On American Jews

A new book says a crisis is imminent, but then there's the Lieberman applause

By Jonathan D. Sarna

JEW VS. JEW
The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry
By Samuel G. Freedman.
Simon & Schuster.
375 pp. $26.

Overnight, this month's nomination of Senator Joseph I. Lieberman to the vice presidency unified American Jews. In a striking display of traditional ethnic pride, Jews of every stripe joined in a chorus of praise for one of their own. The fact that the candidate was an Orthodox Jew made no difference: Conservative and Reform Jews, as well as secular ones, participated as equals in the Lieberman festival, and one pundit estimated that fully 90 percent of Jewish voters would "vote Lieberman" in November.

Against this background, journalist Samuel G. Freedman's new book seems sadly ill-timed. "Jew vs. Jew" chronicles "the struggle for the soul of American Jewry," "the bitter battles pitting Jew against Jew," the "coming civil war." The

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'Jew vs. Jew' suggests an American crisis is imminent

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American Jewish community, Freedman contends, "is divided more deeply and more bitterly than ever."

Six well-written stories – he calls them "parables" – form the core of "Jew vs. Jew." Each recounts in fascinating detail an individual episode of intra-Jewish conflict. Together, they span the length of three contentious decades.

Chapter 1 presents the story of Camp Kinderwelt, a socialist camp sponsored by the Labor Zionist movement in the Catskills, near Monroe, N.Y. Like most summer camps of its type, Kinderwelt went into a slow decline in the 1950s. Its anti-capitalist ideology, its affinity for Yiddish, and its penchant for secular rather than religious forms of Jewish identity clashed with the culture of the Cold War and the new suburban realities of American Jewish life. Kinderwelt opened for the last time in 1971 and then died, mourned mainly by nostalgic old campers who saw its demise as a symbol of a world gone by. What makes the story significant to Freedman is the coincidence that, just one year later, the area became home to the community of Kiryas Joel, the headquarters of ultra-Orthodox Jews known as Satmar Hassidim. "They're the kind of people who are against everything I stand for," one former camper is quoted as admitting. The transition from the secular "Jewishness" of Kinderwelt to the ultra-Orthodox Judaism of Kiryas Joel illustrates Freedman's central themes: the rise of Jewish Orthodoxy, the decline of secular Jewishness, and the resulting turn of "Jewish denominations . . . against one another."

The remainder of the volume focuses on these denominational struggles. In another chapter, Freedman recounts in absorbing detail the painful collapse of a carefully constructed joint-conversion panel established by Reconstructionist, Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox rabbis in Denver. The unprecedented effort to forge a unified standard of conversion so as to promote Jewish unity lasted a mere six years, until 1983. In its wake, all sides experienced bitterness, regret, and anger. Similar feelings enveloped a Los Angeles congregation a few years later, as it struggled with the volatile question of whether the traditional Hebrew liturgy should be changed to incorporate the biblical matriarchs alongside the traditional evoking of the patriarchs in the Amidah, one of Judaism's most sacred prayers. Freedman provides a fair-minded and beautifully written account of this episode, concluding that the gender issue, like the others that he sees dividing contemporary American Jews, is hopelessly intractable.

Another chapter tells the story of Harry Shapiro, a troubled, politically right-wing Orthodox Jew, who, in 1997, placed a bomb in the Jacksonville, Fla., Jewish Center, hoping to prevent an address there by Israeli leader Shimon Peres. Revealingly, this is the only act of attempted violence described in all the pages of "Jew vs. Jew," and even then, it turns out, the bomb was carefully designed not to explode.

In a chapter titled, starkly, "New Haven, Connecticut, 1995-1999," Freedman offers the most detailed account yet of the so-called "Yale Five" – the Orthodox students who sued Yale University seeking exemption, on religious grounds, from the obligation to live in the college's "immoral" coed dormitories. As he shows, this widely publicized case was, as much as anything else, a battle between two kinds of Orthodox Judaism: the modern variety that Yale graduate Joe Lieberman practices and that the university had long accommodated, and a more right-wing separatist Orthodoxy, uncompromising in its standards and beliefs, and fearful of "infection" from contemporary culture.

Finally, Freedman recounts what may be the ugliest episode in his whole book: the ongoing battle led by Reform Jews in Beachwood, Ohio, (themselves once the objects of discrimination) against the creation of an Orthodox campus in their community. The Reform Jews, he shows, worry about the character of their city and its public schools, and fear that the construction of two new synagogues, a mikvah (ritual bath), and a Jewish high school will result in Orthodoxy's "taking over." The Orthodox Jews, meanwhile, insist that the campus they contemplate is simply an effort to promote community. Their object, they say, is to fashion an attractive center of religious institutions within easy walking distance of their members' homes.

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PHOTO / SUZANNE KEATING

Author Samuel G. Freedman concludes that the divides between branches of Judaism are growing.

Freedman is at his best when he sticks to these stories. All of his "parables" feature memorable characters, gripping drama, and narratives that strive to be fair to all sides. When he ventures forth from narrative to analysis, however, he stumbles badly. His epilogue, for example, contends that "in the struggle for the soul of American Jewry, the Orthodox model," – the idea "that religion defines Jewish identity" – has "triumphed." In fact, Orthodoxy is not only by far the smallest of Judaism's chief religious branches, but it was actually Reform Judaism that historically privileged the centrality of religion within Judaism, while Orthodoxy always insisted that Judaism entailed both religion and peoplehood. True, the contemporary religious revival within Judaism has been influenced by Orthodoxy, but the revitalization of religion throughout the United States – the fact that religion today is "in" while ethnicity and secularism are "out" – has surely been far more consequential.

Freedman's other conclusion – that "the divides between the existing branches of Judaism on both theological and social issues are growing so vast, so irreconcilable, that in time those branches, like Christianity after Martin Luther, will be divergent faiths sharing a common deity and a common ancestry" – is no more persuasive. Yes, Jews today are bitterly divided, but such divisions are nothing new. Bitter conflicts separated proponents and opponents of the Hasidic movement two centuries ago, Reform and Orthodox Jews for the past century-and-a-half, and supporters and opponents of political Zionism for much of the 20th century.

While the danger of schism has thus long been apparent, the big story of the new century may well turn out to be the very opposite of the one that Freedman so effectively recounts. Today, with America as a whole moving back to the center politically, there are significant signs in American Judaism too of a return to the "vital center," and away from the divisive struggles of recent decades. Many of the most exciting developments in the contemporary American Jewish community – independent day schools, transdenominational high schools, nationwide programs of adult Jewish learning, the Birthright Israel travel program, the Genesis summer program at Brandeis University, and much more – are all essentially centrist projects aimed at bringing Jews of different persuasions together.

Finally, of course, there is the phenomenon of candidate Lieberman, the very embodiment of Jewish centrism and a symbol of what the vast majority of American Jews hold in common. If the initial Jewish response to his nomination is any indication, "the struggle for the soul of American Jewry" may be ebbing. In place of "Jew vs. Jew," perhaps we may look forward to a shared sense of pride among American Jews and a renewed sense of mission.