

Is the Jewish deli the new synagogue?

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Left: "Beyond the Synagogue"; right: Rachel B. Gross (Courtesy)

(New York Jewish Week via JTA) — Are sociologists and communal leaders looking for American Judaism in all the wrong places?

Rachel B. Gross argues that too many community studies and their authors see Judaism in decline because they measure synagogue attendance, ritual observance and other traditional behaviors and “fail to see it flourishing in unconventional religious institutions like museums and restaurants.”

In her new book, “Beyond the Synagogue: Jewish Nostalgia as Religious Practice” (NYU Press), Gross examines four areas in which Jews are finding “religious meaning and experience ... in seemingly non-religious settings”: in genealogical research, in Jewish museums, in the Jewish culinary revival movement and in the children’s books sent out to young families by the nonprofit PJ Library.

All four areas celebrate the American, Ashkenazi, immigrant experience using nostalgia to cultivate Jews who are “creatively exploring and expanding American Jewish religious life while productively, lovingly, and yearningly engaging with its past.”

Gross, assistant professor and John & Marcia Goldman Chair in American Jewish studies at San Francisco State University, spoke to The Jewish Week from her home in San Francisco. This interview was edited for length and clarity.

Let me start by saying this is maybe my favorite topic, and even when I disagree with you there is nothing I'd rather talk about than American Jewish material culture and popular religion. With that said: Your book is arguing against one way of thinking about Jewishness and religion and making a case for another way of thinking.

I am. I'm arguing against a bunch of things. One is a really narrow understanding of American Jewish religion tied to legacy institutions like synagogues, federations and JCCs. Thinking narrowly about Jewish religion, especially as synagogue services, has led American Jewish community leaders and some scholars to see American Jewish religion in decline. And I, building on the work of many scholars in religious studies, see religion really broadly. I think about religion as things that are meaningful to people and that place people in meaningful conversations with their community, and things that establish really sacred relationships between people, the divine and ancestors — a whole range of sacred relationships and networks. And when we think about religion that way, it lets us broaden our scope and see American Jewish religion as thriving in places that American Jewish community leaders have not largely focused on. In fact, we start to see new kinds of Jewish community leaders as well.

Let's talk about one of those places: the Museum at Eldridge Street, a landmark synagogue on the Lower East Side that was preserved as a museum starting in 1986. How does the museum provide the meanings, relationships and community in the ways that you describe?

It was the first synagogue building built from the ground up by Eastern European Jewish immigrants on the Lower East Side. There's still a congregation that meets in this building. It's a fabulously grand building. It's got a very small congregation that continues to meet there. But it operates primarily as a museum, and other people have tended to look at this kind of space and say, well, because it's a small congregation that dwindled over the course of the 20th century and since it's a museum, clearly religion is disappearing.

And I said, well, what is actually going on when this space is being used as a museum? Well, we've got staff members and volunteers and visitors who create a community here based on meaningful relationships with each other and with the history of this place. Some of those relationships are longstanding and enduring, and some of them might be brief or the visitors might just pop in for a moment. But people have a really deep and emotional relationship with this space and they are being taught how to feel a particular way. And I think that this emotion is best understood as religion, and I think that it's best understood as nostalgia for a really particular narrative of American Jewish history. That feeling is really important and we should take seriously the ways that Jews create, promote and teach this narrative.

Nostalgia often has negative connotations. I'll just put my cards on the table and say I worry that nostalgia looks back to some golden age of Jewish life instead of saying, you know what, this is how we build Jewish meaning at the moment.

I think about nostalgia as a sentimental longing for an irrevocable past. It's a particular kind of emotional relationship with the past. And one of the many things I'm arguing against in this book is seeing nostalgia only as a negative thing. First of all, having an emotional relationship to the past does provide meaning in the present, and it can create community in the present. If we all have a shared way of feeling about the past, that's going to connect us in the present. It's going to provide meaning on the individual level, on the family level, and on a kind of broader community level.

Thinking about the past and really feeling it helps us articulate our values for the future as well. I don't think it's only backwards looking.

But Eldridge Street is literally a museum. It's a building that hosts lifecycle events like weddings and b'nai mitzvah, but it's not a congregation that creates communities of children and couples and elders and mourners.

First of all, the folks who work in museums and scholars in museum studies have long argued that museums are sites of living and ongoing community. These *are* places where we find community because they're explicitly places where we tell our stories, and we can enact what it means to be an American Jew. As you pointed out, they host lifecycle events. But I don't think that's a byproduct. These are perfect places where we can engage our story, where we can articulate our story, on an individual, family and community level — whether it's going on a tour or having a lifecycle event.

And maybe lifecycle events aren't the only way to be a Jew or measure being a Jew. I'm a humanities scholar, and humanities scholars often push back against social scientists. That's a productive disagreement and we keep each other in check. I'm pushing back on the ways that social scientists have measured American Jews, which has played a huge role in the ways that American Jews fund themselves and organize themselves and think about themselves. I've seen very few of these studies ask, How often have you been to a museum exhibit? It seems to be one of the few things that American Jews do across denominational affiliation, and that's what I'm looking at.

You examine the people who are finding deep meaning in American Jewish cuisine, from the New Jewish Food Movement to artisanal, Jewish-style delis. The classic critique from the social science side is that “bagels-and-lox Judaism” is the ultimate symbol of a sentimental, shallow connection with Jewishness. How are the people in your study finding meaning in ways that are much “thicker” and more meaningful than they've been given credit for?

I honestly never understood that critique about “bagel-and-lox Jews.” A huge part of Jewish identity across the board is engaging with food because food is a way that humans create communities and tell their stories. The idea that food is only important for Jews who are not otherwise engaged in Jewish life seems like a silly dichotomy. The concern, of course, is that people who aren’t going to synagogue are only going to delis. One of the things I’m pointing out is that they’re often doing other things as well — you might be going to a deli and you might be going to a museum and engaging in different forms of Jewish culture.

In studying artisanal Jewish delis and what I call the Jewish culinary revival, I primarily focus on the restaurateurs and the production side. These folks are looking at the Jewish food establishment — traditional Jewish delis — and saying, “These don’t reflect our values. We want to bring in our values of sustainability and a focus on local foods. We feel these as Jewish issues and we want to update the deli and engage in that emotional connection to the past, but explicitly bring in our values for the present and for the future.”

That’s such a good example of the way that nostalgia can be forward thinking. They are doing this work explicitly through creating an emotional and tangible connection to the past.

A huge part of Jewish identity across the board is engaging with food because food is a way that humans create communities and tell their stories.

As for their patrons: For a lot of American Jews, going into a deli and thinking about all the times that they’ve gone to a deli with their family, or thinking about the food that their grandmother made — that can be a really important moment. Important Jewish religious moments aren’t just the ones that are big and heralded. These everyday moments make up the meaningful parts of our lives.

And yet these delis are commercial ventures. Isn’t the beauty of religion that it’s somehow divorced from the imperative of the marketplace? Although even as I say that, I know you

have to fundraise to get a shul built or charge for membership.

Everything depends on money and, in fact, everything depends on material culture, which is the academic term for stuff. I think it's a mistake to think of religion as "higher things" divorced from the material world in which we live. I'm interested in how religion works in real people's real lives. And that's through commerce and that's through material goods. We're physical beings in a physical world.

You are critical of the way "continuity" has been used by social scientists and communal leaders, who too often measure Jewish "success" and meaning in terms of fertility and inmarriage. But that doesn't mean people — like me, for instance — aren't genuinely concerned about what their children will do as Jews, and their children after them. Are the people in your four areas of exploration thinking about how their way of being Jewish is being passed on to another generation?

Look, I think the American Jewish community is endlessly creative. That's what I'm arguing in this book. American Jews are creating communities in new and creative ways, and this is how we're doing it now. Each of my four case studies is explicitly about creating connections to the past, the present and teaching them to children. I looked at books distributed by PJ Library, which I think is the most important and really understudied Jewish organization out there. They're so influential because they're getting to people's really most tender intimate family moments. They explicitly want to meet you at bedtime, with your kids, and teach certain narratives to your kids, but also to you. It's about creating family structures and narratives.

PJ Library is interested both in bringing people into legacy Jewish institutions and helping them create new networks. They're telling Eastern European Jewish immigrant stories and drawing people into that story. I think that they think really carefully about ideas of continuity and they think that these stories are one way that you can

create Jewish continuity. Absolutely, these nostalgic stories are ways to pass on certain values to future generations.

Is there a distinction between religion and meaning-making? There are a lot of meaningful things we do in our lives. I get a lot of meaning from my engagement with the arts, but that feels separate from religion, which is about the sacred and the ordering of time and sharing texts and sharing rituals.

I'm comfortable with having a broad definition of religion. I'm certainly not the first scholar of American religion to do this. But I do think what I'm looking at in this book are practices that help us place ourselves in grand, sacred narratives. This story of Eastern European immigration is a grand, sacred narrative that we tell ourselves and these are practices that American Jews engage in to place themselves in that story. It's really analogous to the way American Jews tell the story of Passover, and say "I was at the Exodus," and tell each other that you should feel as if this is your story, as if you were in it.

That's what American Jews are doing with the story of Eastern European Jewish immigration. American Jews are taught how to place themselves in that narrative through the practices I enumerate.

Judaism is traditionally about obligations and distinctions. I keep kosher not only because of tradition but because it's a many-times-a-day encounter with a set of values that makes me stop and say "I'm eating this and not something else because I'm a Jew." Is that same meaning-making possible in a pastrami sandwich that you can get anywhere, or in a children's book that refers to how other people practiced Judaism on the Lower East Side, but doesn't necessarily put any other obligations on the consumer?

Even at the delis I look at that are not kosher, they say yes, these are our Jewish values, explicitly, such as respect for the earth and respect for workers and respect for animals. These are Jewish values, and they

are pairing that with a cuisine connects them to their ancestors. Engaging all these things together is, to them, a sacred obligation.

When I think about nostalgia in this book, I think it's best understood as a mitzvah. Think about the ways that American Jews use the word mitzvah. We use it to mean both a sacred commandment or obligation and a good deed. The people I'm looking at feel different types of obligations to their communities in the present and to the past and I think to the future as well.

I don't know if you even want to, but are you getting a place at those tables where Jewish leaders and communal professionals are thinking about these issues, like helping to write a population study or suggesting communal priorities?

There is increasingly a sea change in the world of Jewish social science, and they are increasingly being more attentive to the ways of studying Jews that I think are important. And I think that many of us in academic Jewish studies outside of sociology are increasingly bringing that pressure. I don't know that it's my goal to end up on a community study board. I think it's OK if not everybody agrees with me, but if I get them to think a little bit more about their everyday lives and the institutions that shaped them, I'll be happy.

Is that sea change partly or even mostly generational?

I'm 35. I tend to think generational divides are overdrawn. The people I'm looking at in this book are all ages. The ways that American Jews engage nostalgia might change over the course of their life — retirees often have more time for for genealogical research, for instance — but every case study in my book includes people of all ages.

There's an academic generational thing, which of course doesn't mean necessarily age. My generation of Jewish studies and religious studies academics is building on the important work of our predecessors and taking everyday life really seriously in new ways and asking new questions about American Jewish religion.

I love the way my colleague Marc Dollinger talks about his own work, which is to say that it is not only the job of academics to refute the generations that came before but to say, “Look, they didn’t get the full picture,” and we can contribute to the conversation in new ways.

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