
“Jewish thought is a cultural practice, and that practice generates compelling accounts of an identity steeped in material culture” (2–3). Ken Koltun-Fromm, whose previous books include a highly original study on *Moses Hess and Modern Jewish Identity* (2001) and a no less formidable work on *Abraham Geiger’s Liberal Judaism* (2006), has moved his scholarly allegiances to twentieth-century America and its “material temptations.” Ambitious in scope, learned and engaging in style, *Material Culture and Jewish Thought in America* is a timely book, for it reflects the broader trend in studying spaces, practices, rituals, and material objects that has shaped our understanding of religion since the 1980s, and which has become a rapidly expanding field in our days. In many ways, Koltun-Fromm’s new book is a tribute to the works of Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblet, Robert Orsi, David Morgan, Jenna Weismann Joselit, and others who have transformed the study of religion, including Judaism, by turning away from text and theology towards the impurities of things we can touch and see and make holy in unpredictable places. But it is a tribute also to the reconsideration of Jewish practice and its implications for new ritual, nostalgia, tradition, and even commandment, in the work of Arnold Eisen, to whom the present book is dedicated. It was Eisen’s seminal book *Rethinking Modern Judaism* (1998) that expressed a new confidence in the power of ritual practices, rooted in community and material existence, to “offer Jews possibilities for adherence denied by creedal affirmations,” thus calling into question the entire modern project of spiritualizing and intellectualizing Judaism. What Eisen accomplished for Jewish practice and commandment, Koltun-Fromm hopes to accomplish for Jewish material culture: to construct a sense of Jewish continuity outside of creed and covenantal obligation, to read modern Jewish thought against itself, and to infuse the permanent fear of Judaism constantly losing its identity, the fear of its “ever dying” at the hands of indifference and assimilation, with a new optimism and confidence in material culture. Consequently, this project does not view itself as a mere exercise in cultural studies or in the anthropology of religion. It attempts, rather, to “wed cultural studies to Jewish thought,” seeking to “reveal the material roots of American Jewish thought” and to uncover “cultural patterns that inform Jewish thinking about things.” Koltun-Fromm exercises reading as a form of fieldwork. If there is such a category as “Jewish identity” (whose unfixed multiplicity appears to be a given to the author) then it behooves us to ground it in objects, he argues; and if there is such a category as Jewish thought, whose practitioners have frequently set themselves apart from the material world, then it is time to reinsert their ideas into the messy universe of images and things: “Cultural studies drags Jewish thought into the messiness and allure of city life, into the ‘universe of things’ that seduce, enliven, and transfigure Jewish identity” (4). This delightful messiness functions as a leitmotif of sorts guiding us through an impressive catalogue of American Jewish figureheads of culture that begins, not by accident, with Mordecai Kaplan, who emerges as both an avid journal writer performing his “material self” and as the likely “hero” in Koltun-Fromm’s agenda. What Kaplan sought to achieve in all his life—to root Judaism again in its social and material identity—existed, as Koltun-Fromm suggests, all along before his eyes: “Material objects are constitutive features of personal identity” (49). Jewish civilization enacts “material performances” even when it thinks that it is thinking. What is original in Koltun-Fromm’s approach is to treat Jewish thought not according to how it treats the material world, but to treat it as a material performance itself, or as he puts it: “[M]aterial places are not merely the site of Jewish thought, but the very substance of it” (275). Not Kaplan writing about art interests the author (though he has a lot to say about that too) but Kaplan’s diary writing as a “work of art,” as a material inscription of his self: “Words were Kaplan’s things” (23). His diary itself assumes the space of home, self-recognition, and self-fashioning. It became Kaplan’s own archive of something “permanent and lasting” against the fleeting world of immigrant identities. Since America remained largely “closed to Jewish aspirations and commitments,” Kaplan had to “pry it open through archiving the self in cultural productions, in aesthetic performances, in a civilization that would remake America into a home for outsiders” (49). This is the theme running, in many variations, through Koltun-Fromm’s new book, suggesting that it was exactly the Jewish descent into the messiness of everyday life, into the shallow depth of popular culture, that
allowed Jews in America to become “clean.” With bold, vertiginous strokes Koltun-Fromm’s pen carries us from Mordecai Kaplan to Edward Bernays, Joshua Liebman, and Erich Fromm as disobedient children of a tragically European Freud, who could not hide his irritation at American flourishing and optimism; to Joseph Soloveitchik, whose modern Jewish Orthodoxy and Halaakhic Man suddenly appear to us as urban constructs and remappings of the city; to a new Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose pious affinity to time and flight from “thinginess” transforms itself before our eyes into architectural space and love of beautiful things, into a deep nostalgia embedded in “the physical contours of everyday life”; to the writings of Anzia Yezierska and Philip Roth, teaching us to “see dress,” to honor the “performative function of clothing”; to Cynthia Ozick, where we hear Yiddish “accreve material weightiness and texture”; and, finally, to the material cladding of Bernard Malamud’s melancholy characters, whose search for identity leads them on a “maddeningly elusive and scarred” path through a “world made heavy by material things.” These chapters, undoubtedly, are evocative in their rereading of the canon of the written word through the lens of material culture, though they demand from us, more than once, a great stretch of imagination, a twisting of vision, to fit material reality into material metaphor, as we must, when we accept Heschel’s “great cathedrals” of time as real places or Soloveitchik’s inner life as mirrors to the urban holy, as a “halakhic house in the city.” Koltun-Fromm’s reading is simply too exciting for us not to suspend belief and query its foundations. But then, it seems, his pen retreats to abandon the arena of Jewish thought and literature, to betray it even, leaving us in a state of material gazer, as it wanders from the covers of Lilith magazine and its reimagining of feminist Jewish identity, to the (unfortunately invisible) black and white photographs of Arnold Eagle, arresting a “male gaze directed at God and Torah” against a “female blank stare of despair and resignation,” to The Jazz Singer in its three screen adaptations, embodying, to various degrees, the Jewish “yearning for an American life, cleansed of Old-World ghosts and ghetto tenements,” and finally, to Jen Taylor Friedman’s Barbie in tefillin, davening with sexy chic and marking a closure in the American Jewish love affair with material culture: “Judaism has finally become hip” (266). It is a closure also in Ken Koltun-Fromm’s study, for at this juncture the tenuous marriage of material culture and Jewish thought is finally annulled, dissolved into a reflection of what it means to view one’s heritage in a performative act of rupture and repair: “Viewing heritage is an active gaze of destruction, recovery, and creation,” the author writes (269), before his book sums up the “struggle for a material identity in America” as a “performance” and “cultural enactment” which cannot be pinned down to any “reified label” but “instead is a complex and ambiguous act of identity” (273). Out of the “messy entanglements that inform material practices” emerges, then, a messy sense of self. Complex and ambiguous acts create complex and ambiguous identities. The performing self self-fashiones itself. Things shape who we are. We cannot extract ourselves from them, even if we try.

It is difficult to put down this book, for it mesmerizes its readers with interpretive thickness and kaleidoscopic mystery; but it is also difficult to put down this book with a sense of satisfaction that its journey—which did not choose the shortest path and not seldom trails off into cumbersome repetitions—has left us with a unified travelogue, that it has left us with more than solid souvenirs, or as Mordecai Kaplan would say, (Jewish) bric-a-brac. As readers in our age we justly avoid literature with a message and should, perhaps, also learn to avoid scholarly books toiling with an argument. There is something inherently valuable in being carried away by a trusted scholar of truly great knowledge and great cultural passion. But, at times, such vastness and passion for material messiness make the reader yearn for the very “straitjackets” of Jewish thought and discipline the author sets out to demolish. Sometimes, the celebration of the messiness of “stuff,” the fascination with “kitsch,” and the embrace of “culture” beg for profundity, the question of the meaning of it all, or, if nothing else, distance and sobriety.

Despite its conceptual (and material) thickness, Koltun-Fromm’s book rests upon strangely thin legs. Of the two presuppositions that seem to guide his study neither one can, nor pretends, to fully support its weight: The first, that we “construct identity by working with things and images, Jews no less than other Americans” (277), and that “materiality lies at the core of Jewish thought and identity in America” (12), is too ethereal and, at the same time, too entrenched in our understanding of Judaism as a culture to still tickle us with surprise. The days of Jewish thought and history as laced-up in pure ideas are too far gone to remember and to combat.