

INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN JUDAISM

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What the Books Say,
What the People Do

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Jacob Neusner

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P R E F A C E

This book introduces American Judaism—that is, the religion, Judaism, as it is practiced in America. It is a work concerned with the religion, Judaism, not with the sociology of the ethnic group, the Jews. Not all Jews are Judaists—practitioners of Judaism—although if and when Jews practice a religion, it is Judaism for the vast majority of them. And since most Jews at some occasion in their lives do practice Judaism, we study the religion from a very particular perspective: How, in America, do members of an ethnic group realize that they also wish to participate in a religious community, and how do they know whether they are only Jewish or also Judaic? That is the question I seek to answer in introducing American Judaism to readers concerned with the study of religion in general and religion in our own country in particular. Anyone interested in religion in general should study religion in the United States in particular, because, by all statistical measures, ours is a country that in higher proportions than most others claims to believe in God, Providence, reward and punishment, and afterlife, as well as weekly or even daily prayer. We have built in this country a nation with the soul of a church—but also a synagogue, as I shall show.¹

When world religions come to America, they become American. Immigrants, whether from Africa or Europe or Asia or Latin America, bring with them nearly every religion known to humanity, and the

immigrants and their children successfully naturalize not only themselves but their religions. Thus, no religion makes the move intact, but all of them come here ultimately unimpaired, and, given the profound measure of religiosity in this country, strengthened and renewed. In practicing a religion, why do people do certain things and refrain from doing other things within the norms of their religion? That question faces anyone who grasps—and everyone does—that religious elites write books, but ordinary folk embody religions, and therefore they know what counts and what doesn't. What do we learn from what they know about how religions work? My basic thesis is that, in its deep religiosity, America is a fundamentally Protestant country, and world religions that naturalize themselves here adopt the Protestant ethos for themselves. The reason is that Protestant Christianity solved the problem of religious diversity by privatizing religion, and for a country as diverse as our own, we have found no better way to civic amity and social stability than leaving people alone and, consequently, leaving religion to fend for itself as well. Just how this works for Judaism I spell out in this book.

In an earlier book, *The Enchantments of Judaism: Rites of Transformation from Birth through Death*,² I covered some of the same subjects that I treat here and asked the questions that I address here. In that book I asked how the rites of Judaism transform those who practice them—and why. The *how* part of my answer registered, the *why* part did not. Here I recapitulate the *why*.

In *The Enchantments of Judaism* one of the questions I sought to answer was, Why do people do certain religious deeds and neglect others? That seemed to me to be part of the question of religious transformation of the faithful (in the case of Judaism, sanctification). People took the title to mean that I was going to tell them how beautiful or how enchanting Judaism is. But to understand the book, one would have had to read it, not just flip the pages. So far as I saw, no general reviewer understood why the book offered, out of the case of Judaism, a proposition of general intelligibility on the character of religion as it lives and is practiced in North America (the United States and Canada).

I should not complain. The reviewers unanimously liked the book, which they thought was a nice introduction to the customs and ceremonies of Judaism: "enchantments" indeed! They missed the message of the subtitle, *Rites of Transformation*, not understanding that, to me,

“transformation” stands for a question: How does it work? *Enchantments* quickly sold out in its commercial edition. But sales hardly justified a second printing. Not only so, but scholars in social science working on precisely the same problem did not realize that the book talked to them.³ They never bothered to read a book about exotic Jewish customs and ceremonies—and they obviously did not follow the reviews. One looks in vain in the sociological studies cited in chapter 2 for a single reference to a work that addressed precisely the same question they propose to analyze—but from the perspective of the study of religion, and with special attention to the interplay between religious practice and theological norm. But then, for Jewish social science, ideas bear no weight, and theology is something they believe is absent in “Judaism” (or: the Judaism they study, weigh, and measure). Still, I wonder whether there is another field of learning so monumentally indifferent to reading books not bearing, in big red letters, the announcement, “This book is relevant to the work you are doing.” That just might suffice to win the attention of Jewish social sciences to the contents of Judaism. The founders of social science spend their lives examining the tensions between the ideas people hold and the things they do; for Jewish social science, ideas do not exist; there is therefore no tension.

I should have preferred that the reviewers not like the book (even for all the wrong reasons) but at least understand it. And I should have hoped to inform, therefore also be informed by the response of colleagues in the social sciences. It would have been interesting to read reviews by scholars of the academic study of religion, but the book had not a single substantial review in a journal of religious studies, even though I worked within perfectly classical congeries of thinking. But we do not choose the colleagues with whom we share our field of study. In the world of Judaic learning even very friendly and loving reviewers do not read from the beginning to the end of a book—and in the Jewish social sciences even the best of the sociologists read only the raw data of opinion polls.

Still, I cannot plead guilty to focusing the book insufficiently, caring more for the atmosphere and nuance of language. I had the world’s greatest editor, Phoebe Hoss, and writing for her approval meant a great deal to me. Even a superficial reading of *Enchantments* will show that I ask and answer a single question on every page of the book: Why this, not that? But the question is framed in context, the answer

teased out of the liturgy. Clearly, in casting as the generative question of the book, How do the rites of Judaism change people? I chose the wrong audience, expecting to address a world that is not asking the questions I am answering—questions about religion, what it is, how it works, illustrated by the case of Judaism. Jews who practice Judaism—Judaists—are not going to want the answers; they already know them. And Jews who study the Jews find religion implausible anyhow; so there is no hearing there.

Here, therefore I re-present my theory to the audience to which I should have addressed it to begin with: people who find religion important and want to understand religion in contemporary society, not for believers who want nice stories about Jews' (exotic) customs and ceremonies nor for the experts on the Jews and Judaism who like collecting opinions but don't like reading books.

The issue that I addressed in the previous book and that is recast for a broader audience of people who care about religion in general, not Judaism in particular, is an urgent one: explaining what we see, not only what we read. So I decided to rewrite the book and focus it more sharply upon what strikes me as Judaism's most suggestive trait: the fairly broadly diffused knowledge of what matters and what doesn't. I have rewritten all of the chapters of that book for the purpose of this one.

My dear friend and collaborator, Andrew M. Greeley of the University of Chicago and the University of Arizona and head of the National Opinion Research Center, kindly read chapter 2 and gave me the benefit of his learning and wisdom. He ranks among the nation's most distinguished social scientists, in demography and ethnicity having few peers, and I am proud of his friendship and thankful for the generous gift of his time and knowledge. He knows the meaning of generosity of spirit and of friendship and lives out the laws of collegiality.

The statistical description of American Judaism presented in chapter 2 derives from the works cited there. Many of the works I consulted were located for me by Michael Satlow of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, who served as my research assistant. I consulted also Jack Wertheimer of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Manuscripts of his own public addresses were provided to me by Calvin Goldscheider, Professor of Sociology and of Judaic Studies at Brown University. For this help I thank all three.

As always, when working with Fortress Press I enjoyed the counsel of splendid editors, in particular Dr. Marshall Johnson. He saw the disorganization of the original draft and, in his own gentle way, suggested that I completely reorganize several of the chapters. I did so, with what I think is a good result. But he only exemplifies the high level of professionalism characteristic of that splendid press, with which I have been proud to be associated for nearly two decades now.

It remains to express my continuing thanks to the University of South Florida for providing ideal conditions in which to pursue my research, and to my colleagues in the Department of Religious Studies and in other departments for their ongoing friendship and stimulating conversation. They show me the true meaning of the word collegiality: honesty, generosity, sincerity. In my long career I have never known people of higher character and conscience.

I wrote this book while a Visiting Fellow at Clare Hall, Cambridge, among people whose ambition it is to make for scholars whatever in this world there can be of paradise. I cannot imagine a more congenial place in which to write a book or conduct intellectual experiments. The humble facilities of that research center conceal the wealth of spirit and intellect that flourish there; to the president and staff of Clare Hall and to the many friends and colleagues who accorded a warm welcome to my wife and me, I express thanks. Over thirty years now, a group of remarkable academicians, with much goodwill aforethought, conceived and brought into being a truly international community of scholars, encompassing humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, law and jurisprudence, and many other areas of learning, in which the resources of an ancient university would be made available to foreigners and indigenous alike. None of the many things that work well at Clare Hall is an accident.

Knowing, as I do, the current and former presidents of the college, recognizing the warm and constructive collegiality of the permanent fellows and the wonderful staff, I realize none of this is an accident. It is the result of hard work and deep thought about the nature of an academic community that really is a community. To my good friend, Clare Hall's President Anthony Low and to all his coworkers and colleagues I express my admiration and thanks for all that I have enjoyed on account of the work of these many men and women of goodwill but also effective wit. Being a veteran of a variety of research oppor-

tunities (more than a dozen research fellowships in national competitions of various kinds and thirty years of various university grants) and research institutes, I may say that everything they do wrong elsewhere they do right here.

It strikes me as providential that, at just the point in my life that I found, at the University of South Florida, a community of learning colleagues capable of genuine intellectual exchange and cordiality, I found here in Cambridge a similar community. Not many people know even one such place, and I know and enjoy a warm welcome in two of them.

Jacob Neusner

P A R T I

WHAT THE BOOKS
SAY,
WHAT THE PEOPLE
DO

◇ I N T R O D U C T I O N ◇

This book introduces one of the world's religions in today's United States of America. Most, though not all, Americans say they are religious, and the world's religions flourish in today's America. In God most of us Americans really do trust. But each does so in his or her own special way, and that is what makes religion in America interesting. Religion is a native category for Americans, as the First Amendment makes explicit; and to understand America, we have to understand religion. What is at stake in the study of any particular religion in this country is the understanding of what happens to religion in America, and what we learn about America from how we practice our various religions here.

That is simply because most Americans are religious. They believe in God; they pray; they practice a religion; they explain what happens in their lives by appeal to God's will and word and work, and they form their ideal for the American nation by reference to the teachings of religion: "one nation, under God." This statement, from the Pledge of Allegiance, really describes how most Americans view our country. Americans act on their religious beliefs. Nearly all—upward of 92.5%—profess belief in God. A majority prays daily and weekly. A majority of Christians goes to church every week; nearly all Jews observe the Passover festival and most keep the Days of Awe (New Year, Day of

Atonement) and other religious celebrations. Religiosity is a fundamental trait of the American people and has been from the very beginning.

Most of the religions of the world are practiced in America. About 60% of the American people are Protestants (among them, 19% Baptists, 8% Methodists, 5% Lutherans, and the other 28% divided among many groups). Another 26% are Roman Catholics. About 2.5% are Jews, most of them practicing Judaism. Somewhat fewer than 1% practice Hinduism, and the same proportion, Buddhism. Only 7.5% of the American people profess no religion at all. It follows that we cannot understand America without making some sense of its diverse religious life. The marvel of America is its capacity to give a home to nearly every religion in the world, and the will of the American people to get along with one another, given the rich mixture of religions that flourish here. This book presents not only the better-known religions of America, Christianity and Judaism, but also the religious world of Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanic or Latin-American Americans, as well as the old religions newly arrived in this country, such as Islam (0.5% of the American people), Hinduism, and Buddhism.

Religion played a fundamental role in America's development by Europeans. The eastern part of this country was settled by people from Great Britain as an act of religion. The Southwest was founded by people from Spain and Latin America as an act of religion. Virginia and Massachusetts were founded by Protestants; Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California, by Roman Catholics. Other Roman Catholics, coming from Quebec, founded the first European settlements in the Midwest. New England is the creation of British Puritans from East Anglia; Virginia and the Chesapeake area, of British Anglicans (Episcopalians); Pennsylvania and New Jersey, British Quakers; and the Appalachian South, from West Virginia and western Pennsylvania south through Piedmont North and South Carolina, was established by British Presbyterians from the area around the Irish Sea, the border regions of Scotland and Northern England, and the Irish counties of Ulster, in particular.

The first European settlements in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California were established by Roman Catholic missionaries and soldiers coming north from Mexico, who wanted to bring Christianity to the native peoples. Many of the place-names in the American southwest were given by Hispanic pioneers who acted in the name of Jesus Christ

and the Roman Catholic faith. The earliest European explorers and settlers in the Midwest, from Detroit to New Orleans, were Roman Catholic missionaries and traders from Quebec, in French Canada.

From colonial times onward, many groups that joined in the adventure of building the American nation brought with them their religious hopes and founded in this country a particularly American expression of religions from all parts of the world: Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. Entire American states and regions took shape because of religiously motivated groups, the Latter Day Saints ("Mormons") establishment of Utah and the intermountain West being one outstanding example. So ours is a fundamentally religious nation in which nearly every living religion is now represented in a significant way.

It is common to think of America as basically a Christian country because different forms of Christianity have predominated through America's history and have defined much of its culture and society. The vast majority of Americans who are religious—and that means most of us—are Christian. Is America therefore a Christian country? Yes, but not only Christian. To be a true American, one can hold another religion or no religion at all. The first religions of America were those of the Native Americans. And, while Protestant and Roman Catholic Christianity laid the foundations of American society, America had a Jewish community from nearly the beginning, the first synagogues dating back to the mid-seventeenth century. Today this country has become the meeting place for nearly all the living religions of the world, with the Zoroastrian, Shinto, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu religions well represented. Various religious groups from the Caribbean and from Africa and Latin America likewise flourish. Virtually every religion in the world is practiced by some Americans.

America is different, and we shall learn that Judaism in America is different from Judaism as it has ever been known, and as it is practiced everywhere else in the world today. The American difference is important to all America's religions. Other countries have difficulty dealing with more than a single skin color ("race"), or with more than a single religion or ethnic group, and modern nations split because of ethnic and religious differences. But America holds together because of the American ideal that anyone, of any race, creed, color, language, religion, gender or sexual orientation, or country of origin, can become a good

American under this nation's Constitution and Bill of Rights, its political institutions and social ideals. And while religions separate people from one another, shared religious attitudes, belief in God for instance, unite people as well.

America is different because—along with Native Americans—it has always been a land of immigrants. From its very beginning, but especially in the years since World War II, America has attracted people from everywhere. Today the great religious traditions of the world flourish in America, and many of them have become distinctively American. That brings us to the ancient and enduring faith of eternal Israel, the religion presented in the Torah, which the world calls Judaism.

Now to the thesis of this book in particular. By appeal to the character of American society and its reading of religion, I propose to explain the anomalies and ambiguities of Judaism as practiced in America. Religion answers urgent questions. Religion's answers find a hearing through their power to invoke the response. This is self-evidently true. Self-evidence is always social: we all know, we all concur. Then the answer matches the question, and religion governs the everyday. Therefore—with the perfect fit between answer and question—what the books say, the people do. Religion not only persuades; through the power of its truth it compels when the faithful hear the truth and recognize its self-evidence. But if the questions do not press, elegant answers go to waste. Truth competes not with falsehood but irrelevance. Answers no one needs, while true, prove self-evidently beside the point of life. So to ask, Why this, not that? we find out first what question is answered, and then find, among the answers that are heard, the common denominator.

That presents us with our theory, why this (which is heard, among the truths of the faith), not that (left in desuetude, among the same truths of the same faith). When we know what the books say—meaning in this case, the message of the liturgy and the meaning of the observance—we can identify the answer that is given. From the answer, we reconstruct the question that is answered. And from the streets and pews we assess what people hear. The sum of answers that find a hearing then derives from what the people do.

Let me state at the very outset the message of this book: Why this, not that? The rites of the Judaism actually practiced have in common

a single trait: their focus on the individual, inclusive of the family. The rites of the received Judaism that for the generality of Jewry do not work speak to a whole society, or to civilization, to nation or people. The corporate community, doing things together and all at once, conducts worship as service. The corporate community celebrates and commemorates events in the world of creation, revelation, and redemption. Sabbaths and festivals focus upon the corporate life of Israel—a social entity. The words that people say on these occasions do not speak to many Jews. It is not because of lack of faith, but the absence of corporate experience of such a nature that would render plausible what is otherwise incredible.

For where people can refer comparable words to shared experience, namely, at home and with their families, working their way through life guided by rites of passage, their experience corresponds to the words they say, and they are changed by those words and want to be so changed by them. The individual rites of passage celebrating family, such as circumcision and marriage; and the rites that focus upon the individual and his or her existence, such as the Days of Awe, retain enormous power to move people. What speaks to the family on Passover—the home rite of the banquet—and moreover addresses the situation that the individual or family identifies as pertinent—resentment and remission—that component of Passover enjoys nearly universal response. The banquet symbol—matzah—imposes its spell, so that people who through the year and on Passover do not keep the dietary taboos do give up bread for the week and eat only matzah. At the same time, the synagogues on Passover contain plenty of empty seats. In my judgment, therefore, words work to make very private and personal worlds. Words do not work to create a corporate world of all Israel. In this collective denial of the public and the communal, the “we” gives way in favor of the “I,” and that is what accounts for what people do and also for what they ignore.

The method of this book is simple. First we listen to the answer, then recover the question, of the rite. Only then, having taken up the contents, may we seek an explanation in the larger context of contemporary Judaism and so explain why this, not that. The same theory that tells us why people do one thing also explains why they do not do some other. So to ask the question: What basic theory, framed in the heart and soul of the religious life of Judaism, will explain the popularity of

(for example) the Passover seder, which nearly everyone observes, and the neglect of the Sabbath, which nearly no one observes, and what moves people on the New Year and Day of Atonement, but not on the Festival of Tabernacles, following soon afterward? That question requires us to pay close attention to the liturgy. In this book the liturgy conveys what the books say, and the statistics of popular observance or lack of the same, what the people do.

Now, what the people do or believe may fall short of what the books say, or it may exceed the official norm, or it may just differ. But books rarely describe religions as the faithful believe in and practice them, and one can't gain knowledge of religion merely from books. How do we make sense of that fact? What do we learn about religion in today's world from the fact that believers negotiate, compromise, play the angles, and otherwise seem to know the difference between what God commands and what (in the framework of the faith to be sure) God will settle for.

Now the issue does not emerge when we contemplate our own religions. Jews who practice Judaism also know what (in their view) makes them "good Jews," and where they cross the line; Catholics know the self-evident rules that distinguish the normal from the fanatic; and even Mormons know when to laugh. But when we want to make sense of religion as we see it, our attention is drawn from what we know to what we need to understand, which is religions of other people: religion in general. How are we to proceed to follow the negotiations that guide the faithful—any group of faithful—across the gap between what the books tell them and what they choose to believe and do?

Here an analogy will serve to set forth both the problem and its solution. Studying about a religion other than our own is like learning a foreign language. We know one language, so we use that as a metaphor for all others; our American language provides the analogies that guide us in learning even utterly different languages. Any American who has studied French in books and spoken French in Paris knows the puzzle of studying Judaism in books and trying to make sense of Judaism in the workaday world—or Buddhism, or Hinduism, or Shinto, Tao, Islam, "native American religion," "the religions of Africa," "primitive religion," not to mention the religion of the Unification Church, the Mormons, Christian Science, the Catholics if we're Protestants, the Southern Baptists if we're Episcopalians, the Evangelicals if we're United Church,