H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jennifer A. Thompson. *Jewish on Their Own Terms: How Intermarried Couples Are Changing American Judaism.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014. 224 pp. $26.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8135-6281-0.

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Published on H-Judaic (April, 2016)

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In *Jewish on Their Own Terms: How Intermarried Couples are Changing American Judaism,* sociologist Jennifer Thompson makes her case that researching Jewish intermarriage is important for scholars and students of sociology and the social sciences, in order to refute previous studies that have relied on assumptions no longer considered valid. Indeed, she notes that within the Jewish world, conversations about intermarriage, especially its impact on "Judaism's present and future," have remained "oddly static since the 1960s" (p. 27). Anyone within or in proximity to the Jewish world knows that this impact is decidedly negative, and Thompson recounts many of the labels used for—and accusations leveled at—couples who intermarry. They have an "accommodationist spirit," they are a threat to Jewish survival, they have betrayed the Jewish people (p. 43). If Judaism is disappearing in modern society, in other words, intermarried couples are to blame. As she notes, "The intermarriage-as-assimilation narrative has anchored Jewish discourses for decades" (p. 37).

In *Jewish on Their Own Terms,* Thompson challenges this narrative by refusing to begin with any of the assumptions built into these static conversations. Thompson interviewed and observed informants in Atlanta and Des Moines and attended two interfaith conferences, compiling data that allow her to cut a new scholarly path in this impressive ethnography. She focuses not on intermarriage as a crisis or problem but on "processes of religious change and cultural assimilation in everyday life and the interaction of religious norms and personal choice in lived experience" (p. 11).

In capturing those norms and choices, Thompson hopes to speak to a second audience: the couples themselves and their interfaith families. She offers them an "accurate and dignified" portrayal by capturing their own voices (p. 11). She offers full transparency by identifying herself as part of an intermarried couple. A Jew by choice, converting to Judaism in college, Thompson has a non-Jewish husband and a Jewish son. She speaks of herself in the workshops as a partic-

ipant and a scholar/observer, and that contributes to the authenticity of all of the voices in these pages.

Lastly, Thompson aims her research at "those concerned with future of American Judaism" (p. 11). Here lies her most groundbreaking contribution, beginning with the title of her book. Contradicting much of Jewish communal policy narratives since the 1960s, Thompson comprehensively documents how intermarried couples are changing American Judaism for the better. Though at times she understates the profound implications of her findings, this book must be essential reading for this demographic of her target audience—in addition to sociologists and intermarried couples themselves.

Thompson carefully lays out how "intermarriage discourse is a proxy for working out anxieties and meanings attached to assimilation and Jewishness for American Jews in general, without pressing them to claim those anxieties and meanings for themselves" (p. 15). Living in an increasingly individualistic society, American Jews—or, as she writes, "at least for non-Orthodox Jews"—individualism is "inextricable from their conception of their own Jewishness" (p. 16). Thompson builds her study around interviews and observations in order to get to the heart of the religious lives of intermarried couples, and thus to this debate. Her focus is almost exclusively on heterosexual couples, and I'll return to the import of that point below.

Thompson's findings shatter Jewish policymakers' conventional wisdom about intermarried couples and their children (though, as she indicates, they align with the work of a few recent academic studies, such as those of Keren McGinity[1]). Religious norms and community, tradition, choice and individual sensibilities, institutional commitment and kin: these are integral to the lives of her informants. Intermarried couples take heed of Jewish communal disapproval, but they also make their own choices to belong to more welcoming institutions. They often subscribe to traditional American religious gender roles, and ***non-Jewish*** wives and mothers—most interestingly, given the antiquated equation of intermarriage with assimiliation—take active roles in bringing Jewishness into the everyday lives of their families.

Thompson groups the perspectives of these couples into two categories: "ethnic familialism," which "values these elements but also organizes religious identity and practice around the unity of the family and visceral, emotional connections to religious traditions"; and "universalist individualism, which emphasizes the conscious choice of religious commitments, rooted in notions of fairness, the unity of humanity, the autonomy of individuals" (p. 17). Whether Thompson's informants consider Jewishness "what you are" or "what's in your heart"—the title of one of her central chapters—they infuse Jewish meaning into their lives and the lives of their children.

These categories will prove useful for scholars of sociology who ground their research in similar models and evidentiary bases. For other readers, Thompson's attentiveness to the interplay of these categories in the lives of intermarried couples will likely be most important. In short, their ways of negotiating ties to Jewish communities involve complex combinations of individualism and community, the universal and the particular, and in that, they are like nearly all (non-Orthodox) American Jews.

We are all, she reminds us, living in a society in which these modern currents of individualism and secularism are at work, and American Jews are an increasingly diverse group. Jewish communal leaders do a tremendous disservice in not looking directly at the lives and experiences of these couples, and indeed at all American Jews. These leaders draw stark communal boundaries, excluding those who balance Christian (and other religious) practices with Jewish observances; they refuse to take these couples on their own terms,

ignoring the value the families themselves attribute to their practices. In deciding what kinds of Jewishness "count," some Jewish leaders have led us to the crisis they blame on intermarried couples—that of declining numbers of American Jews who identify with Jewish institutions (p. 68).

To read Thompson's work is to see clearly the imperative facing American Jewish institutions, and yet some of her most valuable findings lie deep in the details of her study. Thompson's informants feel most "comfortable," she writes, in institutions whose leaders intentionally "disavow[ed] boundaries that community members perceived to be externally and illegitimately imposed" (p. 80). Here she writes of the members of a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) synagogue. "By rethinking religious boundaries," she writes, "this community attempted to balance the needs of the individual with the integrity of the group" (p. 77). Jews of color, LGBTQ Jews, Thompson's intermarried couples and their families: Jewish communal leaders and policymakers of all denominations and approaches would do well to heed the impressive work toward inclusion done within these communities.

As Thompson reminds us, venting anxiety about intermarriage cannot reverse—or even slow down—modernity and the decline of religious authority. Fighting over that very topic now can sometimes serve as the "connective tissue" among Jews across the world (p. 178). But it is only when Jews of different backgrounds connect with one another, when Jewish institutions offer a more "experience-focused approach" to "exemplify Jewish values," that we will be able to talk about each other and Jewish meaning in new ways (p. 179). The "debate about intermarriage," she writes in her introduction, "has functioned since the second half of the twentieth century as a proxy for a larger and more difficult discussion about the nature of Jewishness itself" (p. 24). Updating our models and our narratives of Jewish belonging is the only way to begin that conversation, an essential conversation for anyone who cares about the future of American Judaism.

Note

[1]. Keren McGinity, ***Marrying Out: Jewish Men, Intermarriage, and Fatherhood*** (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

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Citation: Marjorie Feld. Review of Thompson, Jennifer A. ***Jewish on Their Own Terms: How Intermarried Couples Are Changing American Judaism.*** H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. April, 2016.

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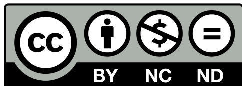
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