Rachel Kranson’s *Ambivalent Embrace: Jewish Upward Mobility in Postwar America* argues that not only was economic mobility in postwar America not seamless for American Jews of Ashkenazi descent, but that the dissonance between their new economic reality and the communal narratives of exclusion and oppression fed anxieties about authenticity. Throughout the study, Kranson attends to how her subjects used the notion of authenticity as a (de)legitimizing marker towards identity performance and is careful to distinguish between their use of it and her analysis of it. Throughout *Ambivalent Embrace*, Kranson focuses her argument around analyses of major metropolitan area rabbis’ sermons and popular writing. The book is structured around perceptions of postwar affluence, political identity, gendered expectations in the middle class, and later critiques of communal wealth and political positioning.

Anxieties over Jewish identity in the suburbs has played out on two particular fronts. First, the identification of Jews with leftist or liberal political identities presented what many viewed as a contradiction with their new affluence and the conservative politics typically associated with it. Second, romantic notions of the shtetl and the Lower East Side captured the imagination and served ideologically as a foil to understandings of suburban Jewish life. These images influenced the sociological interpretations of postwar Jewishness. Kranson notes that while sociologists were aware that postwar Jews were not likely to “relinquish their Judaism,” they still interpreted shifts in ritual as a façade of middle-class convention and representative of superficial connections (72). This conflation of upward mobility and religious commitment as inauthentic can also be seen in present studies of Jewish observance with value judgments around different forms of participation.

Ironically, as Kranson notes, the same rabbis who spoke out against the material affluence of their congregants, and the presumed superficial lives that would follow, were often the salaried beneficiaries of their congregants’ economic success. While the congregational rabbis understood the desire to move to the suburbs and the accompanying white picket fence
dream, some urged their congregants not to move for white flight. Kranson highlights the relationship between the postwar economic mobility for white-passing ethnic groups and the racism involved. Yet, “at a time when middle-class lifestyles linked so closely to white-skin privilege, liberal Jews could not always tell where upward mobility ended and racism began” (57). Moreover, the move to the suburbs brought with it new conflicts over gendered identities and roles.

Prior to the postwar period, most Jewish families had depended on multiple incomes. Now Jewish men were expected to be the sole breadwinner, which was accompanied by anxiety over the viability of their Jewish identity and masculinity. While Kranson acknowledges that a third of Jewish men owned their own businesses in 1957, she doesn’t examine the ideologies at hand there, other than a nod to Philip Roth’s 1959 Goodbye, Columbus’s tensions between the value of intellectual work versus physical labor and business (99). Given that such a significant number of Jewish men were business-owners, an examination of primary sources that might reflect this and their relationship to their own economic mobility and Jewishness would have strengthened her argument.

The following chapter explores how Hadassah’s international campaigns and local chapters served as an intervention to the contradictory messages middle-class Jewish women received on prioritizing education and career or the family. With its promise of women accomplishing more than domesticity by serving their communities without straying too far from middle class mores about being primarily homemakers, Hadassah offered a middle ground. Through raising money for Israeli institutions and promoting moving to Israel, Hadassah campaigns created a parallel to the Israeli soldier in the romanticized image of the Israeli woman working towards the betterment of the Land of Israel, which cast North American life as superficial and inauthentic in its material affluence.

The dissonance Kranson traces throughout Ambivalent Embrace reaches its climax in the final chapter on the Jewish youth collectives of the 1960s and 1970s that critiqued communal affluence and connected it to the key issues of the day (e.g., Soviet Jewry, LGBT activism, Zionism). Yet, this generation’s admiration of prior working-class Jewish women involved in the labor movement didn’t always translate to fuller critiques of their own work, as evidenced by the protest at the Jewish Women’s Conference in February 1973 that critiqued the JWC for its
exclusion of marginalized single mothers, Sephardic, black, working-class, and gay women who didn’t fit “middle-class sensibilities” (151). The connection between the details of the counterculture generation’s upbringing and the development of their critiques warrants further attention. While the relationship to the other movements of the 1960s and 1970s is clear, what of the influence of growing up amidst ambivalence over upward mobility? A similar question could be asked of Jewish education at the time.

While the influx into the suburbs had led to large synagogue-building projects, the protests against the normative and exclusionary nature of middle-class institutions led to the formation of havurot. The small communal groups resisted the model of the large fundraising-dependent synagogue; a pattern which bears further examination. Kranson astutely points out the roles of political and gendered identities and romanticized communal histories in the larger question of what it meant to be Jewish in the suburbs. While she examines middle-class Jewish femininity, it would have been interesting to see her delve more into the permutations of Jewish masculinity and their relationship to marriage, family, and community. Ultimately, Kranson has made a valuable contribution to the study of religious identities in postwar America, gender studies, and labor studies.