



Creative Paradoxes

A Tribute to the Retirement of Samuel Heilman

Riv-Ellen Prell¹

© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2020

Abstract

These comments on the retirement of Sam Heilman reflect on his contributions to the ethnographic study of Jewish experience, and participant observation. They focus on the paradoxes in his scholarship that derive from his being a participant and an observer.

Keywords Samuel Heilman · Ethnography of American Jews · Synagogue Studies

It is a pleasure for me to join the chorus of voices who are reflecting on Sam Heilman's contributions and remarkable career. The ability to constitute a community for this occasion under challenging circumstances not only speaks to the significance of Sam's accomplishments, but might even be an opportunity for the sort of reflections that interested him on how people constitute communities and bring meaning to their connections.

I want to reflect on the earlier years of Sam's work as a scholar because to me they reveal the richly paradoxical nature of his work. What made his scholarship genuinely exciting and pathbreaking grows out of the tension and creativity of those paradoxes. *Synagogue Life: A Study in Symbolic Interaction*, Sam's first book published in 1976, crossed many conventional borders of scholarship and introduced him as an important young scholar.

In neither anthropology or sociology, the hybrid of fields in which he trained in the early 1970s, did scholars study their own communities. Such work invited accusations such as "lacking objectivity," or losing the "capacity for rigor." If one were to risk such accusations it would certainly not be for the study of American Jews in a Modern Orthodox shul. Some anthropologists had studied "exotic" Jews, which portrayed Hasidim as people inhabiting an island-like existence remote from the modern world. That "otherness" gave the scholar some cover. Sam was not, of course, in addition, the only graduate student in sociology to hear from an advisor

or two that studying Jews would likely keep him from a job or a career because Jews were not an appropriate subject for study. Sam's book demonstrated then, and his work continues to demonstrate, the richness and complexity of studying a group of which one is a member. Indeed, notions of subjectivity moved from accusations of inappropriate behavior to questions of how knowledge is constructed. As his books went into second editions, he had the opportunity to explore and to teach readers about the process by which an insider can learn to reflect on, analyze, and interpret the world which was once familiar. He came to call himself "an observant native and an anthropological observer." He claimed this paradox as one that makes possible a rich and layered analysis of social life.

The second paradox is one that Sam inherits from his understanding of the study of culture from a variety of perspectives—"symbolic interaction" of Erving Goffman, as in his first book, and "thick description" of Clifford Geertz, among others- that is apparent in so much of his work. Sam's ethnographic approach embraces the paradox of finding big stories in what others might view as small interactions. His research focused on Jewish life, but they led him to demonstrate how people created meaning, purpose and community in social interactions and sociability, which led to the third paradox.

For many years, Sam studied religion without studying religion. He allowed us to peer around the corners of prayer, study, and ritual to see all of the social processes involved in a Jewish life. He expanded the contours of how to study Orthodox Judaism and Jews ethnographically, and in so doing boldly looked at how community itself is created with all of its complexity and conflict. He did not study theology or actually unpack *halakha* in order to find overarching cultural themes. His understanding of Orthodox Judaism in the synagogue, the

✉ Riv-Ellen Prell
prell001@umn.edu

¹ University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA

study hall, and in social interaction with peers and rabbis told another story. However, as he looked back at what he did in second editions of his work, he learned that other scholars found insights into how Orthodox Jews in fact created what might be called a religious life, or how they negotiated the contours and complexities of that life.

The next paradox that has marked Sam's career is that he writes both as a humanist and a social scientist, sometimes within the same book or study. The richness and precision of language in Sam's work is one of the ways he engages the humanities. Throughout his career, he has drawn on humanists who have also wrestled with relationships between people, the search for meaning, and life and death. As I recently looked back over some of his books, I was especially struck by its range—ethnographies, biography, history, quantitative studies of American Jewish life, a jeremiad or two on the future of Jews in America, and some hybrid forms as well. His work on death, *When a Jew Dies: The Ethnography of a Bereaved Son*, wove together his reflections on his own personal loss that he narrated with great emotion and beauty, with a learned discussion of Jewish approaches to death. Sam puts in conversation the mourner's experience from facing the last minutes of the life of a dear one, through the first year of mourning. He also narrates this process through the work of other scholars across a number of disciplines, who have reflected on death and life within comparative cultural and religious negotiations. He even turned to the work of early anthropologists, who first posed these questions comparatively.

Some of Sam's work follows the narrative form of a journey, especially *The Gate Behind the Wall: A Pilgrimage to Jerusalem*. His earliest books may be less lyrical than later ones, but they read with a true clarity that often eludes most social scientists. More than Sam's qualities as a fine writer is the work on which he draws, and the thinkers and ideas that enrich and shape his social science. They are the work of a humanist as well as a social scientist.

I had an opportunity to work with Sam on a project that Jack Wertheimer invited us to join at the end of the last century. Jack assembled a group of social scientists to produce individual studies and then reflect on them together. His topic was the study of Conservative Judaism at the end of the twentieth century. Sam and I were the ethnographers in the group. However, Sam was the one person at the table who worked

across all of the research methods that were represented there. That project took on for me a sort of social *science knights of the roundtable*, where Jack gathered colleagues to discuss methods, findings, and significance. Not exactly issues of the kingdom and war – however, I'm not sure that some of us did not believe that was what we were actually doing. Since Sam was the only one who engaged all of these methods, he was certainly among the most lively and insightful at the table.

What was striking about this collaboration was that everyone, which is to say most of the men, pretty much all talked at the same time, voices rising, statistics challenged, and methods debated at every meeting. Later in the process, Jack brought in Nancy Ammerman, a distinguished sociologist of religion particularly interested in congregational life and a Protestant, to consult on our work. I sat next to her at one of the meetings and *sotto voce* asked if she had ever been to such a gathering where everyone spoke but seemed to hear each other. Her eyes literally shining, she proclaimed it one of the most exciting experiences of her life! Sam was certainly one of the great simultaneous talkers, but I noticed he also actually listened. He brought that great range of knowledge of methods and American Jewish life to the table and was much appreciated.

I draw your attention primarily to Sam's early work, his ethnographies about modern Orthodox life, rather than his towering later contributions about the leaders and followers who are *defenders of the faith* in Orthodox Judaism, to recall the foundation of his life as a scholar. Sam made his life in two worlds – an orthodox Jew and a secular scholar, an immigrant and an American, a child of survivors who carried that painful history, and a person who came of age in a period of great optimism in the United States and embodied it- and used that life on the margin to ignite an enduring commitment to the study of the cultures of Orthodox Jewish life. Narrator, ethnographer, humanist, and social scientist, thank you Sam for taking us along on this great journey.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Riv-Ellen Prell is professor emerita of American Studies at the University of Minnesota.