

1. The unity of the Jewish people.
2. Mutual responsibility.
3. Jewish survival in a threatening world.
4. The centrality of the state of Israel.
5. The enduring value of Jewish tradition.
6. *Tzedakah*: philanthropy and social justice.
7. Americanness as a virtue.

"Federation Judaism"

SACRED SURVIVAL: THE CIVIL RELIGION OF AMERICAN JEWS. By JONATHAN WOOCHEER. *Indiana University Press*. 254 pp. \$25.00.

Reviewed by JONATHAN D. SARNA

THE term civil religion, popularized by Robert Bellah in a seminal essay of 1967, commonly refers to the symbols, rituals, myths, and tenets that together comprise "the transcendent universal religion of the nation." In the United States, according to most of those who have studied the subject, civil religion rises above church and ethnicity to provide a measure of national cohesiveness and shared purpose—a taste of that "moral unity" which Emile Durkheim considered so essential both to religion and to society. Now the sociologist Jonathan Woocher has applied this concept to the Jews, a group which, although it participates in most aspects of the larger American civil religion (Christmas being the notable exception to the rule), also possesses, he claims, a civil religion of its own.

In this insightful and provocative volume, Woocher sets forth the terms of this "civil Judaism," "the constellation of beliefs and practices, myths and rituals which animates the organized American Jewish community today." Focusing on the "activity and ideology of the vast array of Jewish organizations which are typically thought of as 'secular,'" he discerns seven major tenets of the faith:

He also speaks of three central myths "which the faithful tell one another" and which serve to translate what might otherwise be "abstract tenets" into "real events which happened and are happening still." The first and most important of these is "Holocaust to Re-birth," interpreted as "a paradigm for Jewish history and a continuous inspiration for Jewish action." The second is the theme of American Jewish exceptionalism, as demonstrated both in "the achievements of American Jews" and in the "striking philo-Semitic character of American society." The third and, according to Woocher, most vexing is "Jewish chosenness" (the only one of the three solidly grounded in Jewish tradition).

Myths and tenets, however, are not all. Civil Judaism, as Woocher defines it, also includes major rituals. In a few cases, like Sabbath observance and ritualized study, these are borrowed in altered form from traditional Judaism. But most, including "missions to Israel, retreats, major meetings and conferences" are entirely new, designed to forge feelings of group solidarity and to spur Jews to the kind of activism that civil Judaism demands.

As SHOULD be clear from this summary, civil Judaism, for all that it reflects on the beliefs and practices of American Jews generally, cannot itself claim to be their collective faith. Most American Jews have never participated in the kinds of traveling missions and weekend retreats that Woocher writes about, and fewer still have ever attended the "major civil-religious ceremony," the annual general assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations. It is even questionable whether the basic beliefs of civil Judaism are shared by the community at large. Most for-

JONATHAN D. SARNA is associate professor of American Jewish history at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati and director of its Center for the Study of the American Jewish Experience.

mulations of "folk Judaism," including the one drawn by Charles Liebman in his *The Ambivalent American Jew* (1973), at least pay lip-service to theology; Woocher's list of seven tenets ignores the divine element altogether. On the other hand, *tzedakah*, defined as "philanthropy and social justice," plays a more significant role here than in other popular formulations.

The reason for these differences quickly becomes obvious. The faithful whose "religion" Woocher portrays here turn out to be an elect body, composed not of American Jewry at large but only of one small subcommunity: "the leadership of the American Jewish polity." Civil Judaism serves as the "institutional ideology" of this group, sacralizing its work by infusing it with transcendent meaning. To be sure, there is a relationship between the "religion" of the leaders and the religion of the led, but Woocher's contention that "civil Judaism provides the cement which binds together . . . American Jewry as a community" is clearly an exaggeration, as is his claim that the world view and ethos of civil Judaism are "persuasive to large numbers of Jews for whom they substantially define what it means to be an American Jew today."

Woocher's real focus in this book is, rather, on what might be called "Federation Judaism," the faith expounded and exemplified by those who play an active role in the work of the United Jewish Appeal and the Jewish federations across the country. As a description of Federation Judaism, indeed, this is a pathbreaking and highly original work, full of fresh and creative insights. Woocher carefully reads between the lines of the institutional pep talks given by Federation leaders and brilliantly illustrates how Federation Judaism as a whole seeks to resolve many of the basic tensions inherent in American Jewish life—the classic polarities "between Jew and non-Jew, survival and disappearance, community and individual, exceptionalism and normality, renewal and destruction, life and death." Nobody, to my knowledge, has examined this crucial aspect of American Jewish

life from quite so enlightening a perspective.

Yet if *Sacred Survival* is fascinating and important, it is also deeply problematical for what it suggests about one possible direction that American Judaism might take. Civil Judaism, Woocher reports, "legitimizes a way of being Jewish and a program of Jewish activity within which the role of the synagogue and the rabbinate—the life of study, prayer, and ritual observance—are no longer primary." Most Federation Jews, if they belong to a synagogue at all, are members in name only; they view its central activities as largely "devoid of genuine spiritual significance." Only 25 percent of those Woocher sampled believe that support for Jewish religious activities and institutions should be a high community priority. What is more, Woocher writes, civil Judaism offers its own, alternative rewards to those interested in Jewish religious experience, for "Federation-sponsored events provide occasions for religious exultation and inspiration which rival or surpass what is available in the synagogue."

For the most part, Woocher's purpose is to describe and understand, not to pass judgment. But in the last chapter he abandons the role of the religious sociologist and casts himself as the prophet of a new Jewish religious movement. The movement he advocates—he calls it "post-denominational" and "neo-Sadducean"—is a form of civil Judaism elaborated "into a more encompassing philosophy of Jewish existence," one that "places at the center of its world not Torah, but the Jewish people, and makes the maintenance and expression of Jewish peoplehood its primary religious obligation."

There are elements of Jewish secularism here, as well as elements of Zionism, and even elements of classical Reform Judaism, such as the "prophetic" call to penetrate "the structures of national and organizational life with the power of Jewish values." What is disturbing, however, is that Woocher sees this new faith operating less in the home, the synagogue, and the school—the traditional foci of

American Judaism—than in the public square. Civil Judaism, he writes, is "a Judaism of the historical-political arena, of an elaborated polity and of public activism." Communal and political work, to his mind, should take on for the faithful the character of a "sacred calling."

Here, it seems to me, Woocher confuses a politically activist faith with political activism as a faith. It is one thing to strive to realize the social and religious ideals of Judaism within the polity at large; Judaism, like other religions, obviously seeks to mobilize its community (or communities) of believers on behalf of a vision of society. It is quite another thing, though, to make a religion out of social activism, to sanctify politics itself as a legitimate form of religious expression, and to call the result Judaism.

Robert Bellah put the issue well in his updated 1973 look at American civil religion:

Religion and morality and politics are not the same things, and confusing them can lead to terrible distortions. But cutting all links between them can lead to even worse distortions. The concept of civil religion simply points to the fact that some links between them seem to exist in all societies. At its best civil religion would be realized in a situation where politics operates within a set of moral norms, and both politics and morality are open to transcendent judgment.

Transcendent judgment is precisely what civil Judaism, as Jonathan Woocher describes it, can never provide. That quality is simply not to be found in the workaday world of the Jewish polity. If there is to be "sacred survival," it must come from elsewhere.