

Lightstone, Jack N. and Frederick B. Bird, with Simcha Fishbane, Victor Levin, Marc P. Lalonde, Louise Mayer and Madeleine McBrearty. *Ritual and Ethnic Identity: A Comparative Study of the Social Meaning of Liturgical Ritual in Synagogues*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 1995. vii+224pp.

Lightstone, Bird and associates (former graduate students apparently) take the reader to Shabbat services in six Montreal synagogues. In each place they ask, "What is this congregation saying about itself in its adaptation of a common ritual tradition?"

The theoretical and methodological tools for addressing this question are developed by Lightstone and Bird in the three chapters which make up the first section of the book. Bird brings to the work his background as an experienced ethnographer who has in previous work used a wide range of social science to explain what is taking place during ritual performance. As the word "performance" suggests, for Bird the most helpful literature is that which approaches ritual as communication. While he acknowledges that rituals have social functions, they also have scripts which communicate a variety of different types of messages—explicit and implicit—reinforced by settings which embody parallel messages. Lightstone brings his expertise as a scholar of classical and modern Judaism. He approaches the contemporary performance of congregational worship by stressing the tension which most social scientists find among contemporary Jews—they are heirs to a religious tradition which does not reflect the social reality in which most of them live. When they do not abandon religious tradition altogether, they perform its rituals in ways which allow the tradition to speak to their own life experiences. God and Torah remain, Lightstone argues, but are no longer central. Instead "peoplehood" stands at the center of contemporary Judaism. The unsystematized religion of peoplehood exists mainly outside the synagogue. Israel, Holocaust Remembrance, "Jewish community" and "Jewish family" are foci for the various sacred

beliefs and practices of the religion of Jewish peoplehood. What goes on in the synagogue will somehow speak to this larger “conversation” among Jews about what they hold sacred and the practices these commitments require of them.

Using these perspectives, the detailed analyses in the second section of the book address the Shabbat services at a Reconstructionist, a Reform, a Sephardi, an Orthodox, and a “traditional” Conservative congregation. The data are broadly comparable, but not exactly the same. In each case, the setting, the ritual script and its enactment are analyzed. Additional information sets the script in context—information about the outlook and tensions within the branch of Judaism to which the congregation belongs or about the particular history of the congregation. Two chapters in a final section develop the link between family and congregation with studies of bar mitzvah and of mourning practices in an Orthodox congregation. In the last chapter, Bird uses comparative Christian and Jewish data to relate the study of family rituals to the study of congregational rituals. At one point he suggests that congregational worship might be usefully viewed, from the perspective of the participants, as a family ritual, with similar structural and functional properties. While Bird doesn’t put it this way, the family ritual approach provides another level of analysis about the interlocking set of domains that Lightstone argues are part of the Jewish religion of peoplehood—“family” is set into “community” (which is partially embodied in a congregation) and “communities” are the units of “the Jewish people.”

While Lightstone and Bird write of their congregations as Canadian ones, there is little discussion of distinctive aspects of Canadian Judaism. A study of this kind in an American city would most likely use a Conservative congregation which is much less traditional than the one studied in Montreal. It is debatable whether there would be any other substantive differences. Since the literature on Judaism in Canada is sparse, the case studies of different types of congregations make a significant contribution by documenting and interpreting important

differences. It is the interpretation of findings, however, that makes the major contribution of *Ritual and Ethnic Identity*. While the interpretation makes sense in the Canadian context, it is developed with reference to the literature on the broader contemporary transformation of Jewish identity and Judaism, and is an insightful addition to that literature.

The research reported in *Ritual and Ethnic Identity* gives a different point of entry into the study of the role of Judaism in contemporary Jewish life than most of what is now in the literature. Since Sklare and Greenblum's publication of *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier* in 1967, survey researchers have charted the ritual practices of various groups of Jews. Cumulative data from many studies are now quite detailed and these questions have become a standard in Jewish demographic surveys. To the extent that social science data are used in scholarly and communal discussion about the current state of Judaism, the questions usually asked are concerned with the meaning of these statistical indicators.

Sklare and Greenblum, however, also devoted much of their text to the synagogues of the community they studied. These institutions are the custodians and formal interpreters of ritual observance, and a significant point of reference for the decisions that Jews make about ritual. While historians have done much work on the outlooks of the various movements with which most synagogues are affiliated, subsequent social science research has paid little attention to how congregations mediate between the ideologies of the movements and the needs that members bring with their decisions to affiliate and participate. Even in those studies which gather data in a congregational setting—as do a number in the collections edited by Goldberg, Zenner and Kugelmass—the congregations themselves and the meaning of their ritual performances are rarely examined. *Ritual and Ethnic Identity* makes an important contribution by clearly showing how the performance of communal worship communicates the understandings that congregations belonging to different movements have of themselves and the understand-

ings that those attending have of their participation. The one other study which comes closest to this kind of analysis is Frida Furman's *Beyond Yiddishkeit: the Construction of American Jewish Identity*.

There are more ethnographic studies which examine, as do the two chapters by Fishbane in *Ritual and Ethnic Identity*, the links between family and congregation. Understanding synagogue worship as a family ritual, as Bird suggests, would allow future researchers to examine the ways in which family systems process synagogue worship and relate (or fail to relate) it to the family system's values and norms.

Similarly, focusing on the congregation as a link between the family and what Lightstone refers to as "the religion of Jewish peoplehood" suggests research on what might be called "the family strategies" of congregations. Those of us with experience of congregational committees and boards know that congregations spend a great deal of their time discussing, implementing and often waiving policies about family demands on the congregation. Families often live together as Jews with the tensions and uncertainties that Lightstone points to and with other tensions that are part of contemporary family life. They bring their unresolved tensions into congregational life, making complex and sometimes difficult demands. Yet they do come, because the congregation is one of their links to those things that are sacred to them.

The ways in which congregations, as institutions, mediate between the culture of the family system and the transformations of Jewish religious life are only partially addressed in the existing literature. This encounter between family, congregation and religious change, however, may be one of the most important issues to study in order to understand both contemporary Jewish identity and the contemporary synagogue. Lightstone, Bird and associates clarify issues in this encounter and demonstrate that an appropriate methodology can be perceptively used to explore how a congregation communicates its adaptation of Jewish tradition. The two chapters in *Ritual and Ethnic Identity* on the

relationship between congregation and family are tentative indicators of an additional type of future research.

*Ritual and Ethnic Identity* is a carefully done, thoughtful, clear, and theoretically sophisticated study. By placing a set of detailed observations in the context of a central issue of contemporary Jewish life it successfully relates the specific to the general. It is a welcome addition to the literature on the contemporary synagogue and contemporary Jewish identity. It is an excellent source to give to outsiders who want to understand the meaning to the participants of what is going on in a synagogue, and it allows insiders who are not accustomed to ethnographic analysis to see the familiar in new ways. Its methodological explicitness serves as a useful model, inviting further research which would complement the studies of these congregations with others, and research which would develop further the theoretical issues the analysis raises.

#### REFERENCES

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**Stuart Schoenfeld**  
**York University**