assimilation are, after all, the American way. Why should the descendants of Jewish immigrants prove any more immune to the homogenizing melting pot than the descendants of Italian, German, or Japanese immigrants? Ethnic pride, it turns out, does not keep Jews Jewish. Yiddish and Rosh Hashana greeting cards do not keep Jews Jewish. Not even Zionism and Holocaust remembrance and philanthropy keep Jews Jewish. The key to Jewish survival is what it has always been: Jewish practice and Jewish learning.

“Jewishness as ethnicity, as folk culture, as something separate and divisible from religion, is ceasing to exist in any meaningful way,” Freedman concludes. *Kinderwelt* is dead; *Kiryas Joel* blooms with health. “In the struggle for the soul of American Jewry, the Orthodox model has triumphed.... The portion of American Jewry that will flourish in the future... is the portion that has accepted the



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central premise of Orthodoxy, that religion defines Jewish identity.”

In other words, there is no Jewish survival without faith and observance. Or, as R. Saadia Gaon wrote more than ten centuries ago, “The Jewish people are a nation only by virtue of their Tora.”

**T**he most significant division in American Jewish life is not Orthodox-Conservative-Reform. It is the division, in Freedman’s words, “between a core of American Jewry oriented around religion and a periphery clinging to the eroding remnants of ethnicity.” To hark back to that long-ago editorial in *The American Hebrew*, it is the division between Jews who attend synagogue on a regular basis and those who show up only for the High Holidays. As one segment of the American Jewish community fades away through assimilation, another segment is turning with increased fervor and seriousness to the religion of its fathers. Hence the boom in intermarriage—and the simultaneous boom in religious day schools.

The deepening emphasis on Tora and religious observance can be seen in every Jewish denomination. Among Orthodox Jews, there is an almost palpable tug toward the haredi lifestyle, with its emphasis on very modest dress, covered hair for married women, and the primacy of Tora study. In many

modern Orthodox day schools, the great majority of graduating seniors spend one or two years in advanced Jewish study, usually in an Israeli yeshiva, before going on to college.

Orthodox Judaism has always laid great weight on Jewish learning. But with the skyrocketing popularity of *daf yomi*—organized Talmud study at the rate of one page per day—the number of Orthodox American Jews engaged in daily learning has reached unprecedented levels. When the most recent *daf yomi* cycle was completed in September 1997, 26,000 Orthodox Jews came to Madison Square Garden to mark the occasion; another 44,000 participated by satellite hookup.

Conservative and Reform Judaism are also being transformed by a greater embrace of traditional practice. In 1996, a leadership conference organized by the American Jewish Committee and drawn from every segment of American Jewry drafted “A Statement on the Jewish Future.” Of its five “fundamental values” for Jewish continuity, Tora was listed first, while *tikun olam*, the Jewish injunction to “repair the world” that has become a kind of mantra for liberal Jewish activism, was omitted.

In what Freedman calls “an obvious parallel” to *daf yomi*, the Conservative movement now urges its adherents to study a chapter of the

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Hebrew Bible every day. Conservative Judaism no longer permits intermarried Jews to teach in its Hebrew schools and will not enroll children who are not Jewish according to halacha—that is, who are born to non-Jewish mothers—in its Ramah summer camps.

Most remarkable of all, perhaps, is the swing toward Tora and traditional practice within Reform Judaism.

When the Reform rabbinate published its seminal Pittsburgh Platform in 1885, it went out of its way to underscore its rejection of halacha. The document—which would serve as the definitive statement of Reform belief for more than fifty years—did not even mention the word “Tora.” The key to Jewish practice, it said, should be “the views and habits of modern civilization.” Specifically excluded were “all the Mosaic Rabbinical Laws on diet, priestly purity, and dress,” which it described as “altogether foreign to our mental and spiritual state.”

For many years, this disdain for the old forms of Jewish observance was rigorously cultivated. Many Reform congregations forbade the wearing of *kipot* and banned Hebrew prayer. Some even celebrated the Sabbath on Sunday, and served oysters and shrimp at their annual dinner.

But by the late twentieth century, traditional practice was returning even

to the Reform. Readers of *Reform Judaism* magazine were jolted when Rabbi Richard Levy, the president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the main body of Reform clergy, appeared on the cover of the Winter 1998 issue wearing a *talit* and *teflin*. In an interview inside, he argued forcefully for “a disciplined commitment to lifelong Tora study” and for achieving “*kedusha* [holiness]... through *mitzvot*” ranging from keeping kosher to affixing a *mezuzza* to every door in the house.

To be sure, the same issue included a rebuttal by Rabbi Robert Seltzer, a professor of history at Hunter College, who insisted that “past Jewish beliefs and practices do not automatically warrant our allegiance.” But even he felt it necessary to acknowledge “a longing for a religious experience that the classical [Reform] style may no longer satisfy.” When the CCAR returned to Pittsburgh for its convention the following year, it adopted a “Statement of Principles” that, as Freedman says, “reversed the branch’s historical contempt for ritual and religious law.” And in June of 2001, the CCAR went further. It voted to encourage traditional rituals in the conversion process, such as immersion in a *mikveh*—thereby overturning an 1893 resolution that had described conversion rituals as “unnecessary and meaningless.”

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The rabbis of Eastern Europe turned out to be both right and wrong. For most Jews who emigrated, America would prove to be the *treif medineh*; many—perhaps most—of their descendants would not even consider themselves Jewish. But for a thriving core of religion-oriented Jews, America would become one of the great *goldeneh medines* of history. Observant Jews feared, in Freedman’s formulation, “that the new land would undermine their faith. Instead, we see now, it undermined faithlessness.”

Six weeks before he died in 1994, Irving Howe, the literary critic and historian, conceded that the secular Judaism he had so prized was doomed.

The culture of Yiddish and secular Jewishness flourished and then declined.... The end of it approaches, and neither will nor nostalgia is likely to stop it. For some thoughtful Jews,

those who want to remain “Jewish Jews” but in all seriousness cannot yield themselves to religion, the result is a sense of profound discomfort, perhaps desperation. I think that those of us committed to the secular Jewish outlook must admit we are reaching a dead end.

*Jew vs. Jew* is timely and well-written, unfailingly interesting and often moving. It is not only the kind of work that fuels passionate conversation, it is one that fuels it among people who might otherwise think they have nothing to say to each other. Most noteworthy of all, perhaps, is its tone: Freedman treats every participant in the dramas he chronicles with courtesy and fairness. Would that all of us who write and talk about our fellow Jews did likewise.

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