REVIEW ESSAY:

Jewish Wars, American Style

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Samuel G. Freedman, *Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000). 384 pp.

Having traveled across the United States during the 1990s, impelled by the "mission of bearing witness" to a tragic reality, Samuel G. Freedman, award-winning professor of journalism at Columbia University, shares with us his alarming view of the contemporary American Jewish community. That entity, he declares, is deeply fractured, "cracking apart" because of "bitter internal struggles." Indeed, he offers six case studies as evidence of an ongoing fight "for the soul of American Jewry," a veritable "civil war" between Jews, reminiscent of the horrific internecine *sinat hinam* (baseless hatred) among first-century Palestinian Jews that is said to have contributed to the destruction of the Second Temple and the loss of Jewish sovereignty. Ultimately, Freedman contends, that civil war is being fought over three issues: "What is the definition of Jewish identity? Who decides what is authentic and legitimate Judaism? And what is the Jewish compact with America?" And the intense battle over these questions

> is a struggle that pits the secularist against the believer, denomination against denomination, gender against gender, liberal against conservative, traditionalist against modernist even within each branch. It is a struggle being waged on issues ranging from conversion standards to the peace process, from land use to the role of women in worship. It is a struggle that has torn asunder families, communities, and congregations. (23)

On the surface these heady words imply a kind of Jewish communal free-for-all in which identifying Jews of all persuasions stand ready to lash out at other Jews across the full spectrum of religious, ethnic, and cultural identification. Ostensibly, that is what the core journalistic chapters of Freedman's book purport to

demonstrate, while its extensive, more historical prologue offers an interpretive perspective by which to understand these internal Jewish battles and their underlying causes. To be sure, the book is deeply thoughtful, extremely engaging, and replete with penetrating insights. Its riveting narratives, which constitute the heart of the work, sparkle with passion and poignancy and clearly articulate the clashes and their consequences. Nevertheless, *Jew vs. Jew* falls short of making its case. Building on a dubious conceptual model of American Jewish history, focusing in the main on Orthodox Jews and Judaism—hence inappropriately magnifying their role in the civil strife—ultimately it presents an unbalanced portrait and misleading explanation of Jewish communal division. Ironically, the book is hyperbolic on the one hand and too narrow on the other. Hyperbolic, because in some respects it claims too much; too narrow, because in other respects it does not say enough.

To demonstrate the fracture lines sundering Jews from each other, Freedman presents six accounts of contemporary Jews in conflict. Set in different American cities or regions, all six serve as archetype paradigms for the critical contentious hatreds engulfing American Jewry, or so Freedman would have us believe. Hence each must be read on at least two levels: as information, conveying its own slice of local reality, and as historical warning, intimating profoundly far-reaching dangers besetting the national American Jewish community.

To underscore the glories and ultimate demise of the secular American Jewish identity that flourished until the mid-1950s, Freedman recreates the ethos of Camp Kinderwelt in New York's Catskill region and the flavor of secular *Yiddishkeit* that it promoted. He explores the impact of this Labor Zionist summer camp on Sharon Levine and some of her friends, who seemed to find in it a viable Jewish identity fully consonant with American culture: a little Yiddish feeling, a little Zionist fervor, and a few utterly superficial ritual activities. By 1963, however, Sharon's last year at camp, it was clear that Kinderwelt was experiencing a slide and losing clientele. This problem had become so severe that the camp hired a religious Yemenite Jew as camp director to introduce more religious observances into the rhythm of camp life. Alas, that too did not save the camp; not only did it eventually succumb to a changing American Jewish social reality, but some of the principal protagonists in Freedman's chapter succumbed as well—to intermarriage and

assimilation. With great irony Freedman then records some of these very same folk, decades later, griping about the successful Satmar Hassidic enclave, Kiryas Joel, that in the meantime had taken successful root not two miles from where Kinderwelt once proudly stood: "Theirs [i.e., their religious lifestyle] is blossoming, ours is dead."(67) By juxtaposing the emergence of Satmar Judaism and the fading away of secular Jewishness on the same geographical landscape, Freedman boldly highlights one of the principal messages of his book: in the struggle over Jewish identity, secular Jews and Judaism have lost; the Orthodox definition, that a Jew is a Jew by religion, has won out. (71, 339)

Chapter two segues into the next hot-button issue dividing Jews—the dispute over the religious definition of who is a Jew. Freedman relates the story of a happily intermarried couple in Denver, one of whose partners was converted by an innovative interdenominational conversion committee consisting of Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative rabbis that was established in the city quietly and without much fanfare between 1977 and 1983. Initially enlivened by the ideal of saving Jewish unity in a community in which the intermarriage rate reached over 70 percent, the *bet din* (legal committee), which constituted a hopeful, path-breaking sign of interreligious cooperation, eventually unraveled. Freedman well illustrates how the religious compromises first agreed to by its three Orthodox rabbis could not be sustained and how the three men were pilloried by national Orthodox rabbinic bodies once news of this conversion process got out. No amount of lip service to the ideal concept of *klal yisrael* (Jewish unity), Freedman shows, could overcome the weight of the committee's ideological and religious differences. The Denver experiment failed, and the acrimonious debates over the religious standards of Jewish self-definition continue to haunt the American Jewish polity. Periodic Israeli political and legislative actions that impact on this question only reinforce the lines of difference separating American Jews from each other.

Jewish feminism, correcting what many believed to be theological, ethical, and ritual injustices directed at 50 percent of the Jewish population for over two millennia, did not enter the precincts of Judaism fully formed or all at once, nor did it enter without a struggle. In his third chapter Freedman traces the profound tensions precipitated by a gender equality issue set in the "Library Minyan," a

"traditional egalitarian" minyan of highly educated and Jewish-educated intellectuals and professionals in Los Angeles from 1987 to 1989. With meticulous care Freedman details the personally wrenching debates over liturgical change spawned by the actions of feminist scholar and a future leader of the Jewish feminist movement, Rachel Adler. Acting as a *shaliach tzibbur,* one day on her own and without prior ritual committee approval, she added a prayer for the matriarchs in the public recitation of the *Amidah* prayer to supplement the traditional Orthodox patriarchal passage that heretofore had been the norm for this service. The minyan of clearly committed, identifying Jews confronted the fundamental question: Can one and ought one change the traditional liturgy that had united Jews for centuries? For months the question threatened to rupture the otherwise harmonious minyan, whose members publicly wrestled with the issue. Ultimately, after much deliberation and soul-searching, the prayer was voted permissible on a voluntary basis, according to the will of the prayer leader; only one couple defected from the synagogue because of it—and joined an Orthodox synagogue.

Israel has become a terribly polarizing rather than unifying force in American Jewish life and separates Jews politically and religiously. To focus on this issue Freedman in chapter four tells the story of Orthodox Harry Shapiro of Jacksonville, Fla., during the period 1993-97. Shapiro was a kindly yet idiosyncratic, unfocused, and ultimately unsuccessful young man, whose love of Israel and of Judaism led him to a failed attempt at *aliyah* and subsequently to a not very auspicious experience as a student at Yeshiva University. Deeply impressed by a Meir Kahane speech on that campus, Shapiro found himself gravitating to the ardent right wing political ideals of Kahane and Baruch Goldstein. Suffused with anger over Arab actions against Jews and upset at the lack of appropriate Israeli responses to them, Shapiro came to revile the Israeli left and all those associated with the peace option with the Arabs, especially Israeli leaders. Freedman chillingly portrays the fount of ideas to which Shapiro and like-minded Orthodox Jewish extremists were exposed, such as those of Brooklyn's Rabbi Avraham Hecht, president of the Rabbinical Alliance of America who declared that anyone giving back Israeli land was a traitor, whose actions, if harming the Jewish people, warrant the death penalty. The denoument: Shapiro planted a bomb in the Jacksonville synagogue at which Shimon Peres was to speak—a bomb, which by Shapiro's own

design, was meant not to go off but merely to be discovered. Freedman's point: look at how misguided passion for Israel can lead to irrational hatred of one's fellow Jews.

In chapter five Freedman records events that transpired in New Haven in the late 1990s, when a group of Orthodox students at Yale University, "the Yale 5," sued the school over a policy that they claimed violated their "religious freedom and constitutional rights." The students declared that the university rule that all freshmen and sophomores live in Yale dorms—all of which were coed—forced them into compromising situations prohibited by their religious tradition. The unfolding story of the Yale 5 is set against the background of the religious evolution of Rabbi Daniel Greer, father of one of the five students and a central Orthodox rabbinic and educational leader in New Haven who over the years had changed from being a liberal modern Orthodox politico to a more right-wing observant Jew seeking a life totally absorbed by Torah for himself and his kids. Freedman utilizes this story to underline the *haredization* of Orthodoxy in America and the divisive impact this has had on Orthodox Judaism itself: many within the camp of modern Orthodox Judaism at Yale who had made peace with the Yale policy, as well as others not studying at the university, were furious at the lawsuit, interpreting it as a not-so-veiled critique of their own form of Orthodox Judaism. Freedman, moreover, uses this story as well to emphasize the remarkable potency of a more right-wing brand of Orthodoxy, secure in itself and in its values, which demands an involvement with American culture on its own terms even as it exhibits muscular disdain for that culture by fearlessly challenging the standards of one of its elite cultural institutions.

The last chapter focuses on the bitter and ugly communal struggle in the Cleveland suburb of Beachwood, Ohio, 1997–99, an area 83 percent Jewish, in which a coalition of modern Orthodox Jews and Lubavitch Hassidim sought to build an Orthodox campus in the area housing a new Young Israel synagogue, a Chabad center and *mikveh*, and a girls' school. The proposed campus polarized Jews severely: the Cleveland Jewish Federation favored the plan, as did a Beachwood Reform rabbi, publicly asserting on moral grounds the Orthodox right to build and splitting from many of his own constituents on the matter. Arguments against the Orthodox were either couched in religious terms—their religious lifestyle would change the ambience

of the neighborhood; or, in secular terms—by not sending their children to public schools, those institutions would decline in quality and impact negatively on property values. Eventually, this local communal issue had to be adjudicated by the Cleveland City Council, where the Orthodox were defeated. To Freedman, this case study poses a fundamental question: Can Jews of different religious orientations live together harmoniously or not? The battle lines drawn in Beachwood, Ohio, and replicated, but with far less intensity, in suburban communities such as New Rochelle, N.Y., Lawrence, Long Island, Teaneck, N.J., and more recently in Tenafly, N.J., suggest they cannot.

Each of these six stories stands on its own merit. With the exception of the first, each portrays a concrete flashpoint in a particular place, over a particular issue, at a particular point in time. Clearly, each demonstrates at the least Jewish group debate and division, at worst polarization and hostility. But considered collectively, do these chapters really point to a larger "struggle for the soul" of American Jewry, as Freedman avers? Is there a national civil war? And if so, is the phenomenon of Jewish disunity new? Indeed, must it be considered uniformly ominous and a grave danger to Jewish life in America? Finally, are these stories, which give disproportionate weight to the involvement of the Orthodox as contenders, truly representative of the major fault lines within American Jewry?

No one can gainsay the serious divisions within American Jewry on a whole host of issues, but many Jews are entirely oblivious to the battles Freedman brings to our attention. In fact, Jewish indifference and apathy are major characteristics typifying whole sectors of American Jewry; over 50 percent of Jews are not affiliated with a single Jewish institution. This scarcely adds up to a struggle for the Jewish soul embracing a majority of American Jews. Indeed, in the concluding sentences of his book, the author acknowledges as much, noting that while it is tragic that American Jews "have battled so bitterly, so viciously over the very meaning of being Jewish," it is perhaps even more tragic "that the only ones fighting are the only ones left who care." (359)

From the above, then, we learn that only those who care about the Jewish future and the shape it will take are those who fight over it. That is as it should be, but it is not all bad. On many levels, especially

if disagreements are "for the sake of heaven," Jews fighting with one another over basic principles, however painful and uncomfortable, may well reflect Jewish vigor, not pathology. Hence I differ with Freedman's judgment that conflicts over a gender-based liturgical insertion, failure of the Denver *bet din,* and the legal challenge of the Yale 5 constitute worrisome signs of Jewish civil war. In each instance, committed Jews acted in what they considered to be in the best interest of Judaism and Jewish life. On the other hand, it seems to me that the kinds of Jewish enmity evinced in Jacksonville and in Beachwood, which have less justification and truly smack of *sinat hinam,* ought rightly to evoke anguish and sadness. Although one ought not to delegitimate all expressions of Jewish disunity, it is equally true that one ought not to mindlessly embrace them all and their deleterious impact either.

Disunity can therefore be either healthy or unhealthy. One thing for sure, however, is that in Jewish history disunity is a persistent condition, as Freedman himself acknowledges. Indeed, he asserts that the Jewish religious-secular tension in the "golden eras" of Jews in the Hellenistic Diaspora, in Moorish Spain, and in Enlightenment Europe led to internal Jewish battles similar to those in contemporary America. (30) Why then the special *cri de coeur* over contemporary American Jewish disunity? Because unlike the above three historical examples, all of which ended with physical persecution and death to Jews imposed by hostile external forces, America, with no state church and no medieval animus against Jews to overcome, seemed to offer the grand opportunity for freely chosen Jewish self-expression and survival. And, American Jewry, especially since the massive influx of East European Jewish immigration from the 1880s on, appeared to take advantage of that opportunity by molding a secular culture, *Yiddishkeit*, steeped in an ethnic language and ethos that seemed to promise Jewish continuity, transcend Jewish divisions, yet still mesh with universal ideals. Since World War II, however, lured by American affluence and acceptance, secular Jewish identity that held the community together began to erode and helped pave the way for intra-Jewish struggles over Jewish identity and authenticity. The grand promise of America has been undermined; hence the sense of pathos that pervades this book and the author's *cri de coeur.*

I would suggest, however, that Freedman's historical model of an all-embracing *Yiddishkeit* or sense of Jewishness uniting American

Jews, or at least containing their internal communal fissures, is a limited and romanticized one. Certainly, it does not apply to nineteenth-century American Jewry, riven by Reform Jewish triumphalism, intrareligious squabbles and competing institutions, and the beginnings of "uptown" and "downtown" institutional and values wars between newly arriving immigrants and native Jews. No culture of *Yiddishkeit* mitigated early-twentieth-century ideological polemics pitting socialists, Zionists, and communists against each other, nor prevented the appearance of new competing ethnic agencies, nor stopped the vitriolic diatribes between those with differing religious understandings of Judaism, as the new seminaries of JTS and Yeshiva University emerged, together with a whole network of denominationally oriented programs and institutions. No culture of *Yiddishkeit* helped unite Jews to common policies during the eventful 1930s and 1940s, nor provided a consensus about how to approach and seek assistance from the American government while Jews were dying in Europe. Contrary to the impression left by this book, American Jews in the first half of the twentieth century were a deeply divided group—socially, economically, culturally, religiously, institutionally, and ideologically.

Freedman's conception of American Jewish reality is nevertheless necessary to fully grasp the interpretive framework within which he structures his text and selects the contents for his book. The breakup of this putative secular Jewish culture that helped keep American Jews together until recently is, in Freedman's account, one of two essential preconditions that have led to the current Jewish civil war. The other is the unexpected revival of a triumphal, self-sufficient, and increasingly separatist Orthodox Judaism from the 1960s on. Buffeted first by American acceptance and material advancement and then confronted by the challenge of a vibrant, antithetical value system of Orthodoxy, secular Jewishness as an identity collapsed. (39) The battle lines over Jewish identity changed; being Jewish and how to be Jewish became the subject of religious controversy among religious denominations. Orthodoxy, with its zealous uncompromising attitude to modernity, claimed sole religious authenticity and consequently, Freedman asserts, put the other denominations on the defensive. (71)

This interpretive perspective explains much. First, it helps makes sense of the author's startling and historically tendentious claim—otherwise completely incomprehensible to the student of American

Jewish history—that "if one had to date the beginning of the current struggle over American Jewish identity, then it might well be Passover eve in 1941," when East European separatist Rabbi Aaron Kotler arrived. Soon thereafter he founded the Lakewood Yeshiva, and he and his institution became the spiritual progenitors of an uncompromising Orthodoxy that reasserted Torah supremacy over all contemporary culture. (37ff) Rabbi Kotler's upbuilding of Orthodox Judaism on American shores concretely, symbolically, and proleptically both stimulated and signaled the ultimate demise of secular *Yiddishkeit*, Freedman declares. At the same time, insisting on Orthodox Judaism's religious supremacy, he, his supporters, and his colleagues stirred the abiding resentment of other religious expressions of Judaism whose adoption of American cultural values and behavior seemed to make them less authentic.

Second, it helps us understand Freedman's selection of the six stories that embody examples of Jewish discord. True, each is intrinsically dramatic and serves as excellent fodder for presentation and evaluation. But do these stories truly reflect the full range of the splits within American Jewry? Orthodoxy, to put it mildly, is greatly over-represented. One can imagine equally compelling tales of conflict emerging from within other sectors of Jewry and Judaism on some of the very same issues covered by Freedman. One can also point to other highly important confrontational issues not dealt with by this text that do not involve the Orthodox as prime participants. Therefore one must query: Is the contemporary American Jewish division over Israel and its policies, for example, truly revealed by focusing on a troubled Orthodox Jewish extremist? (chapter 4) True, Orthodox Jews tend to be more hawkish on Israel, but should an account of the American Jewish rifts on Israel not also include other non-Orthodox Jews who similarly demur from the peace proposals? Should not a discussion of the Zionist Organization of America and its president's views, which have agitated many in public polemics in the press, be noted? What about the innumerable antagonistic debates on American Jewish responses to Israel within the umbrella coalition of the Conference of Presidents of Major Organizations? What about the decidedly non-Orthodox Jewish Institute of National Security Affairs and its repudiation of current Israeli peace overtures? Or what about Reform Jews who have left Reform Judaism because they judged their erstwhile religious movement to be but synonymous with liberal

Democratic politics, on Israel and other issues?

Then, too, is the question of who is a Jew, which most assuredly divides Jews who care about the Jewish future, best served only by looking at the failed Denver conversion committee. (chapter 2) Or should not a chapter also have been devoted to the internal Reform clashes over redefining Jews in accordance with patrilineal descent, or to a discussion of the reason for this whole initiative, a spiraling intermarriage rate? Could not an informed chapter have been written outlining the vitriolic Conservative—not only Orthodox—response to that Reform move? Further, is serious internal debate within a religious denomination (chapter 5 on the Yale 5) restricted to Orthodoxy? Ought we not also to learn about the terribly fractious, bitter, and as yet unresolved debates within Conservative Judaism over homosexuality and its possible place in Judaism? And finally, is it really true that secular Jewishness, allegedly supplanted by religious identity, is dead? (Prologue; chapter 1) What of the vast numbers of Jews who are not religiously affiliated? What of the widespread expressions of secular Jewishness that still endure and, for some, thrive? What of the vast network of Jewish federations and the like, whether defined as civil Judaism or not, which offer so many contemporary American Jews an ethnic, rather than religious identity?

No matter how Freedman might argue that he is merely dispassionately reporting what he sees, it is hard to avoid the impression from the tone and selected content of the text that "no Orthodox Judaism, no civil war." Indeed, one can plausibly ask why he repeatedly declares that the "Orthodox" stress on religious identity for Jews has won out—have Reform and Conservative Judaism not equally insisted on Judaism as the core of Jewish identity? Despite his disclaimer in a recent Jewish periodical interview that "one of the most important things I've learned is that you can't reduce these disputes to simple Orthodox vs. non-Orthodox," (*The Jewish Week*, September 8, 2000, 64), which is most assuredly true, the thrust of much of his book, perhaps unwittingly, does not quite live up to this pronouncement.

Let me offer an alternative explanatory model in which to frame a discussion of contemporary American Jewish struggles. American Jews have negotiated the existential dilemma of synthesizing an American Jewish identity from the earliest days of their arrival on this continent. Their many solutions to the question can be placed on a spectrum of behavioral patterns, from conversion at one extreme to

religious isolation and social separation on the other, with many differentiated American Jewish symbioses along the lines of the spectrum in between. In the course of American Jewish history Jews have fought vigorously with each other—from the pulpit, in the press, and from the organizational mantle—over whose version of American Jewish identity is the most authentic and the most traditional, whose is the most modern and most viable. They have also battled each other over whether the fundamental pole of Jewish identity is and ought to be religion or ethnicity. Denominational Jews have argued vociferously with one another and with secularists, while denominational and secular Jews have quarreled bitterly with each other from within their respective religious and secular camps.

The novelty therefore lies not in the fractious struggle over Jewish identity, which has a long history in the American Jewish context, and which cannot be said to begin with 1941. Instead, it lies in the perception of who is currently winning the debate: the Orthodox. That is what is so unique about the current situation when contrasted to the last one hundred fifty years and what has led the Orthodox to be perceived as having more authority than they actually do. Orthodox Jews and Judaism may lay claim to whatever they like about Jewish identity and proper Jewish living. But if they were not perceived as strong and hegemonic by the non-Orthodox—more importantly, if the non-Orthodox were more fully self-confident in their own versions of Jewish identity and lifestyle—then Orthodox affirmations would be less threatening and their impact on American Jewish life would seem less disruptive than it appears in Freedman's book. Why indeed should the vast majority of American Jews care about the thoughts and opinions of a group that comprises at best 6 to 12 percent of American Jewry? Little attention was paid to them for most of the century, even though Orthodox Jewish leaders did not refrain from enunciating their triumphal claim to sole religious legitimacy; few were concerned when pundits and prognosticators in the 1950s predicted Orthodoxy's dissolution. The fact is that Orthodox Judaism has put other forms of Jewish identification on the defensive not merely because of its air of authenticity due to its uncompromising stance vis-à-vis modernity (71), but rather because on every and any index measuring strength of Jewish identity, the Orthodox win hands down: Jewish education, ritual behavior, synagogue participation, percentage of charity given, ties to Israel, diminished rates of

intermarriage, and fertility. These factors explain and reflect the much-vaunted Orthodox institutional revival and cultural elan. Hence the inferiority complex many non-Orthodox feel; hence the feeling of being victimized by Orthodox demands for certain standards of Jewish living. Freedman cites Rabbi Joshua Aaronson, the Reform rabbi in Beachwood, Ohio, who allowed as much in a Yom Kippur sermon:

> The ignorance of progressive Jews impedes our efforts to work with Orthodox Jews as true partners. Progressive Jews suffer from a self-fulfilling inferiority complex that could be erased through the most fundamental of Jewish enterprises: Talmud Torah….Orthodox Jews do not take us seriously because of our ignorance. Our ignorance does not justify the animus of the Orthodox nor our second-class status. However, we must acknowledge the validity of the Orthodox claim that we are in the main illiterate Jews. (342)

So, even if one were to grant the existence of an unprecedented struggle for the soul of American Jewry, as Freedman proposes, and even if one acknowledges—as one must—that Orthodox demands do precipitate communal friction and discomfort at times, it is nevertheless incorrect for the author to insinuate that Orthodox Jews and Judaism are the primary combatants in a current Jewish civil war. The more apt historical appraisal and paradigm is that the Orthodox are doing precisely what all Jews have done in American Jewish life:pursuing their own version of being Jewish and American, and competing with contrary visions. At this point in time—and there are no guarantees for the future (the Orthodox, even the more right-wing branches, confront a host of their own social, religious, cultural, and economic difficulties)—they are riding a crest of self-confidence and realizing their goals more successfully than other forms of American Jewish syntheses are realizing theirs.

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