Jew + Buddhist = JewBu

Emily Sigalow, *American JewBu: Jews, Buddhists, and Religious Change*
Princeton University Press, 2019, hb, 256pp

reviewed by Agi Erdos

Anyone involved in Buddhism today will nod in agreement upon hearing the claim that there has been a surprising number of Jews in modern Western Buddhism. This is particularly true for Buddhism in North America: not only has Buddhism been a popular choice among people from a Jewish background, but a seemingly disproportionate number have become leading lights of Western Buddhism, and have played a major role in shaping its evolution. It is quite natural to ask the question, why? What's the connection?

I came to Emily Sigalow's book hoping to find an explanation for this phenomenon. And while she does propose some answers to the question of why there are so many prominent JewBus, that is not the focus of her study. *American JewBu*, which grew out of Sigalow's PhD dissertation, looks at how the Jewish and Buddhist traditions have interacted in the last century or so, particularly in the United States, where the JewBu phenomenon, like many other things, originated.

This is not the first book on Jews in Buddhism. Roger Kamenetz's *The Jew in the Lotus* and Sylvia Boorstein's *That's Funny, You don't Look Buddhist* are classics. Sigalow, however, approaches the subject from a purely academic rather than personal angle, which makes her sociological-ethnographic study one of the first book-length scholarly analyses.

The story of the JewBu goes back to the late nineteenth century, when westerners first began to look, and travel, to the East in search of spiritual meaning. Jews have featured in the story of Western Buddhism from these earliest days. Sigalow mentions Charles T. Strauss, who was 'the first person ever to be initiated into Buddhism on American soil' in 1893 (p.17). In the first decades of the twentieth century, some of the most prominent figures who disseminated Buddhist ideas in the USA were Jews: Julius Goldwater was ordained and served as a missionary in the True Pure Land tradition; Samuel Lewis was initiated into the Rinzai Zen school and became a teacher, and William Segal was a disciple of D.T. Suzuki and a proponent of Buddhism

throughout his life. The next era in the story of Western Dharma overlapped with the beatnik-hippy counterculture of the 1960s and seventies. At this stage again, Jews were not only converting to Buddhism but became teachers, authors, and gurus on both the East and West Coasts. And then towards the end of the twentieth century the explosion of mindfulness and meditation was brought about to a great extent by teachers and activists who came from a Jewish background, and who had a particular interest in insight practice (Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg – the list goes on and on).

Whether prominent teachers or ordinary lay practitioners, Jewish followers of the Dharma, like non-Jews, were seeking a deeper meaning, a more genuine way of spiritual practice than that they had found in their inherited tradition. Some, while acknowledging their Jewish background, no longer had a connection to the faith of their ancestors. Others tried to find ways to integrate the two traditions in their own lives, and for others, into a harmonious whole. There are certain tendencies underlying this process of quest and conversion, and Sigalow places these under scrutiny in her analysis. As we know from the Buddha's teaching of conditioned co-production, things do not arise in a direct cause-effect relationship, but rather, given the presence of an intricate complex of conditions, certain phenomena emerge. The same seems to apply to Jewish participation in Buddhism. Sigalow emphasizes a handful of significant factors in the process of Jews turning to Buddhism. One of these is the view that Buddhism is safe, as it has no history of anti-Jewish attitudes or violence. It is also the case that Buddhism typically appeals to people from a certain background, namely, educated white middle-class individuals with left-leaning and liberal political views and a strong sense of social justice. And, as it happens, Jews are quite highly represented in this social grouping. Another important factor is the way Jewish observance and community dynamics changed over the course of the twentieth century: as Jews and Judaism became more and more bourgeois in the United States, a growing number of Jews felt that while the tradition gave them a strong sense of cultural and communal rootedness, they were left with a spiritual thirst that their own religion could not satisfy.

What exactly is a JewBu? As it turns out, there are several types and Sigalow distinguishes three categories. The 'spiritually enriched' have a strong Jewish identity, are deeply embedded in their Jewish social and cultural context, and have no desire to change that. For them, Buddhist meditation and teachings are an important addition to their mental well-being and an ethical lifestyle, but they do not consider themselves Buddhist. Others, whom Sigalow labels 'Buddhist converts', are fully committed to the path of the Dharma and identify as Buddhists, regarding their Jewishness as no more than an aspect of their family history and upbringing. They are not active in the Jewish community and do not follow any of the traditions. Then there is the tiny minority of 'dual

belongers', who are equally committed to both traditions and do not feel a need to prioritize between them.

An interesting question that Sigalow looks at in detail is what strategies JewBus employ to reconcile their ascribed (Jewish) and achieved (Buddhist) identities. Some will foreground their Jewishness, which they say is 'who they are', whereas their Buddhist practice is 'what they do' – an approach particularly common among those in the insight meditation tradition, who often view Buddhism as a toolkit of psychotherapeutic practices (p.167).

Another central question in Sigalow's study is how the two traditions have mutually impacted on each other. She describes numerous examples of how Buddhist meditation has become an accepted and popular practice in a Jewish context. Synagogues and cultural centres offer classes teaching meditation with a Jewish twist, and charitable organizations are eager to support such incentives as a means of attracting participants. Meditation has thus become a 'kosher' pursuit for Jews, and that is partly because it has been flavoured with Jewish elements and imagery – and also because many Jews are interested or are professionally involved in psychotherapeutic practices.

It is much harder to put forward a convincing claim that Judaism or Jews have made an impact on Buddhism. Yes, the Dalai Lama wanted to learn about survival strategies in exile, and yes, as Sigalow points out, many Jewish teachers of meditation brought with them a strong sense of social justice. But I don't think the imprint left by Jews on Buddhism was a Jewish imprint as such. It may be an imprint made by Jews, but does that make it Jewish? Social justice and sympathy for the underdog may be something that Jews feel strongly about but it's not a uniquely Jewish phenomenon, even if many American Jews associate their social activism with the Jewish values they'd inherited. It is certainly true that acts of kindness are highly regarded in Judaism, but surely they are equally highly regarded in Christian tradition, or in Islam? What one can state with confidence is that Jewish practitioners of the Dharma would have found it particularly easy and seamless to relate to teachers who were also Jewish, and thus a network of Jewish dharma practitioners sharing the same values would have developed quite organically. However, I remain unconvinced by any other suggestions in Sigalow's book regarding the influence that Jews and Jewish tradition may have had on Western Buddhism.

What I missed the most was a detailed discussion of the God question. Sigalow makes a handful of references throughout the book to respondents' attitudes to the idea of a deity, but avoids any detailed discussion. That is a shame, because in my personal experience this is a crucial question in the life of a JewBu, and one that should have been addressed in a lot more detail – if not from a theological then from an anthropological point of view. Buddhism does not teach about an all-powerful creator God, and hence Buddhists tend to be wary of anything that smacks of theism. This raises questions about the

degree to which an openly Jewish person will find acceptance in a Buddhist community, because it is common knowledge that standing at the centre of the Jewish story, at least traditionally, is, of course, an all-powerful creator God. Even if contemporary Jews have their personal doubts or interpretations regarding such a deity, the question of how they go about reconciling these two diametrically opposed outlooks, and how non-Jewish Buddhists respond to such ideas, is not only an intriguing but I feel a hugely important area of the study of JewBus.

While *American JewBu* has its faults (in places I felt Sigalow should have researched both Buddhism and Judaism in more depth), and it could certainly have done with some attentive editing, it is a well-written and interesting study of an important phenomenon that has remained surprisingly under-researched in recent decades.

AGI ERDOS holds MAs in Hebrew language and literature and Jewish history from universities in Budapest. She practises both Buddhism and Judaism, and is currently training for ordination in the Triratna Buddhist Order.

Princeton University Press:
https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691174594/american-jewbu