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Portrait of American Jews: The Last Half of the Twentieth Century (Samuel and Althea Stroum Lectures in Jewish Studies)

Samuel C. Heilman

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Has America been a place that has preserved and protected Jewish life? Is it a place in which a Jewish future is ensured? Samuel Heilman, long-time observer of American Jewish life, grapples with these questions from a sociologist's perspective. He argues that the same conditions that have allowed Jews to live in relative security since the 1950s have also presented them with a greater challenge than did the adversity and upheaval of earlier years.

The second half of the twentieth century has been a time when American Jews have experienced a minimum of prejudice and almost all domains of life have been accessible to them, but it has also been a time of assimilation, of swelling rates of intermarriage, and of large numbers ignoring their Jewishness completely. Jews have no trouble building synagogues, but they have all sorts of trouble filling them. The quality of Jewish education is perhaps higher than ever before, and the output of Jewish scholarship is overwhelming in its scope and quality, but most American Jews receive a minimum of religious education and can neither read nor comprehend the great corpus of Jewish literature in its Hebrew (or Aramaic) original. This is a time in America when there is no shame in being a Jew, and yet fewer American Jews seem to know what being a Jew means.

How did this come to be? What does it portend for the Jewish future? This book endeavors to answer these questions by examining data gleaned from numerous sociological surveys. Heilman first discusses the decade of the fifties and the American Jewish quest for normalcy and mobility. He then details the polarization of American Jewry into active and passive elements in the sixties and seventies. Finally he looks at the eighties and nineties and the issues of Jewish survival and identity and the question of a Jewish future in America. He also considers generational variation, residential and marital patterns, institutional development (especially with regard to Jewish education), and Jewish political power and influence.

This book is part of a stocktaking that has been occurring among Jews as the century in which their residence in America was firmly established comes to an end. Grounded in empirical detail, it provides a concise yet analytic evaluation of the meaning of the many studies and surveys of the last four and a half decades. Taking a long view of American Jewry, it is one of very few books that build on specific sociological data but get beyond its detail. All those who want to know what it means and has meant to be an American Jew will find this volume of interest.

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