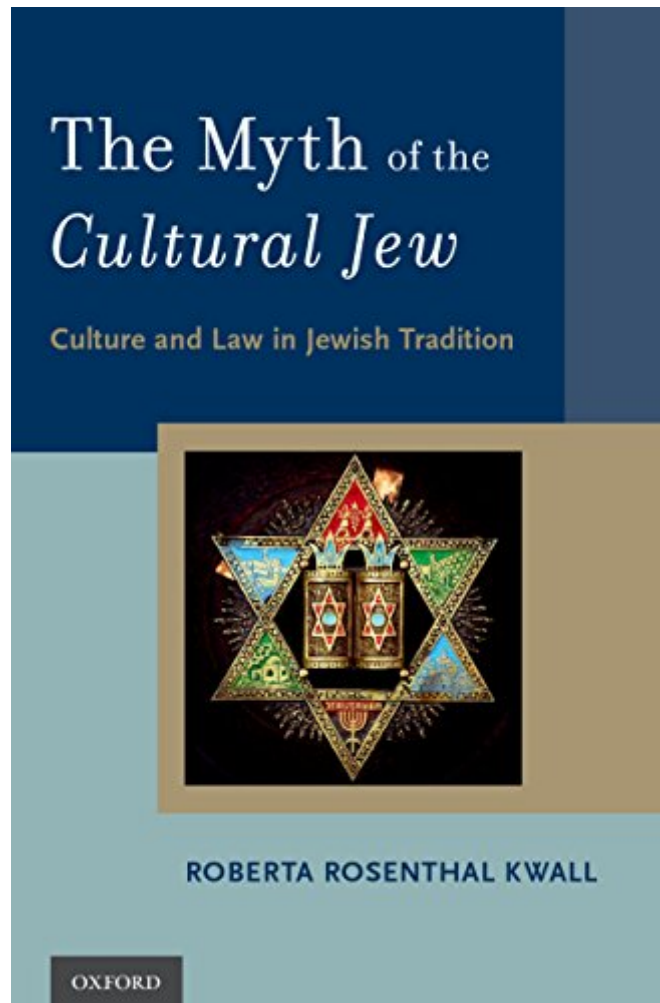


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The Myth Of The Cultural Jew: Culture And Law In Jewish Tradition



Synopsis

A myth exists that Jews can embrace the cultural components of Judaism without appreciating the legal aspects of the Jewish tradition. This myth suggests that law and culture are independent of one another. In reality, however, much of Jewish culture has a basis in Jewish law. Similarly, Jewish law produces Jewish culture. A cultural analysis paradigm provides a useful way of understanding the Jewish tradition as the product of both legal precepts and cultural elements. This paradigm sees law and culture as inextricably intertwined and historically specific. This perspective also emphasizes the human element of law's composition and the role of existing power dynamics in shaping Jewish law. In light of this inevitable intersection between culture and law, *The Myth of the Cultural Jew: Culture and Law in Jewish Tradition* argues that Jewish culture is shallow unless it is grounded in Jewish law. Roberta Rosenthal Kwall develops and applies a cultural analysis paradigm to the Jewish tradition that departs from the understanding of Jewish law solely as the embodiment of Divine command. Her paradigm explains why both law and culture must matter to those interested in forging meaningful Jewish identity and transmitting the tradition.

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In a world where most Jews are secular, where do we look for meaning in Judaism, and what is the meaning that will get passed on to future generations? This forms the central question in Roberta Kwall's rich and rewarding new book "The Myth of the Cultural Jew." Jewish meaning comes from Jewish law (halakhah), argues Kwall. Jewish culture is suffused with halakhah "always has and always will be" it is where even cultural Jews must look for meaning in Judaism. Halakhah is where Jewish meaning comes from, how Jewish meaning evolves, and how Jewish meaning is transmitted. Kwall explains the processes by which halakhah is kept relevant and fresh in light of changing cultural values over the centuries. She explains how culture and law interact in any legal system, and how Jewish law, even in an orthodox world, is no exception. Along the way, she delves into questions like who is a Jew, what is a Jew, what is the meaning and role of Israel for Judaism. When we think about our American constitutional order we ask questions like: "Does one ask what the Framers said in 1789, or what they would have said 200 years later, or something in-between, such as what is the current meaning of what they said then?" If this question resonates with you, buy this book "it will repay you with many insights. If you have an interest in the large questions in Judaism today, buy this book. You'll find a clear and succinct history of the main movements that have shaped Judaism since the Enlightenment (e.g. Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, Open Orthodox, Reconstructionist, Social orthodoxy, etc.) free of jargon, and with extraordinary focus and clarity.

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