

Mennonites see the meetinghouse?

Other similarities revolve around questions of identity. What do the clothes we wear say about us? What is the relationship of the individual to the community, and which takes priority? How does one go about finding one's place in a new setting, while remaining true to what one has inherited as tradition? How does one go about being a good American and a good Muslim? A good American and a good Mennonite?

While there are many good reasons for reading *Black Mecca*, what benefited me the most is the sense of recognition I experienced throughout the book. This is not to diminish the uniqueness of those stories and their tellers, or to downplay the many ways in which my life and the lives of those whose stories fill the book are different.

It's simply to say that at a time when Mennonites are seeking to reimagine mission in ways that don't condemn us to repeat past mistakes, there is something to be said for discovering that the distance between us and them, whoever they may be, is not so great as we thought. It turns out that our commitment to community, and our respect for the tradition, and the centrality of communal worship, are not just Mennonite values. They are also the values of the West African Muslim immigrants whose stories are told in *Black Mecca*. To my mind, that's well worth knowing.

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Jonathan Boyarin, *Mornings at the Stanton Street Shul: A Summer on the Lower East Side*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2011. 226 pp. \$18.00. ISBN: 9780823254040.

While visiting New York City earlier this year, I took a guided tour of the Eldridge Street Synagogue on the Lower East Side. Built in 1887, the synagogue was for five decades a vibrant hub of religious life and social services for thousands of Eastern European Jews who had recently immigrated to the United States.

Now those days are a distant memory. The congregation dwindled in the 1930s as Jews began to leave the neighborhood's crowded tenements for other boroughs. By the 1950s the sanctuary had become decrepit from disuse (it would later be restored to its original grandeur). Over the years, other immigrants came to replace the Jews who left. The neighborhood eventually became absorbed by what is known today as Chinatown. A small congregation continues to worship at Eldridge Street, but these days the synagogue is better known as a museum, where tourists like me flock to admire its Moorish-style architecture. As a casual visitor, it's tempting to think that the synagogue is a remnant of a vanished world.

Jonathan Boyarin has written an interesting book showing that Jewish life on the Lower East Side still has a pulse, however faint. *Mornings at the Stanton Street Shul* is an intimate ethnographic portrait of the Stanton Street Shul, one of the last Jewish congregations in the historic neighborhood. Boyarin, an anthropologist, is no detached observer. He and his wife are longtime residents of the neighborhood and active members of the shul, which belongs to the progressive wing of Orthodox Judaism. The book is essentially Boyarin's journal from the summer of 2008 when he attended morning prayers every day, recording everything he saw and heard.

Boyarin's notes reveal a fragile congregation struggling to find its identity amid constant flux. Like Eldridge Street, Stanton Street's story has been powerfully shaped by demographic changes, including the outward migration of Jews and gentrification. "The Lower East Side ain't what it used to be, and it probably never was," Boyarin muses.

But that's not the whole story. Some families from the immigrant generation stayed, and gentrification brought a younger generation of Jews, which enabled the congregation's survival. Boyarin notes how the progressive values of the "new Jews," such as supporting the expanded roles of women, sometimes created conflict with the other remaining Orthodox shuls in the neighborhood. Despite these difficulties, Stanton Street Shul carries on by straddling two worlds: old and new, traditional and progressive.

As one might expect from a journal, there isn't much of a narrative arc. Many of Boyarin's entries pertain to the mundane nature of keeping a house of worship going: reminders to turn off the lights, interviewing candidates for a new rabbi, petty disagreements between members. A recurring theme is the congregation's struggle to maintain the morning minyan—the quorum of ten Jewish males required to hold a prayer service. Only rarely does Boyarin pull back from relaying events to reflect on the import of what he's seeing. "What is it we are trying so hard to desperately hold on to, and why assume at all that it should still be there?" he wonders, as he surveys a neighborhood that has lost most of its Jewishness. It's an important question for any religious group that finds itself in cultural decline. Sadly, he doesn't pursue it further.

Boyarin deserves praise for his lively writing that captures the colorful personalities of the shul's members. The book is refreshingly free of academic jargon, though readers may occasionally be stymied by the many specialized terms relating to Judaism. Thankfully, there's a glossary in the back for that. But when it comes to answering the question of "So what?" the author is of less help. When the book is over, you're left wanting a postscript about the ultimate meaning of his twelve-week experiment.

In his defense, Boyarin states in the introduction that he didn't set out to write a "meditation on Jewish identity." The book might be better understood as a tribute

to the resilience of community, especially one facing an uncertain future. Who knows if Stanton Street Shul will eventually suffer the same fate as most other Orthodox synagogues on the Lower East Side? Yet its members diligently continue to meet together, even if it's not always clear what it amounts to.

Perhaps togetherness is the point. "Ultimately, while we continue to listen for the still, small voice, we have to rely on ourselves and each other," Boyarin concludes.

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