

Book Review

American JewBu: Jews, Buddhists, and Religious Change

By Emily Sigalow. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. 280 pages, ISBN 978-0-691-17459-4, hardcover, \$29.95.

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American JewBu: Jews, Buddhists, and Religious Change by Emily Sigalow fills an important gap in the study of contemporary Judaism. It has been well-noted that Jews are disproportionately represented in contemporary convert Buddhist communities across North America, but serious academic study of the subject has never been attempted. Scholarship (my own work included) has provided us with comparative work on the two religious traditions. There have also been a number of studies on historical points of contact between Judaism and Buddhism, but no one has properly explored the question of why Jews are so drawn to Buddhism today. The conversation was launched in 1994 with Roger Kamenetz's bestseller *The Jew in the Lotus*, which provided a riveting account of a historical meeting between eight rabbinic delegates and the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala. It was this book, more than any other, that brought the Jewish-Buddhist relationship to the public fore. I remember well when it first appeared on the market. I was living in Nepal at the time—a young Jewish enthusiast drawn towards Buddhism without knowing why. When I finally held a copy of *The Jew in the Lotus* in my hands, I felt less alone. The book was a kind of epiphany.

Emily Sigalow's book is therefore a welcome contribution. Building on the research of her intellectual predecessors (and Kamenetz' energy), Sigalow gives the "JewBu" phenomenon much needed academic attention.

Sigalow begins her book by considering some of the key Jewish players in the early history of American convert Buddhism, starting with Charles Strauss, who took refuge on stage after the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, under Anagarika Dhammapala's supervision. She traces a trajectory through the Beat Generation (with Alan Ginsberg as its forerunner) and into the present (with famous Jewish teachers like Joseph Goldstein, Ram Dass, Jack Kornfield, and Pema Chodron). Unfortunately, she fails to consider one of the Canadian greats in this category: the poet, singer, and Montreal legend, Leonard Cohen. This omission aside (as a

Montrealer, it is difficult not to take offense), Sigalow provides us with a wonderful history, that has gone unrecognized until now.

In the second half of the book, Sigalow presents the results of her ethnographic work, considering in particular some of the explanations contemporary Jewish Buddhists cite for their relationship to Buddhism. She clearly parcels out a number of themes that emerge from her interviews and ultimately concludes that these relationships cannot be isolated from the cultural context in which they arise. By tackling the question, “why Buddhism *specifically?*”, Sigalow identifies a number of cultural factors that make Buddhism more accessible (and perhaps more appealing) to a Jewish American audience.

To begin, Sigalow argues that the social location of Jews in America fits well with the way Buddhism has been translated into American culture. She understands this Jewish social location as being a distinctively “left-liberal, urban, secular and upper-middle class religious minority in the United States” (4). This makes Jews particularly well suited to a philosophical, secularized Buddhism. As she notes, most early Jewish Buddhist teachers focused on meditation and mindfulness. When Jews engaged with Buddhism, they were therefore not swapping one god (or one religion) for another but were focused instead on developing a contemplative technique. This married well with universalistic ideas about spirituality that were taking root in Jewish American communities at the time. As Sigalow explains, “by viewing their Buddhist practices as ‘spiritual,’ and evoking the universality of spirituality, [these Jewish Buddhists] could claim that meditation existed as extra-Buddhist or as not in the province of any one religious tradition” (135).

Sigalow also points to another important factor making Buddhism more appealing to American liberal Jews: the fact that Buddhism has no real history of anti-Semitism. Buddhism is therefore experienced as safe by Jews. A conversion to Christianity would be viewed as a specific kind of betrayal in the Jewish community, but a switch to Buddhism, a tradition that has never expressed systematic hostility towards Jews, is much easier to take.

Sigalow explores features of the Jewish Buddhist phenomenon intelligently and critically, but she does not consider the question of why Jews may be looking outside Judaism in the first place. In her closing chapter, Sigalow notes that Buddhists do not express interest in Judaism the way Jews do in Buddhism, making this a largely one-way relationship (for now; she suggests that this might change in the future with the increasing number of Asian-Jewish intermarriages). The question she is therefore concerned with is why Jews gravitate toward Buddhism. The one answer I think she misses is this: because being Jewish is hard and a way out is appealing.

As mentioned above, Sigalow focuses her attention on Jews who fit the social location of educated, liberal, and mostly secularized. These are the Jews who are likely to wander into a Buddhist center. Obviously, Hasidic Jews are not (or are much less likely to). The Hasidic social location, if we can be simplistic for a moment, is much more conservative and much less educated (insofar as universities go—Talmudic study is something else entirely). Liberal Jews are, therefore, more likely to explore outside their religion.

Judaism is a rich and formidable tradition, but being Jewish can be painful. Sometimes it can be devastating. The Jews of the 20th century who carved out this JewBu reality were primarily of European descent, with a long trail of pogroms and a holocaust behind them. They then migrated to a Christian majority country (the United States of America) where they became a minority once more. Many of these Jewish Buddhists eventually became comfortable, affluent, and educated, gaining a sense of privilege and license to explore in ways that Hasidic Jews (by way of comparison) would likely never dare.

Sigalow's research demonstrates that most Jews, no matter how invested they become in Buddhist practice, maintain some form of Jewish identity. Most of her subjects do not reject their Judaism. Indeed, she notes that, for many Jewish Buddhists, their Judaism is deemed ultimately choiceless for them. It is claimed as part of who they are, stitched into the fabric of their being, thus associating Judaism with a kind of "genetic essentialism" (154).

This is a fascinating point. If Judaism is not a choice, then it is not an identity that can be threatened by Buddhist meditation, which explains why so many of her subjects do not feel that their Buddhism creates a problem for them. But, no matter how Jewish Sigalow's respondents might feel themselves to be, it bears noting that these Jewish Buddhists are not *visibly* Jewish anymore. They do not associate with Jewish groups or find themselves in prominent Jewish gatherings on a regular basis, nor do they wear distinctively Jewish ritual clothing. Their Judaism has become marginalized, with Buddhism taking its place.

Buddhism is undoubtedly a much easier hat to wear in America. It is romanticised, idealized, rationalised. Is it not possible that some of these Jewish Buddhists have gravitated there to give themselves distance from an identity that is often painful to embody? The Jews interviewed by Sigalow have not swapped one challenging identity for another. On the contrary, they have swapped something painful (often hated) for something admired. How many times have I received beatific smiles when my Buddhism becomes apparent? I have rarely received the same response for my Judaism. The Jews Sigalow is interested in have chosen an easier social path to tread.

Sigalow never considers the weight of identity as a possible explanation for the migration of so many liberal Jews toward Buddhism. She does not even raise the question. She does not ask her subjects if they ever found their Jewish identity a burden, or if they have found it easier to travel with a different title. I suspect that if she *had* asked these questions, she may have found herself with a much more challenging conversation on her hands.

That being said, Sigalow's book is an important contribution. She provides us with a history and a discussion of a phenomenon that many are aware of, but that few have considered. Her book will be required reading for "JewBus", especially if they have an interest in contextualizing themselves within a larger social reality, but should also be taken seriously by scholars of both contemporary Judaism and contemporary Buddhism.

References

Kamenetz, Roger. 1994. *The Jew in the Lotus*. San Francisco: Harper Press.