American JewBu: Jews, Buddhists, and Religious Change. By Emily Sigalow. Princeton University Press, 2019. 256 pages. $29.95 (hardcover). ISBN-13: 978-0691174594.

Leah Macinaskas-Le
Graduate Theological Union

In her book *American JewBu: Jews, Buddhists, and Religious Change*, Emily Sigalow brings an ethnographic study of self-definition into the scholarly conversation about Jews in the United States, Buddhists in the United States, and how nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first century liberal American Jews thought and think about themselves and religion. She says in her introduction, "Despite this popular and scholarly notice, we know comparatively little about the relationship between Judaism and Buddhism in the United States" (p. 3). This is to say, she acknowledges that we know, both at a popular level (she lists a number of Jewish celebrities who are also avowed Buddhists) and an academic one, that the phenomenon exists, but not how people themselves experience the phenomenon. Sigalow sets out to rectify this gap in knowledge.

The book is divided into two halves. The first half, comprising four chapters, traces Jewish-Buddhist contacts in the United States from the late nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. The second half of the book, containing three chapters and the conclusion, narrates the results of Sigalow's ethnographic studies and is divided topically rather than chronologically. Her research methods and questionnaires for leaders and lay people are included in three appendices, followed by endnotes, a bibliography, and an index.

Sigalow opens the book with a short, one-page essay, "A Note on the Spelling of *JewBu*." She says that she has chosen this moniker over alternative spellings because the younger, millennial subjects she interviewed tend to use "JewBu" the most often to describe and embrace

their "blended identity." As these young adults are necessarily the future of Jews attracted to Buddhism, she has taken their preferred label.

The introduction lays out the social and scholarly context in which Sigalow's research takes place. She credits Rodger Kamenetz's 1994 volume *The Jew in the Lotus*[1] for bringing the topic of Jewish Buddhists to the forefront of popular attention. However, she criticizes following scholarship for, in effect, theorizing ahead of data. This book is an explicit attempt to rectify that by using a sociological approach to religion as practiced and claimed by people who are living and have lived it.

Part 1 is titled "Four Periods of Jewish-Buddhist Engagement" and begins with chapter 1, "Breaking down the Barriers," which traces the "spectrum of ways" (p. 19) that American Jews encountered Buddhism between 1875 and 1923. Charles T. Strauss was "converted" on stage at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Sigalow expands on this by noting that the Buddhist conversion ceremony that was performed that day was created specifically for Strauss; prior to this, there was no such thing as a ceremony to convert a believer to Buddhism, as, for example, there are for Judaism and Christianity. This chapter depends on Sigalow's extensive archival research into primary sources for the period, including Strauss's own passport, several Jewish newspaper reports on his conversion, and other encounters between the American Jewish community and Buddhist immigrants to the United States. She also delves into various personal letters from Strauss and his own published writings on Buddhism to demonstrate that the Buddhism he and other American Jews encountered was carefully tailored for the Western world by the Asian Buddhists who taught it to them. It was a Buddhism stripped of both mysticism and the supernatural, and also largely of its ceremonies, making it a "scientific religion" for the aggressively liberal and enlightened late nineteenth century.

Chapter 2, "Buddhist Paths to Self-Discovery in the Early Twentieth Century," uses three Jewish men who converted to Buddhism to expand on the various ways Jews who were attracted to Buddhism absorbed it into their Western, liberal, upper-middle class lives. Julius Goldwater, Samuel Lewis, and William Segal all encountered Buddhism through

1. Rodger Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Re-Discovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

Japanese Zen teachers living in the United States. Zen Buddhism became to them the definitive form of Buddhism. Goldwater became a Buddhist minister in Los Angeles and was a stalwart ally to the Japanese population in California during World War 2. He also began using Protestant Christian vocabulary "in order to make it seem more legitimate and less threatening to wartime America" (p. 46). Samuel Lewis also encountered Zen Buddhism from Japanese teachers, whom Sigalow notes were "critical of the institutional forms" of Zen Buddhism in Japan (p. 47). Raised without much religious instruction, Lewis expanded Goldwater's nonsectariansim into full religious universalism, drawing on mystical Judaism and Sufi Islam as well, to preach a message that all religions led to truth. William Segal, by contrast, viewed Zen Buddhism through a Romantic lens, casting the apparently rustic "East" in positive contrast with the industrialized "West."

Chapter 3, "Jews and the Liberalization of American Buddhism," looks at the encounters between Jewish members of the counterculture movements in the United States from the 1950s to the 1970s and how they adopted and further adapted Zen and Tibetan Buddhism to the cultural moment and their sensibilities. Under the guidance of various Jewish converts in this period, Buddhism for American converts became repackaged again as a system of ethics with a strong emphasis on social justice. Sigalow here sees the first real blending of Judaism and Buddhism, attributing this new outward emphasis to a melding of the eightfold path and the Jewish concept of "practicing loving-kindness, or *gemilat hasidim*" (p. 70). This is also the period where the practice of seated meditation, particularly *vipassanā* or "insight" meditation, became the primary religious expression of Buddhism among non-Asian American converts.

Chapter 4, "Buddhism and the Creation of Contemplative Judaism," finishes off the historical survey of the twentieth century. Sigalow begins with the "Jewish Renewal" movement, which rejected "suburban" American synagogue-focused Judaism and instead created a set of Jewish practices more in harmony with the other cultural movements of the 1970s. She notes its inherent eclectic nature, drawing from Sufi and Christian mystic traditions, as well as Buddhist meditation. From there, she moves on to the "medicalization" of mediation, with John Kabat Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), pointing out that, like the ecumenical and universalist repackaging of the nineteenth century, this made Buddhism easier to digest for a non-Asian

American audience. She rounds out the chapter with mild Jewish backlash to this trajectory and a push to create or recreate a more Jewish contemplative tradition, drawn from Hasidism and Kabbalah.

Part 2, "Lived Experience of Jewish Buddhists in the United States" contains Sigalow's own ethnographic research. It begins with chapter 5, "Making Meditation Jewish." This chapter contains both Sigalow's own experience attending a Jewish meditation session and selections from her interview subjects, both teachers and practitioners. It is here that she explicitly engages syncretism, describing "Jewish meditation" as a kind of "pick and choose" religious practice, with bits from both the Jewish and Buddhist traditions included and also left out. Unlike the converts of the earlier chapters, her interview subjects identify much more closely with Judaism and are more comfortable both with Jewish tradition and non-religious "mindfulness" language. This chapter also includes photographs as examples of this picking and choosing, for example in the form of a "Jewish prayer flag," which is essentially a Tibetan prayer flag with the Buddhist symbols replaced with Jewish ones, and a Jewish meditation cushion embroidered with a Star of David.

Chapter 6, "Mapping Jewish Buddhist Spirituality," offers various categories which Sigalow's interview subjects suggested for describing their own spiritual experiences. Here she fulfills her promise to situate Jewish adaptations of Buddhism "within the historical and contemporary orbits of Judaism, Buddhism, and US religious and political life" (p. 125). She demonstrates how the social process of secularization, as well as the lack of religious and ethnic homogeneity in the US, pairs with aspects of the American spiritual landscape as various interviewees speak of Buddhism as "chosen" or "personally meaningful," as well as how they are attracted to Buddhism because either its sacred texts have been removed from the Buddhism they encountered or have been fully translated into English, in contrast with traditional Jewish texts. It is also a critique of the Judaism they have encountered as overly intellectual and restricted by its own history and texts.

In chapter 7, "Constructing a Jewish Buddhist Identity," the final chapter of ethnographic interviews, Sigalow interrogates both her interview subjects about how they see themselves, as well as popular and scholarly concepts around conversion. She sees her subjects engaging in constructive, creative work, being both Jewish and Buddhist, without, as conversion narratives generally have it, turning their backs on

the religion or culture of their birth. There are people who engage in mindfulness or Tibetan breath meditation for the Jewish sabbath or other holidays. They see their Jewishness as inherited and unchangeable, but their Buddhism as chosen and individually relevant and meaningful.

Sigalow uses her conclusion, "After 'The Jew in the Lotus,'" to both summarize her findings and look forward to the next generation of "JewBus." She includes a helpful tabulation of the various ways her interview subjects relate to their Judaism and Buddhism, showing the spectrum of commitments, choices, and identities. She also, at the very end, brings in the small but growing population of people who have moved in the opposite direction: those who were brought up Buddhist but have embraced various aspects of Judaism, and hopes that they will engage in the conversation with the researchers who come after her.

As a Jewish person reviewing this book, I noticed that Sigalow avoids and then downplays the traditional Jewish prohibition of *avodah zarah* (literally translated, "strange worship"); in practice, it means the worship of anything other than the god of the Hebrew Bible. She mentions it only in passing in chapter 6 (p. 131) and appears to prefer to avoid describing any tensions the concept might have brought up historically or in more traditional Jewish communities. For example, she notes that some Jewish communities and publications looked askance at Strauss's "conversion," but she never mentions why. She also comments that many of her historical subjects came from secular or liberal Jewish households, but again, she never elaborates on why this is important in adopting another set of religious practices. It is, however, a motivating force in Jewish adaptation and alteration of Buddhism. Her short comment in chapter 6 makes this clear. Sigalow seems to want to portray both traditions (and their merging) as positively as possible, which I can appreciate, but it does seem to have led to a blind spot.

American JewBu is an accomplished piece of scholarship, with Sigalow exercising her faculties both as a historian and as a sociologist. Her conclusions are well supported by primary texts in addition to existing scholarship on Buddhism, Judaism, and the people who straddle both traditions, and the book is a needed addition to that scholarship. If there is any drawback, it is possibly Sigalow's close adherence to her sources. She often seems to purposely not give a wider contextualization to the people and phenomena she observes. However, she is also committed, as a scholar, to describing her findings impartially and

explicitly refuses to offer a value judgment. The book is a refreshing work of "on the ground" research into what appears to be a particularly American experience and would be a worthy inclusion to any library or person interested in the topic.