

Rachel B. Gross, *Beyond the Synagogue: Jewish Nostalgia as Religious Practice* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), pp. 272.

by *Dario Miccoli*

The field of Jewish Heritage Studies is nowadays growing significantly and has already resulted into interesting research that discusses the intersection between heritage, memory and ethno-religious identity in different national contexts. In *Beyond the Synagogue*, Rachel B. Gross offers an original account of how contemporary American Jews are reshaping their Jewishness and enlarging—or, perhaps, revising—the meaning and place of Judaism through different practices and experiences of nostalgia. Nostalgia is indeed the core category around which the book is based, and is understood by Gross as a quintessentially modern concept that, as opposed to what some scholars have contended, is not always kitschy or “merely reductive; it can also be productive” (p. 28), and whose analysis, in this case, contributes to enlighten the American Jewish lived religion. Complementing historical studies on American Jewry—for instance, Eric L. Goldstein’s *The Price of Whiteness* (2006)—Gross’s book shows how this diverse ethno-religious group has inscribed its complex past inside the American melting pot, while at the same time retaining many of its specificities. Thus, she investigates public spaces such as former synagogues, museums, as well as genealogical societies and aspects of everyday life and material culture, like food and restaurants, children’s books and toys, that deal with an (Ashkenazi) American Jewish past that has been—and continues to be—remembered and reinvented. The choice of the sources is probably one of the most fascinating aspects of the book, as it shows the potential of studying too often underestimated “things,” to be found beyond the institutional archive and *Beyond the Synagogue*—as the title says.

The introduction and first chapter provide readers with a useful discussion of nostalgia against the background of Jewish Studies, suggesting that since at least the 1960s American Jewish nostalgia flourished and led to a redefinition of what it means to be Jewish: particularly, the author discusses the consolidation of a new kind of Jewish religion connected not so much or not exclusively to normative rituals and beliefs, but to “commonplace personal practices and feelings that are

mediated and standardized by certain material institutions” (p. 18). Even though this does not mean that more standard definitions of Judaism cease to apply, Gross convincingly argues that disciplines such as genealogy—that is at the core of Chapter Two—represent for their practitioners a “hobby, commitment, or mitzvah” (p. 43). Moreover, researching and writing about one’s family history, even in the form of a blog or a Facebook post, is also an intimate commemorative act that complements the work conducted by historians or in places like Holocaust museums.

The third chapter is dedicated to historic synagogues as heritage sites. The use of former synagogues as heritage and tourist attractions is of course not unique to the US: think, for instance, of eastern Europe, or the many synagogues that are nowadays utilised not (only) as places of worship, but as tourist attractions in Italy, Spain or in places like Morocco and Egypt. The author focuses mainly on the Eldridge Street synagogue in New York, but also takes into consideration other cases like the Touro synagogue of Newport and the Vilna Shul of Boston. On this basis, Gross argues that these spaces convey a particular quest for authenticity on the one hand, and an “elegiac nostalgia” (p. 115) on the other—that, in turn, represents the figure of the eastern European Jewish immigrant as a paradigm for American immigration. In these synagogues, narratives of life and death are combined and made part of a larger story of multiculturalism that appeals both to Jewish and non-Jewish Americans.

In the fourth chapter, Gross goes on to discuss children’s books that deal with the Jewish past in the US or in the (imagined) European worlds to which American Jews feel connected. As a case-study, the author analyses in particular the PJ Library, an organisation that since 2005 publishes and distributes Jewish books for children and young adults. In addition to this, the chapter looks at playthings like dolls. Children’s books and toys are presented as objects that teach American Jewish children “nostalgia for Eastern European Jewish immigrants as practice of American Jewish religion and American civic religion more broadly” (p. 155), constructing what can be defined a “palatable American multiculturalism” (Ibid.). Food and cookery, and the deli as one of the most iconic spaces where Jewish food is cooked and consumed, are the subject of Chapter Five. Looking at restaurants, cookery books and recipes, and stories of gastronomic entrepreneurship that aim to creatively reinvent Jewish cuisine—especially in New York—Gross investigates

examples of “campy and ironic nostalgia” (p. 188), showing the importance of food as something that reconnects Jews to their past and helps them celebrate it and transmit it in the present.

Beyond the Synagogue forces its readers to rethink the definitions of Jewishness and Judaism, taking them to “the new places and new communal practices where American Jewish religion is thriving” (p. 190). The author acknowledges that understanding nostalgic practices as religious might be at odds with normative definitions of Judaism, but also explains in quite a convincing manner the need to go beyond “the scholarly division between Judaism and Jewishness and [...] ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ ” (p. 28). Therefore, even though Judaism, conceived in this way, may risk losing part of its normative meanings, it perhaps gains new ones more in tune with today’s American Jews, and that ultimately constitute “an alternate [...] way of being Jewish” (p. 38). Given the focus on mainstream (i.e. Ashkenazi) American Jewish identity, Sephardi history and heritage—to which a minority of American Jews feel attached—goes almost unnoticed in the book. Gross also refrains from comparisons with European Jewish or Israeli processes of heritagisation that, even though different, are nonetheless part of a same global heritage and nostalgic revival. I am thinking here of the new approach found in studies by Ruth Ellen Gruber, Erica Lehrer, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett for what concerns the European Jewish context, and of Pierre Sintès, Marie-Pierre Ulloa, Susan Miller and others in the case of the Jews of the Sephardi and Islamic worlds. That said, *Beyond the Synagogue* is a very carefully researched and timely volume that enriches our knowledge of American Jewishness, also offering a template for rethinking the ways in which we understand ordinary (Jewish) objects and places against the background of an undeniably “nostalgic” world.

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