

# H-Net Reviews

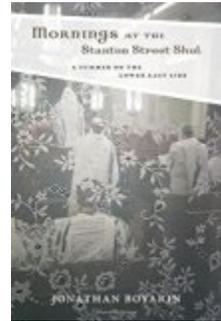
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jonathan Boyarin. *Mornings at the Stanton Street Shul: A Summer on the Lower East Side*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011. x + 209 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-3900-9.

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## These Are the People in His Neighborhood: Jonathan Boyarin's (Orthodox) Lower East Side

What makes a Jewish community? How does one capture the life of that community, in a way that is intellectually honest, respectful of its members, and compelling to the reader? In his most recent book, *Mornings at the Stanton Street Shul*, Jonathan Boyarin offers an idiosyncratic and emphatically subjective take on these questions. Here, the community under investigation is Boyarin's own on the Lower East Side, and most specifically, the daily morning minyan that met at 180 Stanton Street, the congregation's longtime home, during the summer of 2008.

Boyarin's introduction provides the basics. The synagogue, founded by Jewish immigrants from the Galician town of Brzezany, has occupied its own structure on the Lower East Side, once the mecca of the Jewish immigrant community, since 1913. The neighborhood in which it is situated is in flux. Largely Chinese and Latino for decades, the Lower East Side comprises decrepitude and gentrification, thriving ethnic markets and the remnants of earlier immigrant economies, Orthodox authenticity and hipster novelty. The congregation, like its neighborhood, is in transition. During the period in which Boyarin's book takes place, the part-time rabbi who has guided the synagogue through a difficult period of change is moving on. The members of the Stanton Street Shul must find a new spiritual leader who suits the congregation's particular sensibilities, and with limited financial compensation.

The reader quickly discovers, however, that the book

is not a straightforward narrative of the crises facing Boyarin's minyan, shul, and neighborhood. The drama in the book arises not only from the external dilemmas that Boyarin describes, but from an internal struggle as well. This interior drama centers on Boyarin's tasks as a scholar and writer: Can he stick to the ethnographic project he has set out for himself and make a book out of it? Is it possible to capture the essence of his community? All this is in keeping with the author's status as a practitioner of postmodern ethnography. His methodological and analytical approaches here are consistent with those of his first book, *Polish Jews in Paris: The Ethnography of Memory* (1991), published twenty-one years ago: the mode is narrative ethnography, with an emphasis on the personal encounter between anthropologist and subject.

*Mornings at the Stanton Street Shul* bravely pushes the principle of self-reflexivity to its experimental edge. Boyarin is not simply a participant-observer—he is central to the narrative. His regular presence that summer (along with a handful of other stalwarts) guaranteed the survival of the daily minyan. This is a deeply personal project; the author characterizes the study as an “ethnographic memoir.” Alongside fragmentary portraits of the various minyan-goers, synagogue members, rabbis, and neighborhood characters whom he encountered throughout the summer, Boyarin also incorporates his own dreams, flashbacks, and Freudian slips. The book is based on his journals from the time, and it is filled with the minutiae of his life. The author tells us, for example, what he ate

for *shabbes* lunch, the size of his tefillin, and when he had slept badly or had overdone it at the gym. Readers' patience for these details will dictate, in part, their appreciation of the book as a whole.

With this project, Boyarin is not interested in justifying his methodological and stylistic choices in scholarly terms. There is no reliance on academic jargon here, and Boyarin appears eager to invite the reader into the world that he describes, all of which is to the book's credit. Yet there are few signposts along the way to show the reader where, exactly, the author is going. The book is divided into twelve chapters, each corresponding to consecutive weeks of the summer and each week's assigned Torah portion, an elegant and sensible means of structuring the book. Each chapter opens with a quotation from the designated Torah reading, and Boyarin's ruminations are organized according to this system ("Day Five of Parshas Balak, July 10, 2008," for example). A glance at the table of contents, though, tells us much about Boyarin's approach. Here, the chapters are merely marked, "Week One," "Week Two," "Week Three," and so on, the words zigzagging down the page like concrete poetry. Style, in other words, matters more to Boyarin than structural clarity. This is not a standard academic offering. There is a glossary in back, where one can find terms like "daven" and "mechitza," but there is no index. Footnotes are sparse; the works cited page lists only a dozen titles. (As a point of comparison, Ayala Fader's recent ethnography, *Mitzvah Girls: Bringing Up the Next Generation of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn* [2009], references over 250 books and articles.)

Boyarin's strategy, overall, is to let readers connect the dots. He likes his metaphors, plot twists, and analytical structures messy, not neat. One might describe Boyarin's narrative style as purposeful meandering. In one passage, for example, the author begins by recounting a dream about hot dogs; moves on to an explanation of the religious rule that dictates how the tallis and tefillin should be placed in a bag (while noting the name of the Jewish book store where he procured his own plastic carrying bag); continues with a brief description of the mechanics of a tefillin box and recalls when he last had his own box repaired; shares a memory of how and from whom he learned to lay tefillin; and ends with a recounting of that day's events in the minyan, in which the rabbi announced that the group will be studying the laws of tefillin. It is a roundabout approach to the subject of religious practice, to say the least.

Boyarin tackles weighty themes in *Mornings at the*

*Stanton Street Shul*, even if readers are mostly left to diagram them themselves. These include the tensions between authenticity and pluralism in Orthodox Judaism, between intentionality and habitual performance in Jewish prayer and practice, and between being "inside" and "outside" a given community. These tensions surface most clearly in Boyarin's presentation of himself. He describes himself as "something of a postmodern Jew," and the author emerges as someone who negotiates constantly and deliberately between traditional Jewish sensibilities and practices and progressive social and political commitments (p. 3). For example, Boyarin pinpoints a "sentimental attachment to the very idea of being around Jews in traditional dress," and confesses that he has taken up this study, in part, because he "just want[s] to be with Jews doing something relatively innocuous ... and old-fashioned" (pp. 99, 29). Yet the author juxtaposes his own hankering for traditional, male camaraderie and practice with an inclination and desire to push boundaries. He, like many in his congregation, supports expanding women's participation as religious actors and favors the full inclusion of gay members in all aspects of synagogue life.

One of the most fascinating aspects of *Mornings at the Stanton Street Shul* is the portrait it provides of an Orthodox community at once porous and internally divided. Boyarin reveals, for example, that he has long attended a number of other minyans in the neighborhood as an active participant. He is not the only one. Members of other shuls—including the occasional Williamsburg Hasid—attend Boyarin's minyan from time to time and generally share a comfortable rapport with the larger group. Yet there are stark divisions, too, among the neighborhood's Orthodox Jews. The Stanton Street Shul, at the left end of the Orthodox spectrum, rests somewhat uneasily within the religious community of the Lower East Side. There are issues, such as the expansion of women's participation (even within the bounds of halakha) and the potential creation of an eruv in the neighborhood, that serve as flash points. These issues elicit real antagonisms between institutions and people, and Boyarin notes these breakdowns, too.

For Boyarin, there is something special about being Orthodox on the Lower East Side, and *Mornings at the Stanton Street Shul* is his attempt to capture that particular sensibility. The Lower East Side, because of its history and the residual density and intensity of Jewish life there relative to other places, is a neighborhood where one could spend "decades exploring Jewishness," as Boyarin has done (p. 197). Place is central to Boyarin's

narrative, and he contemplates the vanished and vanishing Jewish geography of the Lower East Side throughout the book. The neighborhood houses a pervasive matrix of intersecting Jewish lives—within one’s synagogue and beyond its borders—encompassing years-long friendships and ephemeral convergences, the fixed and the improvised, the past and the present. This seems to be what Boyarin values most about his life there. His ethnographic project provides a means of capturing memories, his own and those of his fellow synagogue members, before they and the Jewish neighborhood they love disappear.

*Mornings at the Stanton Street Shul* is inviting, provocative, funny, and stimulating; at times, it can be

coy and solipsistic. The book is also moving, suffused with Boyarin’s genuine affection for the people in his minyan, shul, and neighborhood. Boyarin writes, at the end the book, that, “for each of us, sharing the journey—figuring out how our own journey can also be a Jewish one, figuring out how a Jewish journey can also be our own—is something that we’ve found we can do best together” (pp. 201-202). Here, the author is referring to the Stanton Street Shul in particular, the place where he has found a Jewish home for three decades. Yet he is making a broader statement, too, about the nature of Jewishness. Even for postmodern Jews, he suggests, community is still the heart of the matter.

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