Aaron Hughes. *Jacob Neusner, An American Iconoclast.* New York: NYU Press, 2016. 336 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4798-8585-5.

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A professor once offered my class his philosophy on being an academic. In professions such as nursing, law, social work, and accounting, one deals with other people's messes; academics have the luxury of coming up with our own messes and questions, and then taking our time to solve them. In return for this often pleasurable work, this professor suggested, the least academics can do is to be decent people in the world. Heeding this, coupled with the advice that children receive–that we are all invited to many fights and that we must learn to be selective in choosing our battles–a certain kind of academic, attuned to the importance of civil discourse and collegiality, is formed.

In *Jacob Neusner: An American Jewish Iconoclast*, religious studies scholar Aaron Hughes has written an insightful biography of a different kind of academic. Most readers who have heard of Neusner know little of the backstory illuminated in this new biography. For those interested in the wider history of twentieth-century American Jews, Hughes argues that Neusnerâs biography is more than an âacademic life mired in technical discussions that have little or no relevance,â but is instead the âstory of what happened as Jews migrated to the suburbs, creating new lives for themselves as they successfully integrated into American societyâ (p. 6). Whether Neusnerâs life can actually be read as âthe story of how American Jews tried to make sense of the world in the aftermath of the extermination of European Jewryâ is unclear (p. 6). Hughesâs biography in fact reveals a man who often saw himself in opposition to the established Jewish community. And, Neusner was hardly typical of most American Jews of his time. Born in 1932, Neusnerâs relative advantages set him apart from the mass of American Jews, who were working to position themselves within the middle class, at midcentury. The wonder is that notwithstanding his often solitary lifestyle, much of Neusnerâs work did redound to the benefit of postwar American Jewish life. Hughesâs book, then, stimulates the reader to consider a question rarely posed in scholarship: what is the connection between the life of a Jewish studies scholar and American Jewry? As historians increasingly recognize the significance of social networks, these kinds of studies are ever more important to intellectual history.

At the center of Hughesâs biography is the claim that Neusner made a singular contribution to the study of Judaism by bringing it into the mainstream of the academy. Neusner helped to turn the study of Judaism from an âinsiderâs clubâ to a respectable academic and intellectual endeavor at a time when many believed that the study of Jewish texts belonged in the yeshiva. Neusner achieved this through an extraordinary combination of accomplishments that included: translating the entire Rabbinic corpus into English; helping to establish the Scholars Press to disseminate these translations; holding leadership positions in the American Academy of Religion; training graduate students; and by doing that for which he is most famous–publishing up a storm.

Neusnerâs ability to effect change within the study of Judaism was aided by his relative outsider position. Unlike other scholars of Judaism in the mid-twentieth century, Neusner grew up in an assimilated Reform home. He could barely read Hebrew as a child, and never studied a page of Talmud in his youth. Hughesâs biography reveals the benefit of Jewish studies being an academic

field with scholars from many different backgrounds who bring diverse visions for its future. Neusnerâs vision for Jewish studies was shaped by the secular academy, rather than by the *cheder* and yeshiva. Educated in American public schools and Harvard University, Neusner was receptive to the idea that the holy books of Judaism–and of every other religion–were not important in themselves, as Neusner wrote, but âbecause of what they tell us about what is important: they answer urgent questions of humanityâ (p. 4). This statement guided Neusnerâs approach to religious studies, allowing him to place Jewish texts alongside Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, and other religious texts as âlocalized reflections on timeless and universal human questions,â as Hughes explains (p. 4).

Changes in the academic study of religion occurring during the 1960s affected Neusnerâs views on the proper place of Judaism in the academy. When he began the doctoral program in religion at Columbia University in 1958, religion was primarily taught in divinity schools, associated with Protestant denominations. But in 1963, *School District of Abington Township, Pennsylvania v. Schempp* distinguished between âteaching religionâ and âteaching about religion,â thereby opening the door to the study of world religions in American universities. âAlthough this newly transformed academic study of religion would still exhibit a Protestant bias,â Hughes writes, âthere was nevertheless a desire to present other religions of the globe to American undergraduatesâ (p. 58). Receptive to these ideas, Neusner allowed them to influence his approach to the study of Judaism.

The tragedy in this story is that Neusnerâs impressive scholarly accomplishments have been undermined by both the sheer volume of his output and his notoriously irascible personality. Those who spent time in the orbit of Jewish studies, religious studies, or Brown University– where Neusner spent part of his career–are likely to have heard stories of his fallings-out and what sounds like often nasty treatment of colleagues and students. âControlling, but in a positive sense,â was how several of Neusnerâs graduate students assessed his style of interaction (p. 140). Based on Hughesâs research, it also appears that colleagues had trouble taking seriously a scholar who had produced as much as Neusner (he published close to a thousand books). It is very likely, as Neusner implied in interviews and letters, that his colleagues envied Neusnerâs prolificacy. It is also likely that many felt, as the religious studies scholar and sometimes-Neusner-friend Jonathan Z. Smith did, that Neusnerâs rate of publication became evidence that he was not spending sufficient time reading–and listening to–other scholars (p. 109). Yet another reason that Neusnerâs scholarship was not duly noted by his colleagues, is that as the number of scholars who had either had negative interactions with Neusner or heard about such interactions increased, it grew more difficult to bring a sympathetic hearing to his writings.

Hughes does not ask readers to put aside Neusner the man, who was known for his irascibility, as we consider Neusner the scholar, known for his prodigious output. Both aspects of his persona–someone who produced so much writing, influencing the field in so many ways, *and* was known for his conflicts with colleagues–are explored in Hughesâs biography, although the latter receives less attention.

By their nature, biographies lead to consideration of how a childhood influences adulthood. In Neusnerâs case, he seemed relatively lucky, having been reared in a middle-class, assimilated home, which translated into certain advantages once Neusner sought success in the secular world. His father owned a Jewish newspaper, which gave young Jacob a platform from which to write about Jewish topics, and it taught him to meet deadlines quickly. Remarkably, for a middle-class Jew of that era, there is no evidence that Neusner felt pressure to become a doctor or lawyer, or even to take over his fatherâs newspaper (in his youth, he had planned to become a rabbi, because he wanted to spend his life with Jewish texts and knew of no other way to do so). For a Jew coming of age in the late 1940s, Neusner had the advantage of being able to consider his interests and passions as he contemplated his future. As an adult, he was fortunate again in his personal life: not only did he find love and familial contentment–it is heartening to read that even Neusner preferred to knock off from work after dinner, in order to watch television with his family–but he also had a generous father-in-law whose financial support helped make Neusnerâs scholarship possible.

Despite how good Neusnerâs lot was for much of his life, his posture was always that of a critic who did not shy away from negative reviews (even after his motherâs death, Neusner told a friend that he could not find anything positive to say or to remember about her). Whether he was voicing critical views of American higher education (in the 1980s, Neusner became a household name through his public expression of these views) or of the American Jewish community, Neusner kept himself at a remove from his Jewish and, often, his academic communities. Both groups rarely met his standards. After a while, it seems that the feeling was mostly mutual be-

tween Neusner and his would-be communities.

With his recent death, attitudes toward Neusner the scholar appear to be shifting. As is the norm, the remembrances and obituaries of Neusner have been overwhelmingly positive. Over time, fewer people will have had experiences with Neusner the man, and it will be primarily his many, many words on the page–in addition to biographies like this one–that speak for him. Neusner likely wanted it that way.

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