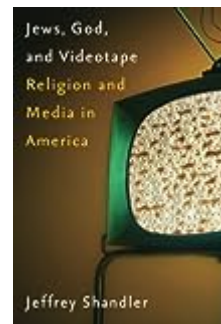




Jeffrey Shandler. *Jews, God, and Videotape: Religion and Media in America.* New York: New York University Press, 2009. ix + 341 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-4067-5; \$23.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-4068-2.



Reviewed by David Gillota (University of Wisconsin - Platteville)

Published on H-Judaic (February, 2010)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Mediating Religion

In recent years, much has been written about American Jews' involvement in the entertainment industry and the representations of Jews in American popular culture, most notably Neal Gabler's *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (1988) and David Zurawik's *The Jews of Prime Time* (2003). In *Jews, God, and Videotape*, Jeffrey Shandler tackles Jewish Americans' relationship with the media from a different perspective by examining the ways that popular media have affected the religious practices of American Jewish communities. The book therefore adds a much-needed component to discussions of Jewish American life and should prove of interest to scholars working in Jewish studies, religious studies, media studies, and popular culture.

Rather than providing an all-encompassing history of American Jews' involvement with popular media, Shandler offers six case studies that move in chronological order from the beginning to the end of the twentieth century. As a result, the book can be approached as a whole or as a collection of related essays. Each chapter makes its own specific argument, but Shandler's overriding the-

sis is that while critics often assume that media detract from religious life, for many American Jews it has done just the opposite. In Shandler's own words, "American Jews' encounters with new media have become a means of continually redefining their notions of religious literacy, propriety, authority, communality, and spirituality" (pp. 4-5). As this list suggests, Shandler uses his topic to interrogate a series of far-reaching issues.

The first half of the book focuses primarily on mainstream media productions about Jewish history and culture, but Shandler does not only analyze texts themselves; rather, he also discusses the impact that media productions have had on the ways that American Jews understand their religion. The first case study, for example, examines the biographies of famous cantors, representations of cantors in various American films, and recordings of cantorial music (*khazones* in Yiddish). Cantors, for Shandler, were "central characters in larger contests between the demands of Jews' traditional communal worship ... and desires for modern, personal artistic expression" (p. 14). For readers who are familiar with

Jewish American cinema, parts of this chapter may seem like something of a retread of familiar material, particularly in discussions of *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and its remakes, but Shandler offers fresh and telling insights when he considers the ways that cantorial recordings, which challenge traditional boundaries between sacred and secular, may affect the spiritual lives of Jewish listeners. Likewise, chapter 2 focuses on the involvement of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in ecumenical broadcasting in the mid-twentieth century. Shandler demonstrates how radio and television shows like *The Eternal Light*, which aired primarily scripted dramas of positive events from Jewish and Jewish American history, contributed to the desire in post-Holocaust America—for both Jews and non-Jews—to assert the compatibility of Jewish and American values.

The next chapter turns to Holocaust remembrance and serves as a follow-up to Shandler's earlier book *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust* (1999). This chapter will, I suspect, receive the most attention, for its implications extend into issues of trauma and memory as well as Jewish and religious studies. Shandler discusses how various Holocaust memory practices bring Holocaust remembrance to a population that, with few exceptions, has no direct experience or personal connection to these events (p. 96). Shandler argues that Holocaust memory practices form a "civil religion," in which the act of remembrance assumes the aura of religious practices. Sponsored viewings of *Schindler's List* (1993), interactive museum pieces, pilgrimages to Holocaust sites, and community events like the "six million paper clips" project all contribute to the formation of a collective memory of the Holocaust for both Jews and non-Jews. While many critics have denigrated such practices for commercializing or trivializing the Holocaust, Shandler asserts that "Americans" extensive and wide-ranging commitment to engaging with this disturbing history is worthy of attention as an indigenous practice in its own right (p. 142). The focus here, then, is more on what Holocaust memory practices tell us about contemporary American and Jewish American culture than their actual ability to help Americans "understand" the Holocaust. Questions of accuracy or legitimacy are therefore sidestepped, but Shandler does provide fascinating commentary on the role that Holocaust memory plays in contemporary America.

The final three chapters shift the focus to the uses of media in the everyday lives of American Jews. This begins in Shandler's analysis of personal media and Jewish ritual. For Shandler, the act of videotaping Jewish wed-

dings, bar/bat mitzvahs, naming ceremonies, and other events can become an integral part of the rituals themselves. While this chapter focuses solely on media and Jewish ritual, Shandler's analysis is not particularly dependent on Judaism itself, and it could easily be applied to other religions as well as the videotaping of secular rituals like birthday parties, piano recitals, and amateur sporting events. The next chapter continues the emphasis on everyday practices by looking at the "December dilemma" and the ways that Jews handle the coincidence of Christmas and Hanukkah occurring during the same month. Shandler discusses a wide array of Jewish responses to Christmas, ranging from intellectual tracts to Adam Sandler's "Hanukkah Song," but the medium that he looks at in the most detail are December dilemma greeting cards that humorously juxtapose Jewish ethnicity with traditional Christmas themes. Shandler acknowledges those critics who suggest that such cards make a mockery of both faiths, but he ultimately suggests that they provide a useful forum for interfaith discussions, asserting that "in the face of longstanding celebrations of the miraculous, the practices of the December dilemma make the case for celebrating the problematic" (p. 229).

In the final chapter, Shandler considers the complex use of media by followers of Lubavitch Hasidism, also known as Chabad. Chabad have used technology in innovative ways throughout their long history, but after the 1994 death of the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who left no heir and who many believed was the *messiah*, the community has used audio, video, and the Internet to transform Menachem Mendel into a "virtual rebbe." During his life, the rebbe was a strong believer in the power of media, and he left behind hundreds of hours of taped lectures and rituals. Chabad has since integrated these into various mass media and placed many hours of video and audio on their Web site chabad.org. Again, Shandler views these developments through a positive light, arguing that "by embracing these new media practices, [Chabad] affirm [the rebbe's] life and teachings" (p. 274).

Overall, *Jews, God, and Videotape* is a well researched and insightful study. Shandler provides a series of convincing arguments. Rather than detracting from religious life, he argues, media can actually add complexity and texture to religious practices. The Jewish people are well known for their ability to adapt to different cultures and technologies, and *Jews, God, and Videotape* demonstrates that this process of adaptation continues into our own time.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: David Gillota. Review of Shandler, Jeffrey, *Jews, God, and Videotape: Religion and Media in America*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. February, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=26208>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.