



American Jewry needs to wake up to new possibilities

IS AMERICAN Jewry in danger of disappearing? Are the twin problems of assimilation and antisemitism overwhelming American Jews and encouraging them to abandon their identity? And are the established institutions able to stem the tide of Jews leaving the fold?

These questions are addressed interestingly and intensively by two young American rabbis who prefer to see the cup as half-full rather than as half-empty.

Rabbi Josh Stanton, of East End Temple (Reform) in New York City, and Rabbi Benjamin Spratt, of Rodeph Shalom on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, approach these issues with courage and commitment, and in so doing, they have written a challenging and compelling book, which ought to be of interest to anyone who cares about the future of American Judaism. Even though they are both rabbis of major synagogues in New York City, they are not afraid to be critical of much of the conventional wisdom regarding why American Judaism is failing to address the needs of American Jews in the 21st century. In addition to their critical outlook of the establishment (of which they are both a part!), they offer many new ideas and point to many hopeful signs as to how the situation of American Jews is not quite as bad as many of the elders think that it is.

Stanton and Spratt are extremely critical of what they call the obsession of decline which has characterized so much of the discussion of the fate of American Jews in the contemporary world. For example, they strongly disagree with Professor Alan Dershowitz's claim in his book *The Vanishing American Jew* (from 1998) that American Jewish life is in danger of disappearing, and that the era of enormous Jewish influence on American life may soon be coming to an end. On the contrary, they argue that this is not the case, and they bolster their argument with many examples of why American Jewry is in fact flourishing.

For example, they tell us that the number of Americans who self-identify as Jewish is growing rapidly, from five million to seven and a half million people since 1990. The Association of Jewish Studies now lists more than



75 departments of Jewish Studies in the USA, including at many of the best universities in the country. A total of 906 Jewish day schools now educates new generations of American Jews.

In contrast to the narrative of constant decline, Stanton and Spratt offer a powerfully positive and perhaps overly optimistic narrative:

In the 21st century, American Jews hold more wealth, access, and power in larger society than any Diaspora of the past three millennia. Jews run for president, lead industry, create new fields of study, and shape law and policy, while Jewish culture captivates society through television, comedy, music and art. Rather than the narrative of the resilient underdog, the story of the modern American Jew is one of potency and choice!

They back up their argument with plenty of facts and figures. For example, did you know that thousands of people join Judaism every year in the USA as Jews by Choice (converts)? And hundreds of thousands more live with Jews or as Jews without formal conversion?

Moreover, there are hundreds of thousands of Jews of Color – perhaps even a million, according to one study – who have not been sufficiently counted in population studies, in their view. Also, in contradistinction to those who say that intermarriage weakens the Jewish community, they bring reports from studies which tell us that nearly 60% of children with only one Jewish parent are raised as Jews, and an even larger majority are exposed to Judaism in some ways.

One of the areas in which these authors point to the current success of American Jewry is in the area of what they call study as sacred practice. Jewish learning is burgeoning across America. Ironically, the period of the last two years of the Covid pandemic has offered many new opportunities for on-line learning via many Jewish institutions, including synagogues, community centers, universities and more.

For example, the website known as *My Jewish Learning* welcomes one million visitors each month, with 30,000 people receiving the



COURTESY FACEBOOK

Rabbi Joshua Stanton

daily *Daf Yomi* emails (the page of Talmud that many Jews study each day until the completion of the study of the Talmud in seven-and-a-half years), and they sponsor live events averaging 200-500 people in attendance. According to Stanton and Spratt, *its intensive programs have a far larger footprint than the largest synagogues in the United States, and may transform the way that entire swaths of the Jewish population view Jewish study*. In addition, *My Jewish Learning* recently launched a subsidiary website called The Hub, which connects 23,000 people via its daily events email.

My Jewish Learning is just one of many websites dedicated to Jewish content. Other important ones are Kveller, on Jewish parenting, Alma on Jewish feminism, the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* on news from around the world and how it affects Jews, and *Sefaria*, which they refer to as the greatest Jewish website in the world.

Sefaria has been putting the entire Jewish canon on their website for several years. They have compiled three million intentional linkages between texts, commentaries, and more recent thinkers. Rabbis, professors of Jewish studies, and Jewish educators lean heavily upon *Sefaria* for adult education and sermons. Users of this website can create and share study guides for particular areas of interest, which are then available to the larger community. By 2019, *Sefaria* had already listed 200,000 of these guides on their site. By 2020, more than half a million people used the *Sefaria* platform each month to prepare their lessons, sermons and source sheets.

There are many more examples of the growth of Jewish study in America in this book, which are all very impressive. Clearly something very

important and positive is going on in this field among American Jews in recent years, much of it outside the old framework of synagogues and community centers. This is a very important and encouraging development.

One of the most controversial portions of this book is the section on American Jewry and Israel. It is the one where I think that these authors have greatly overstated their case. Let me explain.

On the one hand, they point to the unraveling of the Oslo peace process and the experience of the Second Intifada that began in 2000 as the start of the growing divide between American and Israeli Jews. But the truth is that this divide has been going on for much longer, since at least the First Intifada in 1987-88, if not longer. American Jewry – which is mostly liberal and votes Democratic – has become alienated from many of the illiberal policies of the state of Israel toward the Palestinians over several decades.

On the other hand, Stanton and Spratt see a new dynamic emerging, a sense of mutual recognition between American Jews and Israel. But I don't see this, except for a very small group of elite American Jews who are deeply involved with Israel. Most American Jews are not involved with Israel affairs very much. Their identity is American. They are much more knowledgeable and concerned with issues of social injustice in their own country than in the state of Israel, which is far away, geographically, politically and spiritually.

The authors point to the success of Birthright Israel, which has brought 800,000 Jews to Israel to give them a shot of adrenaline of Jewish Identity. But these Birthright trips give these young Jews the superficial Disneyland understanding of Israel. They do not help them grapple with the complex conflict between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, because it is too hot to handle. (I recently met some graduates of Birthright in the USA who got married because of participating together in Birthright, but don't do anything Jewish as a family.)

In fact, I think the gap between American Jewry and Israeli Jewry has only been widening in recent years, and is likely to continue to widen. Except for Orthodox Jews – who overwhelmingly vote for Trump in America and for Bibi in Israel – most American Jews are having more and more trouble with an Israel that does not live up to their ideals of social justice on which they were raised, and about which they still believe fervently. And those who don't care much about social justice don't care much



COURTESY RODEFSHOLM.ORG

Rabbi Benjamin Spratt

about Israel either – they are simply assimilated and apathetic.

Aside from the analysis of these authors of the Israel-Diaspora rift, which I found rather weak (and tellingly not very central to their main narrative), I found this book to be extremely well-researched and thought-provoking. It challenges many of my assumptions about what is happening to American Jewry, brings much empirical evidence to support their unconventional views, and offers an optimistic future for American Jewry based on new paradigms and much creative thinking. I hope that it is widely read and discussed. ■



Awakenings: American Jewish Transformations in Identity, Leadership and Belonging
Rabbi Joshua Stanton
and Rabbi Benjamin Spratt
Behrman House, 2022
192 pages; \$24.95