

Harvey E. Goldberg, ed. and trans. *The Book of Mordechai: A Study of the Jews of Libya*. (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1980) xii, 226 pp. \$19.50.

Jewish historians frequently write the history of their people without any reference at all to important Jewish communities in the Maghreb and North Africa. Consciously or unconsciously they have tended to look down on these Jews in Arab lands, assuming that whatever contribution they made to Jewish civilization had been made hundreds of years earlier. Later, the stereotype holds, Eastern Jews became “uneducated, simple and unkempt.”

With the great influx of Eastern Jews into the State of Israel, it was inevitable that this bias would eventually be overcome, and so it was. Over the past two decades a number of important books and articles have appeared which revolutionize our entire view and understanding of the so-called *Edot Hamizrach* (Eastern Jews) and their history. Because it was written primarily in Hebrew or appeared in highly specialized journals, the impact of this literature was initially limited. Recently, however, Norman Stillman's *The Jews in Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (1979) offered a broad introduction to the subject, and made available for the first time in English a wealth of source material. The translation of H. Z. Hirschberg's *A History of the Jews in North Africa* (2 vols., Leiden, 1974, 1981) opened up the work of that pioneering scholar to the English speaking world. Now it is a pleasure to welcome still another addition to this valuable literature.

The Book of Mordechai: A Study of the Jews of Libya contains a translation of roughly half of Mordechai Hakohen's *Highid Mordekhai*, a Hebrew volume describing the history, customs and institutions of the Jews of Tripolitania, completed in Libya in the 1920s but first published by Harvey Goldberg in Jerusalem in 1978. For this English translation, Goldberg has rewritten and expanded his introduction so that it provides both historical background and biographical data on Hakohen. He has also appended a most valuable series of headnotes and endnotes which both clarify and supplement the text. As an anthropologist at the Hebrew University and chairman of the Israel Anthropological Association, Goldberg regards Hakohen almost as a colleague from the past, a native ethnographer with a “combination of detachment and empathy that would do credit to many an anthropologist.” Translated sections describing Libyan Jewry's economy and language, communal life and festivals, and life cycle and family all support this claim, as do some unfortunately

untranslated sections dealing with Jewish customs and beliefs found in part two of the Hebrew version. Though largely absent from this translation, the history sections demonstrate by contrast that Hakohen also belongs to the tradition of Jewish chroniclers which mixes documented facts, received wisdom, and Jewish apologetics in varying proportions.

Those with preconceived notions about Eastern Jews will be astonished by Hakohen's "modernity," particularly his knowledge of the secular world and of Darwin (with whom he disagreed on "scientific grounds"). Hakohen kept closely in touch with enlightened Jews of the West, corresponding with them, reading their books, and in the case of the Jewish scholar Nahum Slouschz, by serving as his travelling companion when the latter visited North Africa in 1906. Slouschz owed more to Hakohen than he acknowledged in his *Travels in North Africa* (1927). To read the work of the "native guide" and the "western scholar" side by side is, in fact, to gain a fascinating and highly unusual perspective on scholarship and its unconscious biases.

The Book of Mordechai is valuable as both a primary and secondary source in several disciplines. Edited with an awareness of those unfamiliar with Jewish sources, the volume is also ably translated, excellently indexed, and helpfully illustrated with maps. It deserves a far greater audience than I fear it will receive.

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