

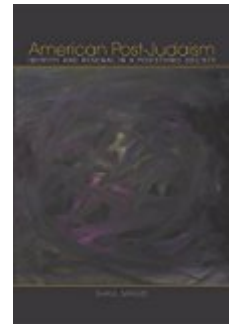
H-Net Reviews

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Shaul Magid. *American Post-Judaism: Identity and Renewal in a Postethnic Society*. Indiana University Press, 2013. xiv + 388 pages. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-00802-2; ISBN 978-0-253-00809-1.

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Prophet, Historian, or Obituary Writer?

Questions of assimilation and intermarriage have long plagued Jewish leaders in America. The traditional response is to lament this plight, combat it actively, and connect it to something amorphously and ominously referred to as “Jewish survival.” In his important new book, Shaul Magid takes a different approach and instead works from the assumption that such modern-day realities are to be celebrated, not lamented. In his creative rethinking, questions of postmodernity and postethnicity, including the querying of Jewishness as a stable essence, rise to the surface. The result is a rich, if idiosyncratic, analysis of American Judaism at the present moment.

The main premise of the book is that as traditional understandings of Jewish ethnicity confront the contemporary American multiethnic/multiracial mix, something will have to give within Judaism. As ethnicity increasingly becomes irrelevant to American society, Magid contends that Judaism must respond by essentially denuding itself of that which has defined it for centuries. To accomplish this process, Magid turns to the thought of Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, one of the founders of Jewish Renewal. Using Schachter-Shalomi as his guide, Magid sets out to rethink not only traditional concepts, such as halakhah and saintship, but also more recent phenomena that have played a huge role in the self-definition of American Jewry, such as Zionism and the Holocaust.

For Magid, the increasingly multiethnic makeup of American Jewry is largely the result of the normalization of intermarriage. Yet, rather than lead simply to a mass abandonment of the tradition, Magid correctly argues that we now, and will so increasingly in the coming years, see people identify with Judaism and as Jews in ways that are neither ethnic nor religious. This, coupled with the tendency for a “disassimilationist reengagement,” has created a situation wherein Judaism ceases to be associated with a distinct ethnos and increasingly becomes part of “a more complex mosaic of different stories, narratives, and affiliations” (p. 187). Such processes are not simply part of the increasing “Americanization” of Judaism, witnessed for example in modern forms such as Reconstructionism, but represent, for the author, a sea change in the ways that “Jew,” “Jewishness,” and “Judaism” will be understood in America and beyond over the next half century.

Magid situates himself both as historian and prophet, with the result that each of these roles has the tendency to blur into the other. At times, for example, he informs us that postmodern America has *invented* a new form of Judaism (e.g., p. 33), whereas in other places, he suggests that we are not quite there and that this new form of Judaism *may* only be coming soon to synagogues near us (e.g., p. 24). It is a fascinating and compelling argument, but it seems to me one that perhaps will only ever

involve a certain cross-section of Jews. Within this context, “post-Judaism” will not so much be the future of Judaism in America, but the future of what will likely be but one sectarian denomination. As Jewish learning reaches woeful levels in this country, it would seem that ethnicity risks becoming the only thing that most Jews have left to cling to. To his credit, Magid rejects such superficiality and, in its stead, provides an elaborate theology of renewal that is, for all intents and purposes, a Renewal theology.

It is perhaps in this latter context that Magid situates himself as a prophet, since he not only traces the processes that led/are leading to this postethnic post-Judaism, but also provides a way to contextualize them within American religious history. Within this context, it becomes quite clear that he is not simply an observer of or commentator on these developments, but he is someone who, as an active participant within them, has much at stake in the debates. So while he can declare that “the age of romanticization and nostalgia in the form of Jewish rediscovery has run its course” (p. 3), it gradually becomes apparent that, in its place, he wants to generate “a radical shift in Jewish thinking, identity, and practice in contemporary America” (p. 240).

The way out of the contemporary impasse, for Magid, is Jewish Renewal, specifically the neo-Hasidic, New Age variety of Schachter-Shalomi. This variety, according to Magid, “offers a systematic critique and reconstruction of Judaism and Jewishness that can be used as a template for future generations of American Jews” (p. 219). This future, however, is potentially very radical: one wherein Judaism is all but severed from halakhah and past authority, but one that is committed to ad hoc ritualization as a basis of community cohesion. This post-halakhic, New Age Judaism is universal, syncretistic, and based on a new metaphysical foundation that he calls “Jewish post-monotheism.”

To get here, Magid tries to show in chapter 3 that Renewal is a uniquely American phenomenon and connects its rise to philosophical roots in American pragmatism, especially as articulated by William James. Rather than regard Renewal as but a fifth denomination of American Judaism, Magid prefers to see it as a New Religious Movement (NRM) that represents “the first fruits of a postdenominational period in American Jewry” (p. 59). Combining Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Transcendentalism, James’s pragmatism and pluralistic pantheism, and New Age spirituality, Renewal becomes truly “American” at its core. As a result, the movement is uniquely poised to

simultaneously shape and respond to the needs of American Jewry. “In the final analysis,” writes Magid, “Jewish Renewal is as much an American Judaism as the Judaism of Rabbi Isaac Meyer Wise, Mordecai Kaplan, or Solomon Schechter and as much an American religion as the spirituality of Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, or Benjamin Franklin” (p. 73).

Having established Renewal’s American bona fides, Magid subsequently sets out to show us how it can respond to ideas central (and not so central) to Judaism: monotheism (ch. 4), *halakhah* (ch. 5), Christology (ch. 6), sainthood (ch. 7), and the Holocaust (ch. 8). Renewal provides a reassessment of all these concepts, providing for a systematic overhaul of Judaism’s foundations. In each one of these chapters, Magid provides an overview of the issues at stake and then concludes with how the thought of Schachter-Shalomi confronts, deals with, and ultimately transforms them through universalization. Explicit in all of this, then, is that Magid firmly believes that Renewal provides the means for recalibrating Judaism by opening it up at precisely those junctures at which traditional Judaism closed it. The question, of course, is what do we do with a Judaism denuded of ethnicity, monotheism, and the law on the one hand, and that embraces Jesus, on the other? For Magid, we call it “post-Judaism.”

A case in point is chapter 8 devoted to the Holocaust and, what I consider to be, the most interesting chapter in the book. Therein, Magid departs from traditional scholarly consensus that wants to see in the Holocaust something that reflects the uniqueness and particularity of the event as a sacred foundation. Once again invoking—though not slavishly following—Schachter-Shalomi, Magid emphasizes the Holocaust’s universality when he concludes that “the Holocaust should not be a tool to further affirm Jews as the most victimized victims; it should not be a justification for distancing oneself from the world, or even a justification for any exclusivist argument for the State of Israel” (p. 228). While I certainly concur with this assessment, it will surely ruffle feathers as such a claim turns on its head traditional American Jewish responses to the Holocaust.

Taken all together, Magid offers his theorization and elaboration of Schachter-Shalomi’s teachings as a new Yavneh, one that will “open Jews to the world to reverse the ways the old Yavneh closed them from the world” (p. 230). The result, and I am sure that Magid is aware of the consequences even though he does not get into them here, will be a veritable *Kulturkampf* within Judaism.

Traditional and more entrenched forms of the tradition will not accept that which negates (even if using the language of transformation) halakhah or even ethnicity. It will be a divisive battle for the soul of Judaism, one that, as other commentators have duly noted, threatens to create an irreparable split between Israel and America.

While I like Magid's prognosis that Jewish identity (like any identity formation) is in flux and morphing before our eyes and that, as Jews and scholars, we should find this exciting, I am not as convinced by his proposed solution. This is perhaps another way of saying that whereas I agree with Magid the cultural critic, I disagree with Magid the constructive theologian. While I think he is certainly correct to remark on Renewal's American New Age roots, I am not at all sure that this movement has the ability or spiritual wherewithal to reach more than a small cross-section of Jews. And while this cross-section may be the circles in which Magid moves

and shakes, I don't see how it can ever have any kind of large-scale appeal. Moreover, a Judaism—or better, a post-Judaism—centered around a neo-Hasidic charismatic leadership is surely problematic. The history of religion in America suggests that this might not be a good thing at all, especially for American Jews.

Despite such reservations, there is much of interest here. Chapter 7, for example, represents an initial step to write the history of the *baal teshuvah* movement in America, surely a scholarly desideratum. In addition, chapter 8 provides much original and creative thinking on the role of the Holocaust in American Jewish life. So while I think Magid has, in the final analysis, put too much weight on the thought of Schachter-Shalomi, his *American Post-Judaism* provides a timely and necessary, if controversial, entry into contemporary Jewish theology. Highly recommended.

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