The Spiritual Transformation of Jews Who Become Orthodox by Roberta G. Sands (review)

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The Spiritual Transformation of Jews Who Become Orthodox, by Roberta G. Sands, argues that the transformation of Jews who become Orthodox, both religiously and spiritually, is “all-embracing, protracted, open-ended”—that, in short, it is perpetually ongoing and always in process (2). The challenge of the volume, and one that Sands admirably meets, is its focus on spirituality and spiritual transformation—how to speak about it, evaluate it, and in some sense measure it. Existing scholarship tends to focus on less elusive features of the journeys of Jews who shift from more secular to more religious, such as language, education, and the adoption of religious practices and mitzvoth. Another distinctive feature of the book, one that builds on the author’s professional training in social work, is its use of psychosocial developmental theory in identifying and analyzing the different stages and challenges facing baalei teshuvah throughout their transformation, a new and innovative approach to the subject matter. The result is a cogent, informative, engaging study that contributes in original and interesting ways to the field.

The Spiritual Transformation of Jews Who Become Orthodox implements a constructivist grounded theory research approach. The data comes from “individual interviews, focus group meetings, and key informant interviews—with no overlap in participants in each of these activities (22).” Data collection took place over the course of three years; the interviews took place in three East Coast metropolitan areas. Forty-eight individuals ages 31 to 58 participated, half of whom identify as men, half of whom as women. The vast majority of the participants are actively employed and have spouses who share similar religious histories. The volume is organized around the process that those who commit to a spiritual transformation experience. The first chapter describes their backgrounds and early experiences, with special attention to early considerations of spirituality and religion and how these impacted their spiritual development. The second and third chapters focus on the various stages of the baalei teshuvah experience—exploration, transitioning, religious reversals or pauses, commitment—and then consider the correlation of psychosocial development to the process of becoming religiously committed. Chapters Four and Five examine the persistent differences that mark those who identify as baalei teshuvah, such as knowledge and experiential deficits and how those are addressed, and marriage and child rearing, especially decisions around education for their children. Chapter Five also considers the relationship—often tense—between baalei teshuvah and their families of origin. Chapter Six examines challenges and struggles that impact spirituality and faith, including infertility,
illness, personal or familial problems, and a lasting affinity to secular values such as feminism. Chapters Seven and Eight focus on the process of social and psychological integration and the challenges of incorporating spiritual practices into daily life. The final chapter emphasizes that becoming Orthodox means the adoption of a new community, a new set of practices, a new sense of self, themselves, and a new relationship with spirituality and faith. The act of “becoming” is ongoing, fed by spiritual struggles and the process of integration.

While the largely chronological organization of the book makes good sense when considering a process that has a fairly defined point of origin and then a marked passage towards Orthodoxy, it does come at a cost. Reflection on complex and nuanced topics that surface at different points in the transformation process are not considered holistically, but rather only as part of stages. One topic that appears briefly at multiple points throughout the study but is not considered in greater depth is gender and relationships to authority. This missed opportunity is a product of the book’s dedication to a methodology that consistently presses forward through stages of development as opposed to reflecting on interwoven commonalities of different stages. Sands does take care to reference gender, but given the rich research and the profound role of gender in both personal and Orthodox identity, more could be done. Chapter 4, for example, includes a discussion of spiritual guidance. Spiritual mentors serve “as teachers and exemplars” for the participants in the study. In reviewing statements from participants, what emerges is that male participants view their relationship with their mentors, almost exclusively (male) rabbis, as parental. Women, however, are mentored by a network of people, some of whom are (male) rabbis, but most of whom are women. Their mentors are the product of social and friend networks and are examples of peer mentorship rather than the more authoritarian model experienced by men. Sands makes two crucial points about these mentor relationships, both hinging on gender. First, the mentor relationship is “a significant early adult development experience for men, but less common and significant for women” (111). Second, “Several women spoke of wishing they had had a special rabbi who could guide them; instead, they obtained advice from a variety of people” (114). A fascinating and complex interplay between gender and authority is at work here that in some ways moves against the grain of traditional assumptions of authority—male baalei teshuvah are the children in the parental relationships with rabbis—and in some ways amplify it. Precisely that role, and even that metaphor, promote a sense of inclusion, belonging, and relational affiliation denied women.
The Spiritual Transformation of Jews Who Become Orthodox is unique in its efforts to capture, measure, and analyze the experience of spiritual-religious change within a specific population of the Jewish community. This seemingly unquantifiable objective is admirably met through the successful implementation of psychosocial developmental theories. The acknowledgement that the process of transformation never, in fact, ends, is striking—and the research here illuminates this process and a sense of its infinitude with clarity and surety. The work bears significantly on the study of Jewish orthodoxies and—the truest sign of its value—will fuel further research and inquiry.

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German-born and Harvard-educated American Jewish philosopher Horace Meyer Kallen is best known for introducing the influential concept of cultural pluralism in the early decades of the twentieth century, and it is a theory which continues to resonate to this day. Kallen maintained that diverse immigrants and minority groups cultivated their own social spaces and that they interacted to create an inclusive, ever-changing American overarching culture. In Horace Kallen in the Heartland, Michael C. Steiner, a professor emeritus of American Studies at California State, argues persuasively that the seven, often restless, years that Kallen spent in the Midwest, a “matrix of cultural pluralism,” played a pivotal, although often overlooked role in the development and maturation of his thought on the subject (2). In fact, Steiner maintains that Kallen’s sojourn in the Midwest (1911–1918), including his visits to Chicago and his stint at the University of Wisconsin, “ensured that Kallen’s sweeping theory reached full expression” in that region (73). Steiner asserts that it was there that the crucial finishing touches were added and that Kallen’s essential message contained a clear warning against the “forces of uniformity and tyranny” (2).

Steiner clearly admires what he refers to as the expansive vision reflected in the work of Kallen and the other thought leaders he interacted with who came into his intellectual orbit during his time in the Midwest.