



VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University
VCU Scholars Compass


Menorah Review

VCU University Archives

1990

Menorah Review (No. 18, Winter, 1990)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/menorah>

 Part of the [History of Religion Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

© The Author(s)

Recommended Citation

<https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/menorah/18>

This Full Issue is brought to you for free and open access by the VCU University Archives at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Menorah Review by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact libcompass@vcu.edu.



MENORAH



REVIEW • THE JUDAIC STUDIES PROGRAM OF VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY • NUMBER 18 • WINTER 1990

For the Enrichment of Jewish Thought

CIVIL TENSIONS IN THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY

Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews
By Jonathan S. Woocher
Bloomington: Indiana University Press

A Review essay by
Miriam Joyce Haron

Although the title gives no indication, the focus of sociologist Jonathan Woocher's interesting book is Federation Judaism, that faith which is observed by those involved in the work of the United Jewish Appeal and Jewish federations throughout the country.

According to Woocher, at the beginning of the twentieth century American Jewry created an American Jewish polity, "a matrix of voluntary organizations and associations, which carry out functions of communitywide concern." This polity gradually developed a common faith that was not connected with any particular synagogue movement, but was instead a "civil Judaism." For the term civil Judaism, Woocher is indebted to Robert Bellah, who in his 1967 seminal essay explained that civil religion points to the rituals, symbols, and myths that compose what is considered the universal religion of the nation, the shared faith, beyond particular church, that unifies all groups.

American Jews did not set out to develop a basis for unity in the midst of their diversity by deliberately constructing a civil religion. Woocher begins his examination with a brief history of the institutional development of the community and of American Jewish philanthropy. He underlines

that while there were substantial differences concerning *halakah*, all Jews accepted philanthropy as an important religious precept. It was, of course, true that through the early years of this century some American Jews, the earlier German immigrants, were giving and others, the later Eastern European arrivals, were receiving. At the same time, until the period of World War II, inside the charitable establishment there was division about the ultimate goal of the community, division between assimilationists and survivalists. Both groups pressed for full integration into American life, but while survivalists wanted to retain their cultural, as well as their religious identity, assimilationists wanted to retain only the latter.

How, then, did the charitable establishment create a specifically American Jewish civil religion? The Holocaust and establishment of Israel so influenced American Jewry that in the postwar period local federations were able to bring together the entire community and to promote a Jewish civil religion with its own articles of faith and its own myths. Woocher describes seven articles of the faith: 1. The unity of the Jewish people; 2. mutual responsibility; 3. Jewish survival in a threatening world; 4. the centrality of the state of Israel; 5. the enduring value of Jewish tradition; 6. Tzedakah: philanthropy and social

justice; 7. Americanness as a virtue. He also discusses the myths supported by the faithful, emphasizing the importance of the primary myth, from "Holocaust to Rebirth."

Devotion to the Jewish state is a central factor in the American Jewish civil religion. Israel's 1967 Six Day War strengthened the American commitment. According to Woocher, as a result of fear that the besieged Jewish state would be destroyed, then euphoria after Israel's victory, "civil Judaism came of age as a force in the American Jewish religious consciousness." The Six Day War, however, was not the only factor that resulted in an intensification of American Jewish activity. Woocher points to the climate of social activism and the growing ethnic consciousness of many groups.

How, then, does the federation community practice civil religion? It adapts traditional religious concepts, including shabbath rituals and grace after meals. Through selective adaptation, it offers "a modern faith rooted in popular Jewish sentiment, yet resonant with Jewish tradition." It organizes missions to Israel and to other countries—carefully orchestrated group trips "to increase the participants' knowledge, concern, and commitment." It also sets up fund-raising dinners and a variety of meetings for the faithful. Woocher noted that the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations has been transformed into a major civil religious ceremony. Every important Jewish organization is represented. "The crowd of participants produces the impression that one is at the center of a vast and important Jewish world." The major issues of Jewish life are addressed. "Here the priests and prophets of civil Judaism carry out their offices before the assembled congregation of Israel." All these ac-

IN THIS ISSUE

- *Civil Tensions in the American Jewish Community*
- *Transmitting Our Memes*
- *Jewish Historiography*
- *Brown Lecture*
- *Book Briefings*

tivities take place under the United Jewish Appeal campaign slogan, which goes to the heart of the matter, "We are one." All Jews, everywhere, are responsible for each other.

Because civil religion attempts to include all American Jews—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Atheist, and Agnostic—its leaders have carefully selected rituals that are acceptable to all and do nothing that will offend any segment of the community. According to Woocher "Civil Judaism focuses on the unobjectionable primary ethical, dimensions of the tradition." There is, however, one heresy that Woocher noted, which "subjects the perpetrator to immediate excommunication: denial of support to the State of Israel." Israel is seen as both the focus of Jewish spiritual energy and the "beleaguered exemplar of the Jewish condition of insecurity in the modern world." Centrality of Israel is the cornerstone of the faith.

Woocher does not, however, touch upon how the civil religion deals with those who support Israel but are seriously dissatisfied with Israeli policy. On this matter there are numerous questions that remain unanswered. Do American Jews who vocally object to Israeli policy maintain their place within the civil religious community? Can American Friends of Peace Now or members of the New Jewish Agenda fully participate? How does the civil religion view the New Israel Fund? Did the War in Lebanon have any sort of effect? (It would be helpful to see a future essay on this subject, one that might also include the impact of the present uprising in the occupied territories.)

Using data obtained in studies of participants in federation and United Jewish Appeal sponsored leadership development programs, Woocher presents a portrait of civil Jewish activists in their thirties. The study confirmed that the participants accepted the tenants of the civil religious faith. In addition, a majority agreed that there was a power in the universe greater than themselves and that the Jews are the chosen people. These young leaders, however, gave low priority to support for Jewish religious activities and institutions. In addition, they were ambivalent about questions of theology. Most Ameri-

can Jews in their thirties, of course, do not participate in such leadership activities; but it is likely that their attitudes are similar to those of the participants who were their college classmates and are now their suburban neighbors sharing similar concerns and a similar lifestyle.

After describing the results of his careful research, Woocher put forward his own blueprint for the future. He considers it evident that the synagogue and the rabbinate have been eclipsed by the federation and the American Jewish polity. Using a term coined by scholar Daniel Elazar, neo-Sadducean Judaism, Woocher suggests a new movement saying, "Neo-sadducean Judaism places at the center of its world not Torah, but the Jewish people, and makes the maintenance and expression of Jewish peoplehood its primary religious obligation."

According to Woocher post-World War II development has produced a Jewish community in which the synagogue "has proven unable to retain clear primacy precisely at a time when most active American Jews have endorsed the preservation of religious tradition as a major communal goal." How should the synagogue respond? Woocher explains that many rabbis are prepared to accept civic Judaism "as an important ideological framework" for mobilizing the community, but are concerned about its narrow system of belief and behavior. He suggests that the synagogue become the co-sponsor of Jewish civil religion, making civil religion's symbols and values "central to its mission and message."

Woocher also calls for creation of a civil Jewish theology that will "give substance to the rhetoric, the mythic allusions and symbols, which are central to the civil religion." In this connection he briefly discusses the work of five potential contributors to such a Jewish theology, including Mordecai Kaplan, Martin Buber, Emil Fackenheim, Eugene Borowitz, and Irving Greenberg. But as Woocher's own research has illustrated, federation Jews are not interested, a lack of interest that is firmly rooted in the history of the American Jewish community. As Leon A. Jick underlined in *The Americanization of the Synagogue, 1820-1870*, from the outset

American Jewry has ignored theology.

Certainly, Woocher will disturb, perhaps even offend, some readers. Nevertheless, in this provocative book he has given us an excellent history as well as considerable material for discussion and debate.

Dr. Miriam Joyce Haron teaches in the Department of History at Northwestern University.

TRANSMITTING OUR MEMES

Ethical Wills: A Modern Jewish Treasury
By Jack Riemer
New York: Schocken Books

A Review essay by John D. Rayner

It is a sad reflection on the materialism of our age that the word "will," as in "last will and testament," is understood to refer only to the posthumous disposition of our material possessions. Not that it is not praiseworthy for the living to leave instructions as to what is to be done with their property when they are dead. It relieves their families of uncertainties which, during their time of bereavement, they can well do without. To that extent, and in so far as provision is made for charities to be among the beneficiaries, there is even an ethical dimension to the making of such a will. Certainly there is no lack of legislation on the subject in the Halachah. In particular, there is strong emphasis on the duty to carry out the wishes of the deceased (*mitzvah l'kayem divrey ha-met*, so Rabbi Meir, Ta'anit 21a).

But the same word, *tza'vot*, literally "command," which denotes a financial will, also describes in Jewish tradition another kind of will in which the testator exhorts his children to be faithful to the spiritual and moral traditions, values, and ideals he has cherished during his life. Such a document is known as an "ethical will." The prototype is the 49th chapter of Genesis, where Jacob, sensing the approach of his death, summons his twelve sons and tells them what he expects of them, though it has to be said that the "expectations" are a

mixture of pious hopes and less-than-complimentary characterizations and predictions. That story, in turn, served as a model for one of the finest books of the Pseudepigrapha, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, which includes such gems as this: "And now, my children, I exhort you, love each one his brother, and put away hatred from your hearts; love one another in deed, and in word, and in the inclination of the soul" ("Testament of Gad", 6:11).

In talmudic and medieval times and beyond, the writing of such ethical wills became a common practice on the part of the learned and pious, and an anthology of them was published in 1926 by the Jewish Publication Society of America, in a two-volume Hebrew-and-English edition, selected and translated by Israel Abrahams, under the Hebrew title *Tzava'ot Ge'onei Yisrael* and the English title *Hebrew Ethical Wills*. The authors represented in this collection range from Yochanan ben Zakkai through Nachmanides to the Vilna Gaon, a span of 1,800 years.

It was the appearance of this work which, more than anything else, established Ethical Wills as a recognized, distinctive genre of Jewish literature. No doubt the genre is represented in other literatures; but only in Judaism has it had such a long, uninterrupted history. That being the case, one might wonder whether it has continued into the present. That question can now be answered in the affirmative, thanks to the work of Jack Riemer who collaborated in the compilation of a handsomely produced volume entitled *Ethical Wills: A Modern Jewish Treasury*.

The volume covers the eighteenth to twentieth centuries and includes famous as well as unknown names. It is divided into four parts: "Traditional Wills," "Wills from the Holocaust," "Wills from the Land of Israel," and "Wills of Modern and Contemporary American Jews."

Some of the selected passages are disappointingly slight and ethically unremarkable, but many of them are eloquent testimonies to the greatness of the human spirit, and specifically of the Jewish spirit, even in situations of unspeakable degradation and terror. On the whole, therefore, the ver-

dict of the Epilogue may be endorsed:

We have seen wills in which people show great sensitivity and concern and we have seen some in which people express the resentments that they feel. But none was petty or mundane. Somehow when a person has only one more message left to give, he or she rises above the trivial and attains a level of significance.

A few major themes strikingly recur. In the wills from the Holocaust there is, for instance (perhaps regrettably but, Heaven knows, understandably), a repeated demand for vengeance, as when Zippora Birman, a resistance fighter in the Bialystok ghetto, wrote:

Cursed is he who reads this, mournfully sighs, and returns to his daily tasks. It is not mourning that we demand of you! We did not even mourn our own parents, but speechless and silent we viewed the heaped corpses of our loved ones who were shot like dogs. We call upon you: Vengeance, vengeance . . .

Much more frequent, though, are appeals for forgiveness from any persons the writer may have wronged during his lifetime. Typical of several is the earnest request of Rabbi Bernard L. Levinthal of Philadelphia (1865–1952):

At the time of the funeral . . . the elder among the rabbis present . . . shall three times, in my name, make announcement of my request for forgiveness by all those whom I may have caused, God forbid, some financial loss . . . as well as by those whom I may have pained by words uttered or otherwise harmed, knowingly or unknowingly.

Some passages read like epitaphs, like the words found chalked on a board in the Warsaw Ghetto: "We lived, we loved each other, we fought, and believed in the God of Israel"; and the jotting of a young soldier in Israel's War of Independence, "Do not eulogize me; I did my duty!" Some are retrospective thanksgivings, as when Rabbi David De Sola Pool of New York (1885–1970) wrote: "There has been no day in which my heart has not leaped with

gratitude for the joy of life. . . ."

Most of them, as one would expect from the antecedent Ethical Wills literature, are exhortations to moral conduct, sometimes with a marked ascetic slant ("Never set foot into theaters," "Never seek after luxuries," and the like), sometimes in broad and positive terms. In most of the wills, there is explicit or implicit emphasis on loyalty to Judaism, either for the contribution it has to make to the amelioration of human society, or simply as a debt of honor.

The chief impulse behind the writing of ethical wills can perhaps be encapsulated in the title of Ernest Becker's book *The Denial of Death*. Human beings crave immortality, because the proposition that death is the unmitigated end is intolerably absurd and tragic. Besides, even quite apart from metaphysical concepts of an after-life, it is manifestly untrue. Something of every individual lives on in his children and children's children; and it does so in two ways: through genetic and cultural transmission.

Cultural transmission, which is what concerns us, is attested even in animals, a subject of special interest to Dr. Richard Dawkins, lecturer in animal behavior at the University of Oxford, who, in discussing the field work of a fellow zoologist on the singing habits of a New Zealand bird, proposed the term "meme" (from a Greek word meaning "to imitate") for an individual item of cultural transmission, to correspond to the "genes" of genetic transmission (*New Scientist*, 28 October 1976).

In human terms, memes would be such things as beliefs, laws, customs, books, songs, concepts, expressions, mannerisms. They are transmitted to us in great abundance throughout our lives and with greatest impact when we are young. Some of them we reject and proceed to forget or neglect. Others we affirm and make our own, sometimes even reinterpret or reshape to our liking. They are the memes we consciously or unconsciously commend to our children and hope they will keep alive when we are gone.

This urge to transmit one's heritage from generation to generation is particularly marked in the case of mi-

nority groups, which have preserved their heritage for many centuries and against heavy odds and all the more so if they believe it to embody insights and values essential for the redemption of humanity—hence the deep-seated wish of most Jews to feel sure that Judaism will be perpetuated by their offspring.

Of course, the word “Judaism” is imprecise, but using Richard Dawkins’ terminology we may define it as the collective meme pool of the Jewish people, from which the individual Jew receives only a proportion, depending on the intensity of his Jewish upbringing and education, and then makes his own selection, which becomes his private Jewish meme pool. In this last sense, at least, every Jew must wish Judaism to continue after his lifetime, a desire he makes known to his children, deliberately or in spite of himself, in innumerable ways. The ethical will is a final summation and reinforcement of that life-long yearning, all the more effective because of the emotional context of sorrow in which his children will be made cognizant of it.

In addition, Jewish ethical wills have in the past derived much of their effectiveness from Judaism’s extreme emphasis on the duty of filial piety, so solemnly enjoined in the Fifth Commandment, as well as the unquestioning acceptance of that obligation as traditionally defined. That is why Jewish fathers felt able to “command” their children to behave in specified ways, with a good deal of confidence that the command would be obeyed.

But that is where—except in circles virtually untouched by modernity—a great change has taken place, and it is reflected in the phraseology of one of the modern American wills included in the Riemer-Stamper *Treasury*, when Abraham M. Ellis (1880–1960), a Philadelphia businessman and philanthropist, concludes, “I respectfully recommend to you, my children, that at least four times annually you reread this ethical will and try to follow its recommendations.” The modern Jewish parent does not “command”: he “respectfully recommends”—and is tormented with anxiety as to whether his children will follow his recommendations. For, both the unquestioning filial piety of

former times and the sense of *noblesse oblige* loyalty to the Jewish people have largely evaporated. Why that has happened is a question beyond the scope of this article. That it has happened is beyond doubt. Perhaps the fact will lead to even greater productivity in the writing of Jewish ethical wills, but in a more pleading, less confident tone than hitherto. That remains to be seen.

And yet the contrast between past and present must not be overdrawn. Jewish parents have always worried whether their children would carry on the Tradition. Just that is the theme of a recurring Midrash (Sifrei Deut. to Deut. 6:4 and parallels) about the patriarch Jacob, who has worried all his life that he may have unworthy offspring (*pesolet*, literally “rubbish”). But at his death-bed his children reassure him by saying: “Hear, O Israel (that is, Hear, O Jacob our father), the Lord is our God, the Lord alone”; and Jacob, deeply relieved, thanks God, saying, “Blessed be the Lord, whose glorious kingdom is for ever and ever,” and dies in peace.

In every Jewish parent’s mind there must be at least a particle of doubt whether their children, or their children’s children, will recite the *Shema*. There are no guarantees, at least not this side of the age in which the prophet Elijah will turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the hearts of children to their parents (Malachi 3:24). Meanwhile the hope that the Jewish memes we have cherished will live on in our children is only a hope; and the Jewish Ethical Will is its literary expression.

John D. Rayner is Senior Rabbi of Liberal Jewish Synagogue in London, England.

JEWISH HISTORIOGRAPHY

Ideas of Jewish History
By Michael Meyer
Detroit: Wayne State University Press

A Review essay by Leon J. Weinberger

Michael Meyer has edited a first-rate textbook for a course in Jewish historiography. After pointing out that contemporary forms of Jewish

identity are rooted in some view of Jewish history, Meyer shares with us the problems of the historian, both the philosophical (“How can the past be known when it is not present to our senses?”) and the historiographical (or methodological) relating to causality and judgments upon the past. Another problem for the historian is periodization. However, the need to locate natural divisions in the Jewish past is complicated by the fact that Jews lived simultaneously under a variety of political, economic, and social conditions.

Equally difficult is the attempt to find a common bond uniting Jews in their several differing cultural and historical experiences leading to variations in Jewish self-definition—an unresolved problem to this very day. Meyer observes that the attempt to find “the spatial connection” (his term) led some historians to search behind the events of the Jewish past and discover certain religious, or moral or national, ideals consistently present and unflinchingly preserved.

Meyer then proceeds to list the major contributions to Jewish historiography and does a critical evaluation of their attempts to deal with the special problems of their craft. Beginning with the writers of the historical sections of the Bible, Meyer observes that in their efforts to develop a philosophy of history, they broke with the historiographers of the ancient Middle East even as they influenced the later historians of the West. Unlike the scribes of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt who were employed by emperors to write about their military exploits, the biblical writers interpreted history as the record of God’s special relationship with Israel which he rewards for its obedience and punishes for its sins. Uninterested in historical events as important in themselves, the biblical writers were more concerned with interpreting the record of history as evidence of God’s presence in world affairs. History, thereby, became a witness pointing to the truth of God’s actions and therefore became a requirement in the life of Israel, God’s people.

With the writing of 1 Maccabees, the first post-biblical work of Jewish history, the influence of Greek secular historiography is seen. God is dis-

tant from the political and military events connected with the Maccabean uprising and is never mentioned by name. Rather than focus on faith and miracles, the writer of 1 Maccabees gives a matter-of-fact summary of events which spurred the revolt of Mattathias followed by a description of the resistance carried on by his sons. II Maccabees appeals both to secular Greek and traditional Jewish readerships. The writer there records God's direct and miraculous intervention on behalf of Israel, his people in the manner of the biblical historian, even as he strives to educate and entertain his readers after the model of Greek historiography.

In Josephus Flavius, the first century C.E. Jewish historian, several influences are at work. Like the Mesopotamian and Egyptian scribes of the Bronze and Iron Ages, he strove to flatter his patrons, the Flavian emperors, by espousing their victorious cause over his Judean countrymen. And following the Graeco-Roman models, he seeks to establish historical truth for its own sake, even though he is at times self-serving in his attempt to vindicate himself and justify the wars of Rome against its enemies. Nevertheless, Josephus fails to rise to the highest standards of Graeco-Roman historiography.

Following the destruction of the second Temple and the end of the Judean commonwealth, Jewish interest in history was confined to the biblical period, which became an idealized and ritually repeated *heils-geschichte* through which the community renewed itself. In support of his view that the Rabbis "possessed no conception of the development of ideas or institutions," Meyer offers in evidence the fact that the latter insisted that the Oral Law as well as the written Torah had its origin at Sinai. One wonders if this is a fair indictment of the Rabbis. Can it not be said that having been traumatized by the loss of the Temple and the Judean state, they were more concerned with preserving the integrity of the *halakha*, "the Jew's City of God" (in Meyer's words) than in historical studies, which, like astronomy and geometry, they would have considered peripheral to wisdom (cf. the *Ethics of the Fathers*, 3.23)? More to the point is Meyer's observation that "for the

most part, historical considerations remained inessential to the rabbinic view of the world."

In the Talmudic period the author *Seder Olam* sought to establish for the first time a chronology according to the creation of the world; and in the Middle Ages, Moses Maimonides, following the model of the *Ethics of the Fathers*, traced the unbroken chain of *halakha* from Moses to his own day. In this effort he was probably motivated by a desire to stem the tide of Karaite polemics and not by a concern with historical studies, which he, like Aristotle, considered a waste of time. Even Judah ha-Levi, who valued God's presence in history at Sinai as the most compelling evidence of Israel's faith, merely followed the model of the biblical historians. Although differing from his contemporaries who sought a philosophical basis for religious truth, Halévi valued history not for its own sake but as the preeminent foundation of that truth.

The ninth and tenth centuries produced two works of historical interest designed to counter the Karaite efforts to delegitimize the Rabbanites and the Oral Torah. These include the *Seder Tannaim ve-Amoraim* from the year 885 or 887 and the *Iggeret* (not *Igeret* as in Meyer's text) *Ray Sherira Gaon* written in 987. In his introduction Meyer lumps Abraham Ibn Daud's *Sefer ha-Qabbalah* of 1160–1161 with the other two and dismisses it with one sentence (p. 16). In the body of the book he does include a short extract from Ibn Daud's work under the headings "The Reliability of the Rabbinic Transmission" and "The Unbroken Chain." This bit of literary gerrymandering is probably designed to support Meyer's thesis that basic to Ibn Daud's work is "the underlying polemic against the Karaites" (p. 79).

Meyer's thesis here is debatable given Ibn Daud's expanded treatment of the history of Spanish Jewry (which Meyer acknowledges on p. 79) and his attempt to promote the authority of the Spanish rabbis as the legitimate successors of the Babylonian academies. It is much more likely that the latter was Ibn Daud's main concern given the lavish attention he devotes to the Andalusian courtier-rabbis in the concluding Chapter VII and in the Epilogue of

the *Sefer ha-Qabbalah*, (ed. G. Cohen, p. 263). The Karaite polemics notwithstanding, there is a new polemical tone in the closing chapters of Ibn Daud's work. It is, in the words of G. Cohen, the effort to proclaim "the almost exclusive dominion of the Andalusian rabbinate over all the other various branches of Jewish knowledge."

Tenth-century Italy produced three works of historical interest. *Josippon*, a book written in Hebrew by an anonymous author, presents an account of the second Temple from "collected stories from the book of Joseph b. Gorion [Josephus Flavius]." Its great popularity in both its short Mantua edition and long Constantinople edition—it was even translated into Arabic by Zecharia ben Said el-Jemeni—attests to a greater interest in post-biblical Jewish history, as Meyer observes. *The Chronicle of Ahimaaz* by Ahimaaz ben Paltiel gives an account of the author's family and their achievements in southern Italy. Rounding out the trio is the *Chronicle of Nathan ha-Bavli*, preserved only in fragments, giving an account of institutional life among tenth-century Babylonian Jews. Franco-German Jewry in the tenth-twelfth centuries was not given to historical writings, and only genealogies of scholars and martyrologies following the First and Second Crusades have been preserved. Not mentioned by Meyer among the historical writings from this period is the *Sefer ha-Yashar* probably written in Spain in the twelfth century (cf. M. Steinschneider, *Jewish Literature*, p. 78).

From the sixteenth century several notable works in Jewish historiography have been preserved. The need to record for posterity the fate of Spanish Jewry expelled from their homes in 1492 led Joseph ha-Kohen to compose his *Vale of Tears* in Hebrew in 1558 and Samuel Usque his *Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel* in Portuguese in 1553. Both authors follow the traditional biblical model and attribute Israel's suffering to her sins. A departure from this religious causality is Solomon Ibn Verga's *Shevet Yehuda* written in the 1520s. Probing the causes for Jewish suffering Ibn Verga advances—for the first time in Jewish historiography—secular considerations ("their pretentious, envy inspiring behaviors") that may have

accounted for their plight. Meyer correctly observes that this new component in Jewish historiography may have come from the influence of the Italian Renaissance with its emphasis on the human factors at work in historic events. In line with the new humanism coming out of Italy, Jewish writers showed an increased interest in the histories of the lands in which they lived, resulting in the histories of Venice and the Ottoman Empire by the Cretan Elijah Capsali, the histories of the rulers of France and Turkey by Joseph ha-Cohen, and David Gans' world history. Commenting on these developments, Meyer notes that "because the histories of other nations could be viewed with less theological presupposition than that of Israel, increased awareness of them must have played a role in the eventual secularization of Jewish history as well."

The secular temper of the Italian Renaissance is most notable in the work of the 16th Azariah dei Rossi who applies critical and analytical methods in evaluating rabbinic legends, albeit he does not produce a connected historical narrative. It is only in the nineteenth century that integrated and comprehensive histories of the Jews begin to appear in the wake of the European Romantic movement, which sanctioned the search for historic roots of people and cultures. Coupled with the *Wissenschaft* with its insistence on nonjudgmental textual studies, this century produced the seminal historical writings of Leopold Zunz, Immanuel Wolf, Abraham Geiger, Nachman Krochmal, and Heinrich Graetz.

Meyer observes that the third element in the mix that produced a synthetic conception of Jewish history was the "system of historically grounded metaphysical idealism." From Herder and Hegel, Jewish historians proposed that a single unique idea was at the center of the Jewish experience, giving it purpose and continuity in its disparate historical and geographic settings. For Immanuel Wolf this idea was the unity of God; for Abraham Geiger it was ethical monotheism. There were polemical considerations in the position taken by the historically grounded metaphysical idealists, who could ar-

gue that Judaism was not of limited importance having passed its prime with the advent of Christianity, but a force that continues to be "an important and influential factor in the development of the human spirit" (I. Wolf, "On the Concept of a Science of Judaism," quoted in Meyer, p. 150). One wonders to what degree, if any, political concerns played a role in the efforts of these historians. Certainly they were of prime importance to Leopold Zunz (a fact that Meyer ignores, see pp. 156-157) who was persuaded that a familiarity with the religious heritage of Jewry will lead enlightened statesmen to grant the Jews the same civil rights as the rest of the German nation enjoys (cf. N.N. Glatzer: L. Zunz, *EJ*).

Other historians like I.M. Jost, who sensed the polemical nature of the idealist, began his *History of the Israelites*: "It is time to close the files on the value or lack of value of the Jews and Judaism and to begin with an analysis of the phenomenon itself, its origin and development." Meyer pays tribute to Jost's "objectivity and good historical sense," which exceeded those of the historians who followed him, such as Graetz and Dubnow, although his work did not gain the popularity of theirs. In assessing the east-European philosopher Nachman Krochmal, Meyer acknowledges his pioneering efforts in developing the first systematic philosophy of Jewish history, although in subordinating the history of individuals and institutions to the history of ideas—after the manner of Immanuel Wolf—he tends to ignore the material components in the history of the Jews.

As expected, Meyer devotes more space to Heinrich Graetz and Simon Dubnow than to the historians preceding and following them. In his attempt to answer the question, "What is Judaism?" by focusing on its historical development, Graetz advocates the role of the historian over the philosopher for whom the history of an idea precedes its historical effects. Although Graetz did not presume that the philosophical idea—the Jewish "folk-soul"—could exist in a vacuum separate from Israel's historic life, he was equally certain that Jewish history was more than its national existence. In Meyer's words,

"Graetz's conception of Jewish history represents an intermediate stage between the earlier view, which paid little regard to the people that brought forth and developed the Jewish idea, and the national historiography of Simon Dubnow who follows him." Like most nineteenth-century historians, Graetz was not without his biases. Among these was his limited interest in east European Jewry, the *Ostjuden*, with their bizarre Hasidism and their "mongrel tongue," Yiddish.

Dubnow, a native of eastern Europe, devotes much of his historical writings to Jewish life in Russia and Poland—including a history of Hasidism—even as he rejects Graetz's thesis that the historical continuity of Jewish life over four millenia is related to their self-image as the bearers of ethical monotheism to the world. For Dubnow, the agnostic, Israel's survival and creative life over the centuries is an expression of its national awareness as a special people. Dubnow had little sympathy for the post-Mendelssohn Germanizers whom he viewed as traitors "to the national cause."

However, Dubnow's avowed "sociological" approach to Jewish history is pitted with flaws not unlike Graetz's *Leidens und Gelehrtengeschichte*. Committed to the indivisible unity of the Jewish people, he fails to expose the conflicts of social and economic interests and regional tensions in Jewish life, even as he neglects to pay due attention to the external influences of the creativity of the Jews. Although not a Zionist, Dubnow's influence is seen in the works of the Zionist historians Ben Zion Dinur and Raphael Mahler, both of whom found the desire for national redemption and a return to the Land the catalyst for Jewish survival. Even a cursory perusal of the synagogue liturgy recited by Jews daily as well as on Sabbaths and Festivals reveals the ever present plea for national restoration in the Land.

Meyer correctly assesses Yehzekel Kaufmann as a unique Zionist historian who perceives the love of the Land as part of a larger self-awareness that made for Jewish survival. According to Kaufmann, "religion was the sole source of the [Jewish] . . . national will." Meyer concludes

his survey of Jewish historiography with selections from the work of the American historians Salo Baron and Ellis Rivkin and from Leo Baeck's essay *This People Israel* written, in part, in a concentration camp. Meyer finds that although Baron's sociological approach to Jewish history, described as the continuing relationship between Judaism as religion and culture and the Jewish people, has added much to our knowledge of the themes he has chosen, his methodology does not help reveal "the dynamics of Jewish history and the connections among its diverse elements." In this Meyer echoes the observations made by other critics of Baron who find that his work lacks a conceptual framework that would help explain the continuity of Jewish history.

In line with this effort to discover a conceptual framework is the "unity concept" of Jewish history proposed by Ellis Rivkin. Rivkin's thesis is that Jews throughout their historical career held a unified perception of the universe, whether religious, as in the past, or secular, as at present, and that this "trans-historical principle" enabled them to blend creatively into their several environments while preserving their unique identity. However, Meyer rightly argues that a metaphysical "trans-historical principle" is not provable, and he questions the accuracy of the "unity principle" given the diversity of views among modern Jews regarding the world in which they live. In Baeck's essay we hear a voice reflecting the Holocaust experience and his efforts to come to terms with it. The Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel pose new problems for the student of Jewish historiography, which added to the already existing ones make for an exciting and challenging discipline.

Regrettably, Meyer does not mention Levi Herzfeld, the first Jewish economic historian, considered by no less a figure than Theodor Mommsen to be "the foremost and most reliable of all Jewish historians" (cf. G. Karpeles, *Handelsgeschichte der Juden des Altentums* [Brunswick, 1894], p. xx); and he completely ignores the seminal contributions of Moritz Steinschneider to Jewish historiography (cf. S. Baron, *History and Jewish Histo-*

rians [Philadelphia, 1964], pp. 276ff.). However, these are matters of judgment about which one can argue. In the final analysis, Michael Meyer has filled a major void in the study of Jewish historiography by presenting us with a volume that should become the standard introduction to this subject. We are in his debt.

Leon J. Weinberger is University Research Professor in the Religious Studies Department of the University of Alabama and author of Early Synagogue Poets in the Balkans.

BOOK BRIEFINGS

Inclusion of a book in "Briefings" does not preclude its being reviewed in a future issue of Menorah Review.

The Encyclopedia of Judaism. Edited by Geoffrey Wigoder. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. This new one-volume encyclopedia is a landmark in Judaic publishing. It contains over 1,000 articles written by more than 70 rabbis and scholars in a wide variety of disciplines, covering all aspects of Jewish life, culture, history, and religion. The work is beautifully illustrated with approximately 300 color and black-and-white photographs. There is extensive cross-referencing throughout the book as well as an index and glossary. It is the best one-volume reference work on Judaism now available.

The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter. By Arthur Hertzberg. New York: Simon and Schuster. The author has written a challenging revisionist history of the American Jewish experience. He argues that America's Jews, in their struggle to assimilate, have denied themselves a usable past. Describing the Jews who came to this country as poor and uncultured, concerned more with material success than religious freedom, Hertzberg portrays their descendants as a community essentially at war with itself and in a quandary about its values and its future. American Jews must redefine themselves in terms of the traditions of Judaism they have neglected in recent generations. This volume is a guide to the past and an enlightening vision of the future.

The "Shabbos Goy": A Study in Halakha Flexibility. By Jacob Katz. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society. From the Babylonian period to the twentieth century, strictly observant Jews have depended on a non-Jew or "shabbos goy" to perform work that was forbidden on the Jewish Sabbath. The author traces the role of the "shabbos goy" through the centuries and accords him a central role in this fascinating study on the larger question of the adaptability of Halachah to the ever-changing circumstances of Jewish life.

REVIEW CONTRIBUTIONS

If you would like to contribute to the *Menorah Review*, please complete and mail this form to *Menorah Review*, Virginia Commonwealth University, Box 2025, Richmond, VA 23284-2025.

Please enter me (us) as a donor to *Menorah Review*. I (we) am (are) pleased to enclose the following funds toward the annual costs of publishing and distributing the newsletter:

- | | |
|--|---------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Donor at Cost | \$15 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Donor at Support Level | \$30 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Donor at Contribution Level | \$50 and more |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sponsoring Grant | \$2,500 |

Make tax-deductible checks payable to the VCU Judaic Studies Program. Thank you.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

The Pen and The Sword: Israeli Intellectuals and the Making of the Nation-State. By Michael Keren. Boulder, CO: Westview Press. This is the largely untold story of Jewish intellectuals in Israel who committed themselves to the goals of Jewish nationalism and yet strived to maintain their role as intellectuals. From the roots of romantic Zionism in the nineteenth century and the settling in Palestine, to the founding of the state and the crisis of war, their relationship to Israeli culture has been crucial to the building of the nation. But, the author argues, it has also made problematic the development of a critical humanist stance in that culture.

Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification. By David Novak. New York: Oxford University Press. Most studies written about the Jewish-Christian relationship are primarily historical overviews that focus on the Jewish background of Christianity, the separation of Christianity from Judaism, or the medieval disputations between the two faiths. This is one of the first books to examine the

THE SELMA AND JACOB BROWN ANNUAL LECTURE

Sponsored by the Judaic Culture Advisory Committee and the Judaic Studies Program of Virginia Commonwealth University

Speaker: Dr. Marc Lee Raphael
College of William and Mary

Topic: "Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver and American Zionism: The Crucial Years, 1943-1947"

Time and Place: Tuesday, March 20, 8 pm
James Branch Cabell Library
901 Park Avenue, Fourth Floor

relationship from a philosophical and theological viewpoint. Drawing on Jewish classical sources, the author argues that there is actual justification for the new relationship between Judaism and Christianity from within Jewish religious tradition.

Old Wounds: Jews, Ukrainians and the Hunt for Nazi War Criminals in Canada. By Harold Troper and Morton Weinfeld. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. History has complicated the relations between Canadian

Jews and Ukrainians. The authors document 40 years of willful Canadian government inaction against Nazi war criminals and collaborators who found haven in Canada after World War II. The book recalls the efforts by Canadian Jewry to focus national attention on these Nazis, many of whom were alleged to be of eastern European origin, and explores the tensions this effort generated between the two ethnic groups.



REVIEW • THE JUDAIC STUDIES PROGRAM OF VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY • NUMBER 18 • WINTER 1990

Menorah Review is published by the Judaic Studies Program and the Judaic Culture Advisory Committee of Virginia Commonwealth University. Unsolicited manuscripts are welcome. Address all correspondence to Judaic Studies Program, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA 23284-2025.

Editor: Jack D. Spiro
Managing Editor: Elaine M. Jones

JUDAIC CULTURE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Robert M. Talbert, chairman
Harry Lyons, founding member
David G. Bromley
Jacob Brown
Earle J. Coleman
Daryl C. Dance
Hans S. Falck
Helen Horwitz
Robert Hyman
William J. Judd
Lawrence F. Laban
Frances Lewis
Marcia Penn
Elaine Rothenberg
Arthur J. Seidenberg
Jerry Simonoff
Jay Weinberg
Morris Yarowsky

Ex Officio:

Deborah J. Freedlander
Charles P. Ruch
Elske v.P. Smith

Nonprofit Organization
U.S. Postage
PAID
Richmond, Virginia
Permit No. 869