

Empowered Judaism, 1956 Edition

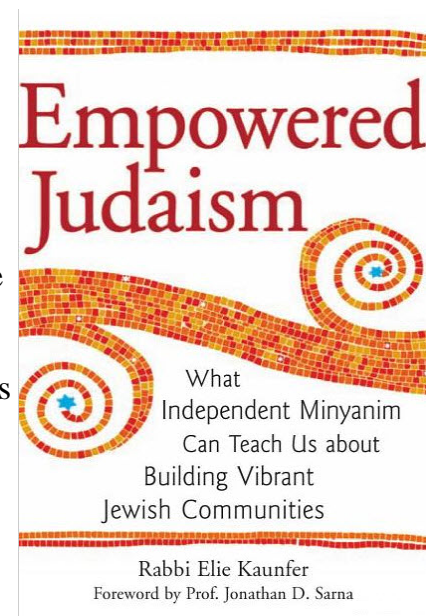
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This month's **newsletter and Reader's Guide** will feature religious denominations other than the big three. Among the authors featured in that guide will be Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, one of the founders of **Mechon Hadar**, an institution on the forefront of the independent minyan movement (I mean, emphatically non-movement!).

Rabbi Kaunfer is also the author of *Empowered Judaism: What Independent Minyanim Can Teach Us about Building Vibrant Jewish Communities*. To his credit, Rabbi Kaunfer recognizes that the approach he advocates is not actually new. "[T]his book is about a vision of Jewish life in the twenty-first century and the opportunity we have of bringing that vision to fruition," he writes (page 1). "In this vision, the future of Jewish life is dependent on Jews--not just rabbis--taking hold of the rich, challenging, surprising, and inspiring heritage that makes up our texts and traditions. It is not about a new 'big idea' or innovation for its own sake, but a recognition that the big ideas in Judaism were laid out clearly by our ancestors thousands of years ago."

In this installment of the J-Vault, we see that similar calls to renew Jewish lay empowerment, rethink synagogue institutions and communal prayer, and reconsider the nature of the rabbinate, can also be found in the world of the mid-20th-century Jewish institutional world--a milieu usually criticized for being stilted and thin in substance. But voices of dissent, of course, challenged the community to aspire to more.



From the J-Vault: *The Jewish Community and the Synagogue in Perspective* (1956)

"I am less impressed by the thousands of students in the Sunday schools, the magnificence of the facilities, and the pageants," said **Judah J. Shapiro**, "than by the sterility of curricula and the limited time spent by the child at the school." Shapiro was speaking at the 1956 annual meeting of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service. Excerpts:

The rabbi in eastern Europe existed in an informed, and frequently learned, Jewish community... in the eastern European Jewish community, the average Jew had learned sufficiently to know what was expected of him as a Jew and could answer most of his questions out of his own learning... because of his learning, the layman knew at what point to turn to the rabbi

who then delved and pondered and was in turn, checked and perhaps corrected by the layman in defining a position. Compare this with our own situation!

Rabbi [Emanuel] Rackman adds weight to this description when he says: "Rabbis derive their authority as interpreters of the law from the people, but this authority can only be conferred by a public literate enough to recognize who is worthy of it. " How many people affiliated with the synagogue are able to deal with the questions of practice and observance on their own, without the directive of the rabbi? How many know when to ask a question?...

[T]he synagogue has become the cover of ignorance, for once affiliated, the individual is no longer questioned on Jewish identification and no longer requires the thoughts and convictions that must be derived only out of understanding...

In Chelm, it is told, the inhabitants realized how difficult it was to search for something lost in the dark. Accustomed to deal with all problems that presented themselves, they finally decided to hang a large sign on the synagogue, boldly illuminated at night, on which was inscribed in big letters: "All searching done here." In this way, when anyone lost something in the dark at night, he found it much more comfortable to do his seeking by the light of the synagogue. I fear that our synagogues here are not assisting the individual members with the resources and tools to face the questions which arise in the home and in the office and on the street but rather call out, " All searching done here, in the synagogue." There the rabbi sits with the answers. Our problem in this area is to give the Jew the Jewish resources and outlook which will permit him to function Jewishly wherever he finds himself and on whatever terms he has formulated his Jewishness...

My first point, therefore, is that there is an absence of knowledge and that the increase in enrollment in Jewish schools, in synagogue and temple affiliation, and in rabbinical direction has not, and is not a symbol of, increased Jewish knowledge...

[E]ven where the Jew knows little of Jewishness and even where he derives little learning from his synagogue affiliation, he nevertheless finds reassurance from the learning of the rabbi. The rabbi may be more or less successful in enlightening his congregants, but they associate themselves with his Jewish learning. Someone, it seems, must be actively Jewish, and if the member is not, or cannot be, he at least derives satisfaction from the paid employee who is, on his behalf...

If there is no Jewish context to any of our services, I hope that you will agree that they are not Jewish communal services. Jewish communal services are not identifiable by their service to Jews, for that makes the doctor, the psychiatrist, the barber, the theatre, the manicurist, and taxi driver a Jewish communal worker at the moment that these serve Jewish clientele. Jewish communal services are what they are called, only when they serve the Jewish client in the context of his Jewishness and on behalf of a Jewish community...

Our present American Jewish community is increasingly the product of these public schools where subtly and painlessly we have been severed from the nourishment of a previous Jewish culture. Add to this the urge to be integrated in the total society, especially strong in an immigrant group, and we can see how far we have come from a pre-dominating Jewish cultural pattern. Today, therefore, any discussion of Jewish culture invariably suggests something of the past, something irrelevant, something unknown. To mention Jewish culture is to summon up a picture of Jewishness drawn out of another social and economic context...

From the wealth of what Jewish culture can mean, we have endless resources for living Jewishly and being integrated in the whole of the society in which we find ourselves... It is the successful search of a meaning in Jewish culture that can hopefully establish such goals and values which can govern Jewish communal services by re-establishing a cultural concept of community...

Shapiro, too, by the way, affirms that "I have said nothing new in this paper".

Publication details...

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