

The Choices of a New Generation

By Andrew Silow-Carroll

Lisa Schiffman's *Generation J* (San Francisco: Harper, 1999) is a thin book about a thin Jewish identity.

Not that there's anything wrong with that.

In fact, of all the recent books assessing the state of American Jewry at the end of the 20th century, it may be the most useful. Compared to panicked jeremiads like Alan Dershowitz's *The Vanishing American Jew* and Elliott Abrams's *Faith or Fear?*, it is even realistic. Unlike the professional worriers, Schiffman develops a portrait of young American Jews who are not suspended between full observance of Judaism and total assimilation, or teetering on the brink of cultural annihilation while the lifeline of tradition continues to fray. The Judaism she experiences and describes is a wholly American integration-sometimes successful, sometimes not-of past and present, committed and apathetic, traditional and innovative, kosher and treyf. It is how many, if not most, American Jews are living their lives, and it is the way of being Jewish that members of the leadership class are going to need to understand if they hope to remain relevant in the Jewish future.

Schiffman makes no claims to expertise on the Jewish condition. Her book merely asks why Judaism exerts so strong a pull on a thirty-something writer and "Internet strategist" who grew up in an assimilated home in a Christian neighborhood, married a non-Jew, and through her training as an anthropologist has studiously flirted with Eastern religions.

"Wayfinders, each of us" is how she describes herself and fellow members of "Generation J." "You'll see us everywhere: Jews in search of perfect clarity. We're turning away from the religion into which we were born. We're turning to Wicca, to New Ageism, to Buddhism, to nothing. We're burning sage sticks at home and pounding drums in the forest. We're meeting with psychics, shrugging our shoulders at rabbis, listening to the music of twelfth-century nuns."

So what inspires her to research a book on Judaism? As an anthropologist, Schiffman is too smart to think that, just because it is the religion into which she was born, Judaism has no answers. Like any wise consumer in the land of plenty, she is exploring all the possibilities.

Generation J is a guidebook to this landscape of Jewish choice. Schiffman attends a workshop on Jewish identity in Berkeley and haunts Jewish film festivals and museums; she interviews a range of Jewish thinkers from the Orthodox klezmer musician Andy Statman to Jew in the Lotus author Rodger Kamenetz to Zen-master-turned-Conservative-rabbi Alan Lew; she meditates at

the Aquarian Minyan, chants niggunim at a Reform synagogue, immerses herself in an Orthodox-run mikveh, and cheers the "Kikes on Bikes" contingent at the San Francisco Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender Pride Parade.

Her husband is a bemused witness to her search, trying to understand why, if Judaism is so important to her, she doesn't celebrate the holidays or perform the rituals. "The way I spend my days doesn't express my thoughts," she snaps back. "Going to temple wouldn't make me more of a Jew. And the last time I checked, I didn't need a membership card for this tribe. I was born into it."

Still, this "contradiction" gnaws at the author: "It occurred to me...that for too long I had been liminal. I had been someone who could neither disclaim her Judaism nor fully claim it. And I had been hoping that, somehow, the waters would clear. I would be able to escape this place of betwixt and between."

This is invariably the moment in "spiritual autobiographies"-from St. Augustine to Thomas Merton to Stephen Dubner-when the seekers experience an epiphany, discard their ambivalence, and embrace the faith of their ancestors. Schiffman does nothing of the sort. Instead, hers is a quiet revelation in which she discards the search for clarity and embraces the very ambiguity of her Jewish path. She writes: American Jews have no patience for liminal states, no patience for ambiguity. Who can blame us? Those stages are painful. No one supports their existence. We live in a culture that thinks pain needs to be dulled, cured, erased. Perhaps we're missing out, I realized. Perhaps our ambiguities are holy, not something to numb. Our sense of psychological discomfort, our emotional unease, life's excruciating gray areas-all these are holy. Revelatory. They teach us what we need to know. They make us grapple with the question of who we are.

Schiffman doesn't address how she might pass this sense of holy ambiguity onto her children. She does understand and appreciate the insiders-the activists, scholars and leaders-who engage most deeply in traditional, denominational Jewish behavior. Rabbis, she writes, are "walking bodies of knowledge...lines of continuity and demarcation...reflections of entire communities." But in her "postmillennial Jewish scenario," the boundaries between who's in and who's out, what's right and what's wrong, and what's mine and what's yours would matter less and less.

"[Y]ou'd feel free, entitled even, to visit other synagogues, whether Reform, Renewal, Orthodox or Reconstructionist," she writes. "You'd be exposed to other ways of worship, other people, different rabbis. You could drop in on a course of kabbalah at the Renewal synagogue or one about Judaism and social justice at the Reconstructionist place of worship (which would probably be a space shared with Unitarians). The lines of demarcation between Jews might begin to melt."

In the end, Generation J is about a form of Judaism for which "either/or" is no longer a viable category. It says you can sit on the fence-in fact, you can sometimes see more from up there. It says the ancients had it right when they called themselves "Hebrews"--from ivrim, or boundary crossers-and "Israel," from one who wrestles, grapples, with God. It is a vision that may not warm the heart of insiders who, fueled with statistics and nostalgia, view anything less than a full engagement with Judaism as a loss to the community. But if Judaism is to remain relevant to more than a dwindling number of insiders, our leaders will need to grapple with the grapplers.