What is an American JewBu?

Sociologist Emily Sigalow demonstrates Jewish Buddhists are not a monolithic group

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER  FEBRUARY 27, 2020 11:25

In 1893, Charles Strauss, the 41-year-old owner of one of the oldest and largest lace goods businesses in New York City, became the first convert to Buddhism in the United States. Although his parents were Jews, Strauss explained that he had not been in a synagogue more than half a dozen times in his life.

A Jew “in spirit” when Jews came under attack, he was attracted to Buddhism because without “postulating a God” it offered a “sublime ethics,” a “living force” compatible with scientific reasoning, aimed at the welfare of plants, animals and human beings. It taught compassion, self-restraint, good deeds and frugality.

In 1983, Leonard Cohen, one of many famous Buddhist Jews, accepts an award in 2012 for song lyrics. (Jessica Rinaldi/Reuters)

Although it is difficult to determine who “qualifies” as a Buddhist these days, sociologist Emily Sigalow, the executive director of the Impact and Performance

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Assessment Department at the United Jewish Appeal-Federation of New York, points out that the percentage of Jews “in Buddhist circles” is significantly higher than their share of the population of the United States.

In American JewBu, Sigalow reviews the history of Jewish-Buddhist encounters. The demographic, spiritual and successful minority “social location” of American Jews, she indicates, helps account for their attraction to Buddhism. Sigalow also explains the impact of the “meeting and mixing” of Judaism and Buddhism and the “repackaging” of meditation on the “people, organizations, discourses and practices” of both religious traditions. Drawing on archival research, field work and in-depth interviews, American JewBu is an informative study of a fascinating phenomenon.

Sigalow accepts the conventional wisdom about the reasons Jews gravitated toward Buddhism. In the first half of the 20th century, she writes, the Jewish spiritual seekers came from wealthy families. Their version of Buddhism was compatible with a modern, liberal, universalist or even secular spiritual perspective. In the 1960s and '70s, Jews played a substantial role in the transformation of Buddhism in the United States.

Dissatisfied with the highly rational and intellectual form Judaism had taken, they sought spiritual experiences with a capacity to address the stresses of everyday life. Downplaying monasticism, dogma, reverence to the Buddha and bowing practices, leaders and teachers of Jewish descent emphasized the private experience of silence and meditation, the ethical pursuit of social justice and the psychotherapeutic dimension of Buddhism.

Jewish Buddhists, Sigalow demonstrates, are not a monolithic group. Some view Buddhism as their primary meaning-making system, embracing a Tibetan cosmology, including the nature of existence and enlightenment, karmic rebirth, and meditation techniques involving visualization of deities, mantras (chanted phrases), mudras (ritual hand gestures), and mandalas (representations of enlightened worlds).

BABY-BOOMER JEWISH Buddhists often embrace their new communities because they are anti-materialist, politically liberal or radical.

Others view mindfulness and meditation as techniques to enhance their commitment to Judaism. Their meditation classes include Torah readings, chants of Jewish prayers, discussion of Jewish holidays and mystical traditions.

"Take what works from Buddhism," Shoshanna Cooper, a founding Jewish meditation teacher, told Sigalow. “Leave the rest and move on." Several respondents maintained that reframing traditional observances – like brachot (blessings) over food – as mindfulness-infused meaning into what had seemed to
be “obligatory or even senseless performances.”

Sigalow characterizes a third group as “dual belongers” who draw on as well as translate between both religious traditions. They often connect to Judaism as an ascribed identity, a system of belief and culture, usually established at birth, fixed and immutable, part of who they are and where they came from. They define Buddhism, on the other hand, as an achieved identity, a conscious choice embedded in what they do.

American JewBu reminds us that like all religions, Judaism and Buddhism are “living, moving” traditions, characterized by “flux and mixing” in response to changing historical circumstances and social conditions, and not stasis or uniformity. Acting often as influential interpreters of Buddhism in the United States, American Jews, Sigalow emphasizes, altered “the spirit and ultimate mission” of Buddhism.

The process began with a radical secularization of Buddhism. It was followed by efforts to instill within Buddhism “a socially active and psychotherapeutic ethic,” detached from most dogmas and traditions, made available for all to experience, and in a sense “whitened.” While Sigalow notes that American Buddhists have not adapted Jewish customs and observances into their practice, these efforts have also resulted in “resacralization in Jewish forms.”

Sigalow ends her book by wondering, provocatively, or perhaps puckishly, whether the increasing intermarriage between American Jews and Buddhist Asians might be followed in the 21st century by conversions to Judaism, the emergence of Buddhists as leaders and interpreters of Judaism, and/or the incorporation of Jewish observances and customs into Buddhist practices.

After all, as her book demonstrates, minority religious traditions in the United States have not adapted only by assimilating into the (Protestant) majority. They also “reconfigure themselves by borrowing and integrating elements from each other through a process shaped by their specific locations in society.”

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