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*Building Jewish Roots* is Faydra Shapiro's highly reflexive and lucidly descriptive ethnographic account of Livnot U'Lehibanot, a three month Israel experience program designed to provide a positive Jewish experience for mostly disaffiliated North American Jews in their twenties. Shapiro, a past participant and staff member, analyses the message that Livnot aims to convey to its participants and the methods used in order to accomplish this task, in an engaging attempt to determine how this program affects participants' levels of involvement in the Jewish community after leaving the program.

Just beneath the surface of Shapiro's insightful observations and rich description of the Livnot community, which in their own right merit the reading of this text, can be found a perceptive discussion of both the problems and the possibilities of Jewish identity in contemporary North America. Shapiro describes the survivalist mentality that emerged within the North American Jewish community following the Holocaust, the Six Day War of 1967, and the realization of increased assimilation and intermarriage among North American Jews in the latter twentieth century. She explains that this survivalist mentality precipitated the establishment of Jewish cultural continuity as the most important commitment among Jewish communal institutions in North America (5-6). The over 200 Israel experience programs of which Livnot is a part, along with day schools, supplementary religious education, Jewish community centres, youth groups, and summer camps, comprise the attempt of the North American Jewish community to mitigate the loss of Jewish identity and affiliation (6).

In spite of these efforts on the part of Jewish communal institutions, assimilation and intermarriage are continuing to rise, while levels of Jewish involvement persist in declining. Shapiro makes the argument that the problems facing Jewish identity in contemporary North America are not a result of religious demand, but rather, an issue of religious supply. In other words, there is a desire among North American Jews to be more religiously involved, but they are not being appropriately engaged by the Jewish religious institutions. Shapiro argues that the institutional response to anxiety over Jewish cultural assimilation, which emphasizes survival and continuity, fails to provide a Judaism "that is felt to be spiritual, meaningful, and personally relevant" (8). She is keen to point out that the search for a personally relevant Judaism is part of the much larger North American progression towards an individualistic approach to religion as opposed to the communal approach to religion of decades past.

Shapiro understands the Livnot experience to be a rejection of institutional survivalist Judaism in favour of a Judaism that attempts to bridge traditional Jewish identity and religion with the contemporary values of young North American Jews. Shapiro argues that the connection between traditional Judaism and contemporary values ultimately results in a personal and meaningful Judaism, rather than an inherited and obligatory Judaism (8). Shapiro spends the entire second chapter of the book providing an in-depth ethnographic account of the physical context of the Livnot program in Tzfat, Israel, of the...
Livnot staff, and of some typical Livnot participants, complete with revealing transcriptions of interviews and information gathered from participant observations (16-44). At the close of the chapter, it is established that prior to their involvement in the program, the majority of Livnot participants have had overwhelmingly negatively experiences with North American Judaism. As a result of the negative experiences and high level of Jewish disaffiliation among participants, Shapiro explains that Livnot's goal is not to try and "convert" participants into a particular type of religious observance, but simply to educate participants about the tradition through classroom lessons, hiking, and close relationships with the Orthodox Livnot staff, enabling them to make an informed decision about their level of Jewish commitment (45-49). Shapiro says that it is Livnot's non-coercive and multidimensional approach to Jewish education that respects participants' contemporary North American values, which most significantly sets Livnot apart from other Israel experience programs.

The specific ways in which Livnot makes the vision of a more meaningful Judaism work for its participants is where Shapiro spends the majority of her analytical capacity. In chapter three, Shapiro examines the picture of Israel that Livnot constructs for its participants. She explains that by limiting participants' experience mainly to Tzfat, the Old City of Jerusalem, and the remote rural locations of group hikes, that Livnot paints a picture of an ancestral and mythical land, which ignores the poverty and urban blight of contemporary Israel (56-61). Shapiro goes on to explain that the less quixotic aspects of contemporary Israel are kept hidden from Livnot participants, and that those aspects which are briefly discussed, such as Zionism, the Occupied Territories, the Palestinians, and the State of Israel, are romanticized in order to present a picture of a depoliticized and homogeneously religious Jewish society (61-69). Through participants' rebuilding and restoring parts of the city of Tzfat, and by virtue of their limited exposure to actual contemporary Israeli society, Shapiro argues that Livnot present Israel as a nation that needs their involvement, and which is highly accessible with little in the way of cultural or linguistic differences (70-73).

In chapter four, Shapiro turns her attention to analyzing how Livnot presents Jewish history and the Jewish people to its participants. She elucidates the ways in which Livnot portrays Jewish history and historical Jews as comprising a consistent narrative of Jewish survival against the odds, in order to cultivate a sense of responsibility among participants towards continued Jewish survival (79-84). Likewise, Shapiro demonstrates how Livnot's construction of observant Jews as normal people, is meant to develop a sense of familiarity and similarity towards Orthodox Jews (84-90). Shapiro also describes how Livnot consciously presents participants with an image of Judaism in which the family, rather than the synagogue, is the central religious institution, and also provides an opportunity for participants to have meaningful relationships with other North American Jews, which may previously not have been possible (90-96).

In chapter five, Shapiro explores the ways in which the Jewish tradition is selectively chosen and emphasized by Livnot to appeal to its participants. Shapiro explains that Livnot constructs a Judaism that is personal, debatable, flexible, accessible, individualistic, multiple, ethical, inclusive, egalitarian, and environmentally friendly (101-123). Shapiro argues that such a construction of traditional Judaism is extremely appealing to Livnot participants with little Jewish background and who have often had
negative attitudes towards Judaism (127-136).

Shapiro demonstrates that the picture of Israel, Jewish history and the Jewish people, and the Jewish tradition that Livnot creates for its participants, is clearly a selective one. Livnot's goal is to select those elements of Israel, Jewish history and the Jewish people, and the Jewish tradition that will easily appeal to Livnot's participants. Shapiro explains that Livnot's goal is to transform Israel from a vague space to a holy place, promote a positive conception of other Jews, and to present a Jewish tradition which is coalescent with contemporary North American values.

In chapter six, Shapiro examines the lives of past Livnot participants, determining that the majority of participants fall into one of three common patterns of Jewish involvement. The first pattern involves an initially high level of Jewish involvement following the program, which eventually declines in varying degrees in order to accommodate to the realities of participants' lives in North American society. The second pattern is one of steadily increasing Jewish involvement, which in many cases leads participants' becoming religiously observant Jews. The final pattern that Shapiro identifies is marked by little or no change in participants' levels of Jewish involvement following the program (144). Regardless of which category of Jewish involvement that Livnot participants fall into following the program, and despite the serious dissonance that participants experience between Livnot's vision of Judaism and the realities of their lives, Shapiro observes that nearly all past participants consider their levels of Jewish involvement to have significantly increased following the Livnot program (146-175).

Shapiro concludes her book by explaining that while Livnot may selectively choose an incomplete picture of Israel, Jewish history and the Jewish people, and the Jewish tradition, that the program is successful in providing participants with enough basic knowledge and experience about Judaism in order to make an educated decision about their level of Jewish involvement following the program (176, 191). Shapiro argues that Livnot serves as an "antidote" and "corrective" to Jewish culture loss as a result of the influence of Western Christian universalism, allowing participants "to become 'Jews by choice' rather than 'Jews by accident'" (97, 183-184, 187, 191). Shapiro recognizes that Livnot is not the sole answer to the problems facing Jewish identity in contemporary North America, but insists that Livnot represents some of the possibilities that exist for addressing declining Jewish culture loss within the North American Jewish community (191-194).

Beyond the valuable ethnographic insights and the instructive discussion of the problems and possibilities of Jewish identity in contemporary North America, there exists a third layer to Building Jewish Roots. This additional stratum focuses on the personal transformation of the author herself as a result of her multiple experiences with the Livnot program. Although Shapiro limits the discussion of her personal experiences with Livnot mainly to the introduction and final chapter of the book, the entirety of Building Jewish Roots represents Shapiro's transformation from a secular disaffiliated Jewish woman, to a religiously observant Jewish woman, and finally to a scholar who is trying to make sense of Livnot and her experience within it.

At the same time that Shapiro's insider status provides invaluable illumination of the Livnot program, it also inevitably leads to the emergence of some ideological biases. For instance, although Shapiro does an excellent job of explaining how the message and
methods are selectively chosen and emphasized by the Livnot program in order to
appeal to its participants, she fails to provide any real critique of these decisions. Instead,
Shapiro largely endorses the selective pedagogical orientation of the Livnot program as a
successful way to provide a positive Jewish experience to disaffiliated North American
Jewish youth. Additionally, Shapiro's obviously positive experience at Livnot causes her
to provide a sometimes harsh critique of the many North American attempts to mitigate
Jewish cultural loss, particularly that of Hebrew schools (35-38, 44, 47-49, 103-104,
107). Another of Shapiro's biases emerges in her critique of the negative affect that
Western Christian universalism has had on traditional Judaism (97, 183-184, 187). While
it is indeed true that the Enlightenment values of liberal universalism have greatly
affected the Jewish tradition, Shapiro seems to ignore the fact that Jews, as well as
Christians, formed an integral part of this ideological transformation, and that this was
not a process directed at undermining Judaism, but is also considered as a mostly
negative process by the majority of the world's Christians.

All things considered, I feel that Shapiro's biases do not pose any serious threat to
the value of this text, and are overwhelmingly compensated for by what is clearly a first-
rate ethnography and consideration of the challenges that the legacy of modernity
continue to pose, not only to Judaism, but to all religious forms in the West. I would even
go a step further in saying that Shapiro's obvious biases and strong opinions actually
enhance the effectiveness of this text, setting Shapiro apart as what she would call "a
noticeably Jewish academic" as opposed to simply "an academic who happened to be a
Jew" (189). Through this text, Shapiro demonstrates that it is possible to be both a serious
academic and a deeply religious individual.

While this text is primarily a scholarly examination of how the Livnot program
works as an effective Jewish educational experience, the accessibility and highly cogent
argumentation with which Shapiro writes, expands the ideal readership of this book
beyond academics and students interested in questions of religion, modernity, and
cultural assimilation, to include all members of the educated Jewish public.