



Is there a future for Liberal Judaism in America?

IF YOU are looking for a book about American Jewry which will challenge you to think out of the box and perhaps even be a little bit hopeful about their future, then the book *Tikkun Ha'am/Repairing Our People: Reimagining Liberal Judaism in America* by a distinguished American Reform rabbi may be just the one for you. But you will have to be ready to be provoked a little bit (or a lot) and to think more creatively than you usually do about the condition of non-Orthodox Jews in America in our time.

The writer, Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin, is a now “retired” rabbi who devotes himself full time to teaching and writing. By now, he has become an accomplished writer – this is his eleventh book! He is also a well-known speaker, as he has served as a scholar-in-residence all over North America.

He has become particularly well known in the non-Jewish world as well through his now famous (or infamous) column for Religion News Service (RNS), known as “Martini Judaism: for those who want to be shaken and stirred.” He definitely shakes a good cocktail

in each posting! Each one is thoughtful and often provocative. He likes to draw people into thinking differently than they usually do about their condition as Diaspora Jews in a rapidly changing environment. In fact, many of the chapters in this book were originally published on this platform.

This book represents nearly 50 years of this author’s “intellectual activism” (his term):

It emerges from the mind and soul of a Reform rabbi and author, who has sometimes felt homeless and in exile from the accepted truths and norms of his community, and who has dared to imagine something different, and who has committed those dreams to the printed word.

For Salkin, this book is an “extended mediation on the prospects for non-Orthodox Judaism” in America. Despite how bad the situation appears to be, he endeavors to dream of a better future, one that will require much more intensive thinking and action on the part of American Jewish leadership.

Most of the book was written before the events of October 7, 2023 in Israel, but the

author did write an introduction two weeks after the massacres by Hamas on that day. This soul-searching introductory essay is an important contribution to the literature of Diaspora Jewish responses to this historic event, with which we are still grappling every day. In this introduction, Salkin reaches some very far-reaching conclusions about American Jewry in the post-October 7 world:

- *More than ever before, American Jews appreciate the centrality of Israel and Zionism to the Jewish people.*
- *More than ever before, American Jews feel that they are part of a people.*
- *American Jews are trying to discern the balance between universalism (caring for all people) and particularism (prioritizing the Jewish people).*
- *American Jews are encountering antisemitism and understanding it more deeply*

These are very important statements by an experienced American Reform rabbi and one of the leading Zionist rabbis in the Reform movement today. While I disagree with most

of these conclusions, I understand where he is coming from and respect his ability to state his views clearly and forthrightly.

For example, I would question whether American Jews are appreciating Zionism so much these days. In contrast, I would argue that most of them haven't the foggiest idea of what it is all about, not historically and certainly not in the contemporary context. Moreover, more and more young Jews don't understand Israel at all, and mistake Israel for its government. Also, many of them see Israel's policies against the Palestinians as deeply destructive and unethical.

Is it really the case that more and more non-Orthodox Jews see themselves as part of the Jewish people? I am doubtful. It seems to me that more and more of them are totally assimilated, with very poor Jewish education and very minimal Jewish identification, and very little consciousness that they are part of a people.

Similarly, non-Orthodox American Jews have become overwhelming universalists. They think that Judaism is only about social justice. Salkin would like to see them balance their universalism with some particularism, especially vis-à-vis identification with Israel in its hour of need (once again). But, as he acknowledges in several of the essays of the book, the facts speak against his desire for American Jews to return to Jewish peoplehood. For example, in one of his best essays in the book, he brings to bear some of the major conclusions of the Pew report on Jewish Americans from 2020:

- *American Jews report diminished ties to Judaism.*
- *American non-Orthodox Jews feel decreased ties to the Jewish people.*
- *American non-Orthodox Jews feel less responsibility for helping Jews around the world.*
- *American non-Orthodox Jews report shrinking emotional ties with Israel.*

Salkin knows these facts very well. Nevertheless, he seeks to imagine a different future for American Jews:

I write about that which the vast majority of American Jews have lost, and I point to that which we might find again. I take a long hard look at Reform Judaism, though



Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin

my questions will be applicable to much of non-Orthodoxy. I hope that we can reclaim a counter-cultural narrative for modern Judaism. I long for a Jewish moral and religious language that is natively Jewish and non-apologetic... I believe that non-Orthodox Jews and their leaders would do well to reexamine their assumptions about the Liberal Jewish project in America. I wish to inculcate a spirit of question-

ing, even iconoclasm, within my readers... I intend my writings to be provocative but not hostile, to express a sense of creative maladjustment, that sense that something is not quite right in the world and in Judaism itself.

I must admit that I like this approach very much. I like Salkin's spirit of questioning. I like his sense of creativity, his searching for new ways to reclaim Jewish identity in a highly assimilated American atmosphere. And I appreciate his attempts to be optimistic, even if I do not agree with his conclusions.

One of the major issues that Salkin discusses in many chapters of this book is the poor Jewish education that most liberal American Jews receive. For example, he states:

Many non-Orthodox Jewish parents have abdicated their responsibility to raise literate, committed and connected Jewish young people, and to adequately partner with the Jewish community in reaching that goal... I and my colleagues in synagogue life failed them. We failed to convince Jewish parents that Jewish education in the teen years was crucial for their kids' Jewish identity, and for their ability to stand up to the intellectual and moral rot that they would encounter on campus.

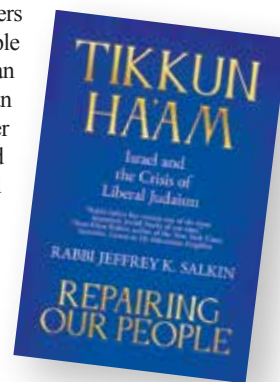
I agree with Salkin on this and would take this a step further. The parents who have chosen Reform Judaism for themselves and their children have selected a form of minimalist Judaism on purpose because their American identity is so much more important to them. They – and their rabbis and teachers – have exposed their children to a totally inadequate Jewish education, which not only does not prepare them for discussions about religion, Zionism or anything else when they get to the university but gives them hardly any useful tools for Jewish learning and living later in life.

One other issue that Salkin raises in this book is particularly provocative. He identifies himself as a “tribal Jew” and tries to explain why. He tries to convince the reader that being part of the tribe is a good quality, not a pejorative one:

Perhaps the fear is not that Jews will be “tribal”. It is that they will be tribalistic... Being tribal? Connected? Passionate? Sharing a language, rituals, culture, stories, literature, tunes? I embrace it... but I reject tribalistic, arrogant, insular, self-absorbed. Especially because the notion of being tribalistic implies that it is good enough to simply be Jewish, as if there is some kind of precious ontological prize for a mere identity. An identity without content, substance and worldview is hollow.

Salkin makes an important point here for American Jews, but I wonder if “tribe” is the best word or concept. In contrast, so much of Jewry in Israel is “tribal,” but it has not made them more ethical or peace-loving. Jews in Israel could probably use a large dose of universalism from their American Jewish brothers and sisters. If I was trying to seek a balance between universalism and particularism for American Jews, which Salkin believes is important, I don't think that I would want them to be more “tribal.”

Salkin provokes the reader to ask questions and to think carefully. He is well aware that the situation of liberal American Jews is not a good one, but he refuses to despair. In his writing and his rabbinate, he continues to prod Jews to avoid false dichotomies, to let them know that you can be American and Jewish, that you can care for your fellow Jews as members of the same people and that you can care for human beings who suffer in America and around the world as well. For this, he is to be applauded. ■



**TIKKUN HA'AM,
REPAIRING OUR PEOPLE:
Israel and the Crisis of Liberal Judaism**

Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin, 2024.

A Wicked Son book
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