

## Speaking of Jews: Rabbis, Intellectuals, and the Creation of an American Public Identity

By *Lili Corwin Berman*

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009, 266 pp., (Including 59 pages of notes, a select bibliography, and index). ISBN 9780520256 811.

*Speaking of Jews* chronicles how Jews explained themselves to non-Jews in the United States from World War I through the Civil Rights era. The basic thesis is that in considering how to talk about being Jewish to non-Jews, the Jews were also searching to find a definition for themselves as to what exactly it meant to be Jewish in contemporary America. Lila Corwin Berman, therefore, focuses on non-Orthodox Jews, because their lives are not principally focused on following the precepts of religious law, to the relative exclusion of secular society. Her study relates to the overwhelming majority of Jews in America, who wish to be thoroughly involved and integrated into American society.

Berman begins her analysis by focusing on the manner in which Reform rabbis and leaders of the Jewish Chautauqua Society, an organization formed in 1893 whose mission is “to provide knowledge and education about Jews and Judaism, to bring about an appreciation of the Jewish people, their history, religion, and culture, and to build bridges of understanding between peoples of all faiths and cultures.” ([http://nftb.org/national\\_programs/jcs.shtml](http://nftb.org/national_programs/jcs.shtml), accessed September 15, 2010). They viewed Judaism as the basis for American values. The dilemma for the Jews was how to justify their existence without having the explanation undermine the continued existence of a separate people. Jewish missionaries and Chautauqua activists placed

Judaism at the center of modern day ethics and formulated it as a guide for Jews and all people wishing to adopt democratic principles. Rituals and religious practices were downplayed inasmuch as they separated Jews from the larger society. Berman points out that the emphasis on ethics as an argument for acceptance could have set the stage for the demise of the Jews as a separate people. Instead, this group advocated that being Jewish and being American were defined as almost one and the same. The fact is, though, that the Jews were not accepted as equals, and the negative experience they underwent as a non-Christian minority in the United States ensured their continuity as a separate entity.

Following this very perceptive analysis, Berman then moves to the heart of her book, and talks about how Jews utilized the social sciences, and in particular, sociology, to help define Jewish existence in the United States. The basic argument is that Jewish sociologists studied and discussed the role of Jews as part of an American ethnic pattern that sought to categorize the Jewish experience in universal and American terms. The upshot is that Jews had a legitimate place in American society as a separate, but equal group. The independent existence of the Jews was based on sociological Jewishness—a central concept of the book - meaning the manner in which Jewish patterns and behaviors distinguish Jews from non-Jews. Berman focuses on this impor-

tant idea throughout the book and discusses the problematics of such a formulation of Jewish identity, as the sociological basis for Jewish existence as a separate group undergoes change over time. Indeed, it can disappear completely. The issue of intermarriage for Jews is particularly relevant to this as it becomes difficult if not impossible to justify a preference for endogamy once the basis of sociological Jewishness breaks down. That is to say that when there is really little religious or social distinction between Jews and non-Jews, how does one frame a preference for in-marriage as a legitimate claim? This is an issue that American Jewry has to grapple with, and, as Berman discusses quite thoroughly, it has led the Reform and Conservative denominations to reconsider their definitions of Jewishness and how to reach out to non-Jews and to welcome religious converts.

Lila Corwin Berman's study is a very insightful analysis of how Jews in the United States react to their environment and seek to be accepted as equals. In her very significant contribution to understanding the construction of Jewish identity in the

United States, she points out constantly how the explanations that Jews give to their non-Jewish neighbors become an important element in their definition of Jewishness for themselves. Such a process can be expected to take place for other religious groups and in other societies as well, and it is for this reason that the value of this book extends beyond the specific case it studies. For example, in recent years Muslims in the United States and in Europe have had to explain their religion in an environment that is at times quite hostile to them. This volume sensitizes us to the analysis that can be done to inquire whether the definition of Islam undergoes change in light of the explanations given to non-Muslim neighbors. Berman also provides us with an interesting theoretical basis for undertaking a comparative study of Jews (and members of other religions) in various societies, to see how explanations affect religious definitions and lead the same religious movements to develop variations in form and content in different societies.

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## Archaeology of Religions, Cultures and Their Beliefs in Worldwide Context

By *Sharon R. Steadman*

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The archaeology of religion has generated increased interest among social scientists involved in the scientific study of religion. Sharon Steadman recognizes that most of the cultures discussed in this interesting text did not recognize the existence

of "religion." It is largely Western intellectuals who have sought to elevate "religion" as a phenomenon of human society in need of clarification by social scientists. However, Steadman rightly explores the world views of ancient cultures insofar as they overlap