THE LAST WORD ON THE JEWISH CATALOG

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THE JEWISH CATALOG. *A do-it-yourself kit compiled and edited by Richard Siegel. Michael Strassfeld and Sharon Strassfeld. Illustrated by Stu Copans. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America. 319 pp. $5.50 (paperback only)*

This magazine (may it live to be a hundred and twenty!) will probably never again have occasion to review a Jewish work of nonfiction which has enjoyed the phenomenal success of *The Jewish Catalog*. Published some eighteen months ago, the Catalog has already sold *well* over 100,000 copies, and there has not, as yet, been any sign of decline in the rate of its sales. This, it should be noted, in a field where sales of a thousand or less are not infrequent, and where anything above four or five thousand copies is considered splendid.

But in spite of its wide popularity, *The Jewish Catalog* has been only slightly understood as a publishing event, while as a serious book it has, given its enormous recognition, been virtually ignored. It has been given surprisingly little attention in the media, which is all the more surprising because it is so clearly a media event. To be sure, most Jewish newspapers have carried *something* on the Catalog, but this "coverage" has usually been restricted to a brief notice of the book's availability, and perhaps a recipe for chicken soup, or some other selection from its pages. Two or three American Jewish newspapers have taken the trouble to challenge the Catalog's blunt assertion that the Anglo-Jewish press in this country cannot be taken too seriously, but the great majority of the papers have merely confirmed the accuracy of this judgment by carrying remarkably similar accounts of the book, copied in some cases from each other, and in other instances condensed (often without credit) from Edward Fiske's story in the *New York Times* on the eve of the book's publication in November, 1973. The general press, meanwhile, has mentioned the Catalog only in passing, and not even the *N.Y. Times Book Review* has seen fit to review it. Only four or five substantial reviews have appeared, all in Jewish magazines, and all with the exception of Marshall Sklare's wrong-headed and nasty blast in *Commentary*, extremely favorable.

Apparently, the relatively limited coverage of the Catalog has in no way impeded sales; while it has all the trappings of a media event, the Catalog has been consistently overlooked or at best underplayed by the press, and has achieved its popularity by appealing directly to consumers in their local communities, clubs, or synagogues. Unlike most other events in Jewish life, the Catalog's success has not been a top-down, centralized phenomenon, originating out of New York or Jerusalem, but, on the contrary, a true grass-roots development. The process of the book's distribution says some admirable things about Jewish life in America, while raising some provocative questions about the influence of both the national media (Jewish and general) and the national Jewish organizations on the rank-and-file of the American Jewish community.

The Catalog's success resembles its creation: both are due mostly to word-of-mouth promotion, and the strength of diverse networks of interested and involved people in various communities. One such network produced the Catalog: an extended community of people, mostly in their twenties, clustered around Boston, New York, and, to a lesser extent, Washington. They are Jewishly involved and active, and for the most part have consciously remained outside of the major institutions of Jewish life, involving themselves instead in new, alternative, counter-institutions like the Jewish student press and the *chavurah* communities. This particular group was active in the formation of the Jewish student movement some five years ago; now, most of them are no longer students, although they retain leadership roles in the student movement. The three editors of the Catalog are all former members of Havurat Shalom Community in Boston, and have since become involved in similar projects in New York. Stu Copans, the illustrator, has been part of the Fabrengen Community in Washington, D.C.

As for the forty or so writers whose work comprises the Catalog, they are now spread across the continent, although many have been part of *chavurot* or similar groups in recent years. A significant minority is now part of what used to be known as The Jewish Establishment, a term which is rapidly falling into disuse at about the same rate as members of this network are joining it. Also represented in the Catalog are some highly individual and frequently dissenting voices who might have gone unheard in a more conventional anthology, and whose participation in this forum adds sparkle and character to the entire chorus.

Assembled between two covers, the forty writers form a genuinely rare community of the printed page, a community which is admirable for the way in which its members can share perspectives and values while remaining free to be themselves and maintain their individual voices. Each section of the Catalog is written by someone who is deeply and emotionally involved in a particular area, who is a devotee rather than an expert (although some are both), and who can communicate about the subject at hand in a lively and infectious manner. The result is a series of highly colorful articles, whose total effect is deeply personal without being overly idiosyncratic or restrictive, forming a forceful

and expanded partnership of ideas and practice.

But even this would not have been enough by itself, and behind the scenes there have been several facilitating agencies. The Catalog began as the brainchild of two graduate students at Brandeis's Lown Center for Contemporary Jewish Studies, who were also members of Havurat Shalom. George Savran and Richard Siegel hit upon the notion of creating a Jewish version of the influential and enormously successful *Whole Earth Catalog*; they sent out letters to friends and colleagues, and made several approaches to the established Jewish community. During the early stages, the editors appealed for assistance to two sources—The Institute for Jewish Life and Jewish Student Projects. Both agencies responded favorably to the request.

The final ingredient in this recipe for success was the Jewish Publication Society, whose image (and assets?) have been decisively transformed by the Catalog's success. The J.P.S. is one of those institutions of which we can be most proud, but it has not hitherto been known for its innovations and daring. As a non-profit concern, the J.P.S. has been understandably cautious with community funds. But during his tenure as editor, Chaim Potok injected a good deal of life into the organization, and the Catalog owes much to his vision and efforts. It was Potok who supervised its publication, turning the unformed dream into a well-designed and handsome volume. Merely accepting the manuscript for publication would not have been enough, for the Catalog's total effect depends heavily on its design and layout, which have highlighted its content and reinforced its underlying principles at every point.

So much for the publication event. As a book, the Catalog is considerably more difficult to describe. For one thing, it is an anthology written by different hands; for another, there is simply no precedent or previous point of reference to which it can be compared, despite a few bemused analogies from well-meaning readers to the Talmud or the *Shulchan Aruch*. First and foremost, *The Jewish Catalog* is a resource book consisting of ideas, instructions and commentaries on a broad range of Jewish activities, especially those concerned with the life cycle of the Jew, the calendar, various forms of religious ritual, and Jewish art and culture. Reflecting the community which created it, the Catalog is the most vivid and concrete expression of a new religious impulse in Jewish life, one which attempts to combine the hitherto mutually antagonistic modes of liberalism and traditionalism. So while it is concerned with Jewish law and with religious tradition, *The Jewish Catalog* offers a new perspective which as yet has no name, but which is clearly *not* Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist or anything else that we have known until now. It is, rather, a different kind of sensibility, whose most active proponent has been the Havurat Shalom Community, which has sought to break down the organizational structures which divide Jews and concentrate instead on finding a common ground on which to unite the varieties of Jewish belief and observance. This might best be called, for the time being, non-Orthodox religious Judaism, or, perhaps, liberal traditionalism, because it is concerned both with the tradition, and with the modern developments and influences which affect it. In this, it owes a good deal to both Conservative and Reconstructionist Judaism, but it is far less dogmatic and far more fluid than either. It is, in short, a search for authenticity that includes careful attention to traditional *halachic* formulations, but without regarding them as binding. Significant — yes; even compelling, in some cases, but not binding.

The result is a fascinating and occasionally curious mixture of traditionalism and modernity, with a juxtaposition of various religious and secular sources, ancient and modern ideas, faculty of instructors which ranges from the great traditional sages of bygone eras to the young couple down the street. Who is truly wise? asks the Talmud. The person who learns from everybody. The enactment of this noble idea may be the Catalog's greatest achievement.

Its tone, too, is unlike anything else we have seen. The vast majority of works about Judaism since the Enlightenment have assumed that any serious discussion of religion and ritual must also be solemn. The Catalog utterly rejects this idea, and represents a radical departure from the austerity and the formalism of "normative" Jewish writing. Instead, as Joel Rosenberg has suggested, it hints, perhaps inadvertently, of a return to the playfulness of some of rabbinic and midrashic literature. In the section on the *kashrut* of sea foods, there is a drawing of a fish with a puzzled expression holding up a pair of (weighing) scales, with the caption "fish with scales." My favorite moment is the drawing of a man blowing into a ram's horn in the sec-

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tion on how to make a shofar. Unfortunately, the ram is still attached, and a small child beside the man mutters: "I think we must have forgotten one step."

Like *The Whole Earth Catalog* which inspired it, this book is intended to be "a compendium of tools and resources" to be used, in this case, "in Jewish education and Jewish living in the full sense of these terms." The quotation is from the Catalog's introduction, but its full impact is difficult to grasp without reading through the entire volume, since "tools and resources" are defined rather expansively, and include the outlining of religious law in particular situations (such as *kashrut* and *Shabbat*), the reasons behind various laws, customs and practices, the presentation of illuminations and commentaries, interpretations and alternative suggestions. Even more important is that "tools and resources" are also defined literally, and the Catalog is crammed full of plans and designs for creating one's own religious materials (*tallit, sukkah, m'zzuzah, challah,* candles etc.) as well as ideas for the celebration of religiously significant occasions in the personal life-cycle and the Jewish calendar. Here, it must be said, there are unfortunate and major omissions; neither birth nor bar/bat mitzvah has been included, but these will likely be remedied in future editions.

At the heart of the Catalog's purpose is the making and acquiring of religious articles for personal use in the home, and in rituals and ceremonies which are not space-bound, and which need not be confined to the synagogue. A community whose rituals have become dead, commercialized routines cannot provide the necessary religious awareness or cultural integrity which permits full participation in the range of Jewish experience. On that premise, the Catalog goes to great lengths to provide alternatives which humanize the participants by engaging the five senses as well as the imagination, the intellect and the spiritual faculties.

And because it succeeds in this effort, *The Jewish Catalog* is a subversive document. Although not political in any overt sense, the Catalog advances, if only implicitly, some highly critical perspectives on Jewish life in America. The various sections have been written against the background of the harsh and angry critiques expressed by the Jewish student movement and its allies in the Jewish community. Without the shared critique that American Judaism was spiritually impoverished and commercial and mechanized, the Catalog could not have come into being. But it goes far beyond the critique, transforming mere dissent into a rigorous program of alternative, positive, precise and eminently feasible actions to improve the situation of Jews alienated from tradition, culture and community, not to mention religion. The Catalog's directives are subversive because they address a Jewish public unaccustomed to thinking in such physical, personal and joyful terms about Jewish life. But it is subversion of an eminently subtle and effective form; because it presents no strident manifestoes, the Catalog's genius rests in its ability to present practices which are refreshingly new (to the bulk of its readers) while at the same time establishing a continuity with the Jewish past and maintaining a reassuring tone of *normalcy* to its prescriptions.

There is another element to the subversion. As a directive for "personal responsibility and physical participation" in Jewish life, the book carries with it an inevitable attack on the religious structure of the Jewish community, and on the rabbinate in particular. Without ever saying so directly, the writers in the Catalog — several of whom are themselves young rabbis — are deeply critical of the rabbinate in America as a priestly class whose power has been in direct proportion to the degree of ignorance among the Jews each rabbi serves. The Catalog provides Jewish communities with their own store of religious and ritual knowledge, made easily accessible and informal, so that the rabbi can properly resume his traditional and rightful role of teacher. At last, the rabbi can again have students rather than ecclesiastical clients. And, to their credit, the rabbis are generally delighted with the Catalog, suggesting that the rabbinate as it has developed is no more attractive to the rabbis than to their critics.

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The Catalog's relationship to issues of *halachah* and observance is more complex. Until recently, the Orthodox establishment has had a virtual monopoly in all discussions of religious law, and although the problem in America has never approached the dimensions of the parallel tragedy in Israel, there has been precious little opportunity for non-Orthodox voices to be heard on these matters. In the Catalog, a group of people who for the most part do not consider themselves Orthodox talk intelligently and openly about *halachah* and their relationship to it. *Halachah* serves as a guide and a point of reference, but it is only one of several considerations, as this passage on the making of a *tallit* makes clear: ". . . there are no limitations as to the size, or decoration of the tallit — except for the taste, sensitivities, and personality of the person who is going to wear it. (Within this, you are free to explore the range of your creativity and imagination.) Some suggestions follow, but these are meant as guides or structures upon which you are invited to impose yourself."

There follows an extensive list of suggestions of various kinds of material and construction, including tie-dyeing, batiking and silk-screening.

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the largest and most successful adult education program that American Jewry has ever experienced. Without condescending to its readers, many of whom are obviously without much knowledge or background in Jewish matters, the Catalog offers a lively, intelligent and occasionally controversial account of Judaism which is pitched to the beginner, but which covers the entire range of sensibilities and experience so that even the expert will find new ideas and nuances here. Indicative of the book's respect for its readers is the refusal of the author of the section on *Mikveh* (ritual immersion) to recommend any book in English on the subject, because, as she announces, she has been unable to find anything on a sufficiently intelligent level. If it does not condescend, neither does the Catalog commit the other tempting sin — intimidation, and the observance of this double imperative assures the book's almost universal accessibility.

Still, there are limitations on the Catalog's effectiveness and its accessibility, limitations which derive, paradoxically, from its very strengths. The reader who is uncomfortable or unfamiliar with religious language may be puzzled or even alienated by the Catalog's frequent use of devotional terms and concepts, by its strong bias in favor of *Chassidism* and mysticism, and by the parochial orientation which derives inevitably from the common milieu of its writers. They speak of religious ideas without apology or embarrassment because they have long shared these issues with each other in a common — and often closed — language. But for some readers, the shared assumptions will prove irrelevant, or too casual, or esoteric. Others may be uncomfortable with the seriousness with which the Catalog takes both ritual law and spirituality. These problems, of course, are the other side of the Catalog's advantages; the book instructs by taking positions, by rooting itself firmly in the world-view of its writers. The Catalog's peculiarities are a challenge. Whether that challenge proves an invitation or an exclusion depends, obviously, on the reader — and that, in turn, is what makes the volume of sales the Catalog has experienced such encouraging news.

I deliberately have said little about the contents of the Catalog, in part because they are so well known and easily available. Briefly, the book is divided into the four broad areas of Space, Time, Work, and Man/Woman. Within these categories, the Catalog touches many (but by no means all) of the essential bases of Jewish life, and quite a few non-essential but intriguing ones. Although it is encylopedic in scope, the Catalog's ability to inform on every subject is obviously limited. But one of its chief services is the wide variety of sources and references to which it points. These are, in the main, valuable, but so many are out-of-print, obscure, or otherwise unavailable that the editors and publishers of the Catalog could perform a helpful service by collecting some of the less accessible recommended articles and readings into a companion volume.

Within the Catalog, there is a wide range in quality. Some of the chapters, like those on Jewish periodicals, music and film (there is nothing at all on dance), suffer from being uncertain as to how they fit into the book and what, exactly, they are supposed to accomplish. The more successful chapters tend to be those which combine abstract and physical information, and the best of these are the sections on Shabbat, Shofar, death and dying, and the section on scribal arts and calligraphy.

I was impressed most of all by Debby Lipstadt's section on travelling in the Soviet Union. Her guide is crammed with useful information, and ought to be reproduced in pamphlet form for every Jewish visitor to that country. Perhaps it should be noted that the article takes for granted that the only important aspect of a Jew's trip to the Soviet Union is the matter of contact with Soviet Jews, and Debby Lipstadt provides a wealth of good advice as to how to go about this delicate task. Her suggestions are disarmingly simply and grounded in common sense, and yet portentously indicative of the whole tragic situation of Soviet Jewry. For example, she recommends that photographers take plenty of flash bulbs because Soviet Jews may well prefer to be photographed indoors. Visitors are urged to carry address labels, which are easier than writing names and addresses on the spot, to give to Soviet Jews who may want them. To avoid hidden microphones and the writing of notes, it is a good idea to bring a child's slate which can be repeatedly written on and immediately erased. Ms. Lipstadt also writes about the usefulness of "false piety" for the visitor to the Soviet synagogue as a means of conveying to Soviet Jews that their counterparts in the West know Hebrew and are concerned with identifying as Jews. Also covered are such subjects as how to deal with official guides (firmly and stubbornly) who will imply that Jewish sites cannot be visited, and how to prepare for the questions Soviet Jews are most likely to ask.

This section is followed by a most unfortunate chapter about traveling cheaply in Israel, which is all too frank about the mutual suspicion and occasional ill-will between Americans and Israelis, while offering virtually nothing to overcome the problem. The result is a guide to taking advantage of Israelis and their hospitality. Still, even here there is some useful advice, including a facetiously genteel and understated warning to visitors that "Israeli soldiers tend to have miscon-

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ceptions about the morality of American women."

There is also a section on *aliyah*, but otherwise the state of Israel — and any discussion of Jewish peoplehood — are conspicuous by their absence. It could be argued, with some justification, that this is a book about the physical dimensions of Jewish life in America, and that there is no way that Israel can be included on this level, or that Israel is simply not part of the religious life of American Jews. But both of these suggestions are, in my view, wrong-headed in their attitudes about Jewish life in America. Certainly the Catalog is an optimistic statement about American Jewish life — a statement which borrows from America almost as much as from Judaism — and as such there is no getting around the fact that it amounts to a slap in the face for Zionism as we know it.

On the other hand, the Catalog might have included sections on how to spend a year studying, working or otherwise living in Israel, or a summer in a kibbutz or ulpan, but there is no mention of these options. It might also have given more attention to the question of *aliyah*. As it stands, that section is small, but also forthright: "There is a rabbinic saying that the land of Israel can be gained only through much difficulty and hardship. The Jewish Agency tries very hard to enable every immigrant to feel that he has participated in fulfilling this prophecy."

And so it is with particular interest that one reads the review of the Catalog in *The Jerusalem Post* by Deborah Weissman, herself a member of the extended community of *chavurah* alumni before moving to Israel. Admiring the book's conception and execution, she is nonetheless troubled by two things. First, she notes the lack of attention to "Jewish history and peoplehood, anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, non-Ashkenazic Jewish culture." What upsets Ms. Weissman even more, however, is that Israel is shortchanged throughout the book. "The authors," she writes bitterly, "seem to have been influenced by a well-known leader in the American Jewish institutional world, who is quoted as having said, 'For out of New York shall go forth the Law and the word of the Lord from Los Angeles.' "

Nobody I have met has ever heard it put that way, but the issue of the quotation's veracity is quite beside the point. Deborah Weissman is right to link the issues of peoplehood, history and Israel. One of the great limitations in the *chavurah* movement has been its tendency to ignore and devalue the physical, *soiled* aspects of Jewish life — the questions of oppression, danger, and survival, for instance — while attempting to restore those aspects of Judaism which have been ignored and undervalued by almost everybody else — religious sensibilities, for instance, and spiritual sincerity. In this latter effort, this tendency is commendable, but not if it means the putting aside of the more physical concerns. The tradition teaches us that Judaism needs both aspects to survive, and if the balance can be redressed the *chavurah* community can be a great source of guidance and inspiration to the rest of American Jewry.

If Deborah Weissman and, one assumes, most Israelis who have seen it are disappointed in the Catalog, it must also be said that most of the Catalog writers are disappointed in Israel, in its failure to provide a Jewish alternative to a mechanical, inflexible and controlling Orthodoxy which dominates, to say the least, all Judaic efforts in Israel. There is very little between Orthodoxy of this variety on the one hand, and (normative) secularism on the other.

As a Zionist in Israel, Deborah Weissman is understandably concerned about the Catalog's "total emphasis on the centrality of the U.S. geographically as well as ideologically, in contemporary Jewish life," although she probably goes too far when she suggests that this may be partly due to the possibility that "exposure to the anti-Zionist attitudes of the general culture has blinded some Jews to the deep religious meaning of Israel." Perhaps — but I suspect that the truth in this case is both less conspiratorial and less partisan than the comment suggests — even if equally challenging to the Zionist idea. The Catalog is an affirmation, bordering on a celebration, of the possibilities for creative and authentic Jewish life in the Diaspora. And it will take an entirely new kind of Zionism—as well as a broader form of Diasporism — to cope comfortably with such an attitude without undermining the unity of the Jewish people.

All in all, the Catalog amounts to the largest and most successful adult education program that American Jewry has ever experienced . . . it is an affirmation, bordering on a celebration, of the possibilities for creative and authentic Jewish life in the Diaspora.

Some of the omissions may be remedied in the second volume of the Catalog, which is now being prepared for publication sometime next year. This will be a more theoretical work, and will cover such moral and religious issues as the Holocaust, health care, sex and sexuality, *tz'dakah*, fundraising, gossip and slander, and numerous other subjects.

Finally, a word about the book's execution. The drawings by Stu Copans are generally superb; the photographs, collected from a variety of sources, are frequently compelling. The Catalog is well served by a consistently appealing design, by various type-styles, and by the repeated good use of small-type marginalia in every article. In a book which continually stresses the connection between form and content, the medium and the message exist as one. ✱