



Emily Sigalow. *American JewBu: Jews, Buddhists, and Religious Change.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. 280 pp. \$21.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-691-22805-1.

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Emily Sigalow has written a pioneering work that is certainly the best account of a phenomenon that is, simultaneously, just as ineffable as notable: the prominence of Jews among American Buddhists. Affably known as JewBus (or JuBus) since Roger Kamenetz popularized the term in his book, *The Jew in the Lotus* (1994), about the travel of Jewish delegates to visit the Fourteenth Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India, the supposed affinity of American Jews for Buddhism has been addressed in numerous non-academic publications—most often in the form of a personal narrative. Now we can read the first fully realized academic work that actually investigates the encounter of American Jews with Buddhism in the United States and which offers an explanation for this affinity through a mix of historiographic and ethnographical studies.

Accordingly, the book is divided into historical and ethnographical sections (since I am a historian, this review will focus mostly on section 1). Sigalow traces the encounter of Judaism and Buddhism in the United States since the late nineteenth century along the line of great men (this biographical focus is justified due to the ethnographic interview-based approach to contemporary syncretism in the second part of the book). She identifies four different periods of Jewish-Buddhist engagement in the US, beginning with

the years 1875 to 1924 and Charles T. Strauss. Strauss, a native of Switzerland, came to the United States at the age of eighteen. On the occasion of the World's Parliament of Religion in Chicago in 1893, Strauss was the first person to be initiated into Buddhism in the US. The second period starts with the 1920s and focuses on the three prominent JewBus, Samuel Lewis (1896–1971), William Segal (1904–2000), and—whom I found the most interesting of all—Julius Goldwater (1931–2001). Goldwater was an offspring of a prominent Arizonian Jewish family, who at one point owned a department store chain, and a second cousin of Republican firebrand Barry Goldwater. During the Second World War after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Julius Goldwater became a public advocate for interned Japanese Americans. He was appointed caretaker of the Nishi Hongwanji Temple in Los Angeles and was given power of attorney over three other temples in the area. It is not so much this family history but Goldwater's attempt to universalize Buddhism—in other words, to rid it of its sectarian Asian roots and to minimize the difference between the various schools of Buddhism—that earns him his place in Sigalow's book. (Though I hope a family biography is already in the writing!) Goldwater's decontextualization of Buddhism in the name of an Americanized version was the antecedent to

the adaptation of Buddhism to the norms of US society, including the demotion of notions like reincarnation and its cosmological and mythological foundations, as seen today. This trend of the Americanization of Buddhism accelerated—quite ironically—with the encounter of countercultural Westerners with Buddhism on the hippie trail or in, say, Berkeley, during what Sigalow describes as the third period of Jewish-Buddhist engagement, from 1966 to 1990. The influence of the counterculture movement and its fascination with what was often called Eastern wisdom marked the turn away from a more intellectual attachment to Buddhism toward a meditation-centered approach. Vipassana (insight meditation) and the Zen and Tibetan traditions with a focus on seated meditation surged in popularity and laid the foundation for the successive interest in Buddhism among the upper-middle-class demographic with liberal or progressive values. American Jews played a paramount role in this countercultural adoption of Buddhism as early adopters, teachers, and reformers who constructed a liberalized version, thus furthering the detachment of Buddhism from its Asian roots and paving the way for its neoliberal, psychotherapeutic incarnation. During the fourth period, starting in the 1990s, the amalgamation of Buddhist-inspired meditation and mindfulness with medicine and psychology—again with the help of American Jewish scientists, some of whom had studied with Jewish teachers of meditation in the 1960s—brought a new religious syncretism to life.

The Americanization of Buddhism would not have been possible without the contribution of Jews and produced a vernacular version that in itself proved highly attractive to the sociodemographic groups in which American Jews are well represented. This development resulted in the founding of Jewish-Buddhist communities and organizations, which are the subject of the second, ethnographic, part of Sigalow's book. In the second part, based on a wide range of in-depth interviews with Buddhist teachers and lay practi-

tioners, she analyzes the syncretism of religious practices, especially meditation, spiritual discourse, and religious identities that developed as a result of the meeting of Judaism and Buddhism in the US. Sigalow does an extremely good job of putting the sometimes vague language of her interviews into analytical categories. Subsequently, she can argue convincingly that it was the distinctive “Jewish social location” of American Jews, that is, left-liberal, urban, secular, and upper-middle-class, that propelled them into such a prominent place in the history of Buddhism in the US. In addition, she argues that the Jewish view of Buddhism clearly benefited from the comparison with Christianity. For Sigalow's interviewees, Buddhism is not tied to such a long history of anti-Judaic doctrines and antisemitic persecution as is Christianity. The lack of a strong religious hierarchy led to the development of flexibility and permissiveness, enabling converts to Buddhism to maintain part of their Jewish identity or even continue certain religious practices.

In her conclusion, Sigalow identifies three different types of American Jewish Buddhists: first, converts to Buddhism, who adopt Buddhism as a primary meaning-making system and yet maintain a cultural or familial identification with Judaism; second, those who use Buddhist meditation or mindfulness to spiritually enrich their Judaism and who identify primarily as Jews, not Buddhists; and third, dual believers—the smallest group—who identify both as Jewish and Buddhist in equal parts and actively practice both religious traditions.

I find Sigalow's multifaceted argumentation for the affinity of American Jews for Buddhism, which evolves around one explanation—the “Jewish social location,” adding other aspects that are not all-encompassing to offer insights into individual reasons—persuasive, and every scholar on Jewish-Buddhist relations, religion in the United States, and contemporary religious syncretism should take heed.

Less in order to point out lacunae, but rather for sketching a path that future Jewish-Buddhist studies can take from Sigalow's pioneering starting point, I want to advocate for an understanding of the history of the encounter between Judaism and Buddhism as a transnational affair through texts and translations, migration and movements, travel and tourism. This is obviously an American story, and Sigalow tells it as such. And yet the transnational links are apparent throughout the book. After becoming a Buddhist in 1893, Charles T. Strauss returned to Europe, where he played a conspicuous role in setting up the local Buddhist community in Leipzig, one of several Buddhist centers in Germany at the time. The parallels to the coeval interest in Buddhism in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century are not coincidental. As the case of Strauss reminds us—and more examples exist—a transnational network of early Western Buddhists existed among which Buddhist texts circulated, and a set of dominating figures influenced the reception of Buddhism in more than one country, not the least because very few knew any East or South Asian languages and translations often relied on English, French, or German renditions. From the beginning, this transnational moment was foundational for the perception and reception of Buddhism in the West and only became more apparent when, during the 1960s, many American Jews with interest in Buddhism went to Asia, while Asian immigrants brought their religion to the US. Furthermore, starting with its early admirers, Buddhism in the US was often cast in a romanticized light of Eastern wisdom, an aspect that garnered strength during the counterculture movement but subsided with the Americanization and meditation-based psychotherapeutization of Buddhism. And yet, an investigation through the prism of Orientalist discourse might offer intriguing insights.

All of this, of course, is beyond the scope of Sigalow's book, and there remains no doubt that her book is an essential contribution to Jewish-Buddhist studies, a field that was once virtually

nonexistent but is now burgeoning. Twenty-five years after Roger Kamenetz's book, Emily Sigalow provides us with a compelling account of the American JewBu, an account that any future study on this subject cannot and will not ignore.

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