

Jonathan D. Sarna



## THE ESSENCE OF AMERICAN JUDAISM: A REVIEW ESSAY

Earl Shorris, *Jews Without Mercy: A Lament* (Garden City, N.Y., Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1982), 191 pp. \$14.95.

Jack Nusan Porter, *The Sociology of American Jews: A Critical Anthology* (Washington D.C., University Press of America, 1980), 298 pp.

The famous would-be convert, who came to Hillel seeking to learn the whole Torah while standing on one foot, finds many imitators among the ranks of American Jews. Daunted by Judaism's seemingly overwhelming complexity—the endless array of forbidding tomes, printed in microscopic type, and only comprehensible to the specially trained—these modern seekers likewise demand some statement of Judaism's essence, a basic formula, one simple enough for any English speaker to understand.

A whole library of volumes stands ready to meet this challenge. Some books base themselves on ancient and medieval sources, demonstrating as they do so that the modern quest for Judaism's fundamental principles has roots deeply grounded in the past. Other volumes—charming yet now forgotten catechisms, tedious but for some reason still popular creeds and platforms, and modern 'how to' books—more closely adhere to Christian models—and by no coincidence. Yet no matter how alluring and how basic such texts in essential Judaism become, for some they can never quite become basic enough. Like Hillel's visitor, these Jews demand a formulaic definition, one easy to remember, easy to express, and easy to apply, a ready means of ascertaining what is Jewish and what is not.

Abraham Cronbach, professor of Social Relations at Hebrew Union College, once offered what is perhaps the easiest formula for defining what Judaism is: "Whatever inside of any Jewish soul is good and right and holy and noble—that is itself Jewish."<sup>1</sup> Since for Cronbach social justice was "good and right and holy and noble," it naturally followed that "social justice is Jewish." With pardonable exaggeration, it might also have followed, as Lenny Bruce pointed out in one of his routines, that "chocolate is Jewish," "fruit salad is Jewish," and "macaroons are *very* Jewish."

Cronbach never said in his definition that those opposed to what he felt to be "good and right and holy and noble" should be labelled non-Jewish, much less anti-Jewish. Some of those he influenced, however, did

take this obvious step. They reduced the definition of Judaism to the single word “ethics,” spoke endlessly about “the Jewish thing to do” (frequently identical to what their neighbors thought was “the Christian thing to do”), and termed anyone who disagreed “unJewish,” almost as if “I disagree with you” and “that’s not Jewish” had become synonyms. To legitimate their seemingly unbecoming self-righteousness, they appealed to the biblical prophets, claiming to be their spiritual descendants. Rabbi Kaumann Kohler, after all, had taught a whole generation of rabbis that:

it requires all the earnestness and unbending firmness of the holy seers of old, the boldness and uncompromising zeal of an Elijah and Isaiah, to be in these days a builder-up of characters, a teacher and monitor of virtue and holiness, a restorer of the old paths of integrity and righteousness, in an age addicted to greed and passion to become a repairer of breaks, a regainer of souls for God and his truth!<sup>2</sup>

Many seem to have taken this lesson literally.

Earl Shorris, who admits to being a man “of little piety, virtually no learning, and uncertain ethics,” may never have heard of Kaufmann Kohler or Abraham Cronbach, but he is a direct recipient of that formulaic definition of Judaism—prophetic Judaism—that they and their students taught. Shorris writes in *Jews Without Mercy: A Lament* that Judaism’s essence consists of “mercy and social justice” as Jews “traditionally” defined them. No more and no less. Since, by his reading, neoconservatism does not comport with mercy and social justice, he questions whether neoconservatives can be Jewish at all (“Is a person without mercy a Jew?”). To his mind, the only good Jew is a liberal one, and he darkly warns that Jews will suffer should neoconservatism prevail. He also seems to think that Jews will suffer if Menachem Begin should prevail; indeed, I find not a good word about Israel anywhere in the book. Shorris even attacks the “darkness” that Israel manifested in condemning Adolf Eichmann to death “for his moral blindness.”

Shorris admits in his autobiographical sections that he does not read Hebrew, does not observe basic Jewish rituals, and when his son reached thirteen, he did not make him a bar mitzvah. Instead, he took him to visit the Soviet Union (Shorris has not yet been to Israel. . . .) The only reason that the Shorris house no longer sports a Christmas tree is that it occasioned injuries (“I resolved to save the lives of the Shorris family by getting the Christmas tree out of my house”). Shorris’s definition of Judaism did not prevent him from bringing the tree into the house in the first place. The “essence of Judaism” that he practices says nothing about such matters.

While Shorris’s personal history thus makes for an intriguing case study of assimilationist Judaism, as a statement of politics or religion his book has nothing to offer. Too often, its understanding of both neocon-

servatism and Judaism prove to be misunderstandings. Its quotations prove to be misquotations. Its truths prove to be untruths. Walter J. Dannhauser's trenchant review in *The American Spectator* (August 1982) corresponds to my own views on *Jews Without Mercy* so well that more need not be said here. I quote one paragraph from Dannhauser and encourage those interested to read the rest for themselves:

If . . . ignorance cannot excuse everything, it might at least suffice simply to dismiss this book, which contrary to the author's intention is a thoughtless tirade rather than a lament, though it is surely lamentable. One hopes, indeed, that this book will be dismissed. It merits general oblivion and the specific contempt of those who disagree honorably with the Jewish neoconservatives.

But if *Jews Without Mercy* can be summarily dismissed, the formulaic debasement of Judaism that it represents cannot be. For Shorris's book demonstrates the dangers inherent in all efforts aimed at reducing Judaism to a single basic principle from which everything else follows. The untutored may need a Judaism simple enough to be mastered while standing on one foot; indeed, according to the Talmud (*Makkot* 24a), even the prophets Amos and Habakkuk agreed to reduce Judaism to a simple formula for their sake. Those who from necessity rely on such "statements of essence," however, must be made to understand that "essence" is merely a form of Jewish pabulum, a far cry from what Judaism fully constituted is really all about. In the final analysis, the closing words of Hillel's statement to the would-be convert—left out of many translated versions of the story—may have more to do with Judaism's essence than all the rest: "*zil gemor*"—go and learn.

## II

If *Jews Without Mercy* represents one form of reductionist Judaism prevalent in America, Jack Nusan Porter's *The Sociology of American Jews: A Critical Anthology* represents another: survivalist Judaism, a Judaism broad enough to encompass everyone who believes in "the survival of the Jewish State of Israel and the continuity of the Jewish people." In twenty-nine selections, most from popular Jewish journals, particularly *Interchange* (briefly published by Breira), *Moment*, and *Jewish Currents*, Porter covers a broad array of subjects, several of them ("The Hollywood Witch-hunt of 1947," "Class, Ethnicity, and the American Jewish Committee," "Vietnam and the Jews" etc.) not treated in Marshall Sklare's better known and more formidable anthologies, and most of them treated in more openly partisan fashion than Sklare's analytical approach to American Jewish Sociology would permit. "My aim," Porter explains, "has been to provoke discussion and activism, not present polished academic

treatises that only a few specialists will read." He does not explain why this aim required him largely to neglect such subjects as American Jewish religious movements, American Jewish culture, and American Jewish demography.

Porter has performed a service in collecting together and preserving some valuable and provocative pieces that might otherwise have been lost. His introduction, based on well-known secondary sources, offers some useful background information, placing Jewish Studies and Jewish Sociology in historical perspective. His most interesting contribution, however, lies in his introductory section dealing with "Radical Jewish Sociology," the subfield in which he feels most at home. First, he defines "Radical Jewish Sociology" as sociology that may be:

Zionist or Diasporist[sic], religious or secular, but it must be socialist, progressive and activist in order to qualify . . . a radical sociology of Jewry must combine scholarship with politics, socialist politics, politics that will actively transform Jewish structures and institutions when they no longer serve the people.

Then, in ten subsequent paragraphs, Porter sets out some of the issues which, from a radical Jewish sociologist's point of view, demand "research and action." The list includes everything from "democracy in Jewish life," to a "radical Torah," to "a more militant stance toward anti-Semitism."

Like Earl Shorris, Jack Nusan Porter has his feet firmly planted on the left side of the political spectrum. But unlike him, he nowhere uses words like "mercy" and "social justice" to define his Jewish perspective. Instead, his Jewish sociology embraces everyone, from the Jewish Defense League to "marginal people in the Jewish community." He recognizes, even if he does not applaud, all ideologies so long as they promote Jewish survival. Judaism, as he defines it, excludes only those who exclude themselves.

Survivalism, usually defined as Porter defines it, in terms of the survival of the State of Israel and the continuity of the Jewish people, has become a core value of American Jews, widely accepted, according to recent studies, by Jewish leaders and lay people alike. While this can hardly be termed a new development—belief in the value of Jewish survival, after all, is one of the factors that has kept diaspora Judaism going—promoting survival as an end in itself is a phenomenon of more recent vintage. Formerly, Jews justified their ongoing separateness on the basis of their being chosen by God, their superiority to non-Jews, or their being imbued with a special mission, yet unfulfilled. Today, all three of these justifications have declined in popularity. Jews either defend their survivalism on the basis of the Holocaust (survive in order to deny Hitler a "posthumous victory"), or as a postulate unnecessary to defend at all. Just as American Jews believe that America should survive,

even if they cannot quite define what exactly America stands for, so they believe that Judaism should survive, whether they understand it or not.

Survivalist Judaism, in one sense, stands as polar opposite to the kind of reductionist Judaism espoused by Earl Shorris. The one is broadly tolerant and inclusive, the other narrowly ideological and exclusive. On a more fundamental level, however, Earl Shorris's Judaism and Jack Nusan Porter's Judaism share a common point of departure. Both reject traditional Jewish learning, law, and practice as a basis for "essential Judaism," and instead reduce Judaism to formulas that are at once more simple and more empty. If these formulas aimed merely to introduce people to their Judaism, with the aim of later educating them further, they might be commended. But standing alone, without the admonition to "go and learn," they offer little of substance, and many grounds for concern.

JONATHAN D. SARNA

Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion

#### NOTES

1. Abraham Cronbach, "Judaism and Social Justice, Historically Considered," in W. Gunther Plaut (ed.), *The Growth of Reform Judaism* (New York, 1965), pp. 11-119.
2. Kaufmann Kohler, "Arise and Give Light to Judaism and the Jewish Pulpit," *The American Jewish Pulpit* (Cincinnati, 1881), p. 7.