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VCU Menorah Review

*For the Enrichment of Jewish Thought*

Summer/Fall 2006 no. 65

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## A Rebbe in Skirts

***The Maiden of Ludmir: A Jewish Holy Woman and Her World.* By Nathaniel Deutsch. University of California Press**

A Review Essay by Matthew B. Schwartz.

How might we like to have some of the great figures of the past relaxing before us on an analyst's couch? It would be fascinating to probe the mind of Cain or Aristotle or how about the original Oedipus himself? However, no such opportunity affords itself, and we must satisfy our curiosity within the significant limits of what these people wrote or what others wrote about them. Indeed, even when it comes to people one knows for years, there is so much that one can not fathom.

Nathaniel Deutsch's volume on the Maiden of Ludmir is not a traditional narrative biography but derives, he says, from the midrashic style of mingling many sources whether harmonious or conflicting. The Maiden became a sort of Hassidic holy woman, not exactly a rebbe, who functioned as a mentor or counselor in Ludmir and later in Jerusalem during a lifetime which spanned almost all of the 19th century. The Maiden, whose real name was Hannah Rachel Vebermacher, was deeply affected in early adolescence by the death of her mother. She devoted herself to prayer and often visited the cemetery where, according to stories, she experienced a vision which some regard as highly mystical and others as a sign of mental instability – perhaps a psychotic episode similar to the stories of dybbuk possession. While in Ludmir, Hannah Rachel put on tallit and tefillin like a man and spent her days in a small shtiebel synagogue which she had apparently bought with money that her father had left her.

Little more than this is remembered about her, and she left no writings of her own. Professor Deutsch covers most of the standard historical information in the four-page preface. Much of the rest of the book describes Professor Deutsch's own quest for the Maiden in the scholarly literature and even his visit to Ludmir. His enthusiasm for his subject

is evident, and his style can be engaging. Still, the reader who peruses this book only to learn the basic textbook facts about the Maiden need not really go past the preface.

There are many digressions, sometimes lengthy, as on S. Ansky's fact-finding visit to Ludmir during World War I, on Shmuel Abba Horodetsky, an early 20th century historian of Hasidism, and on Menashe Unger who wrote on Hasidism for the Jewish papers. There is a digression on women and tefillin, a narrative history of the Jews of Ludmir beginning with their early settlement many centuries before the Maiden, and a discussion of the movements of Shabtai Tzvi and Jacob Frank.

The book devotes great effort to issues of personal sense of identity and gender roles. This is very much the expression of the interests of 21st century scholarship, which has been strongly concerned with these matters. Was the Maiden really a sort of "false male" or perhaps an androgynous figure, as the author suggests? She appears to have been a very intelligent person, perhaps no less astute than scholars who study her today, even if her milieu lacked our telephones, airplanes and computers. We have in fact far too little information on the Maiden even to guess at her attitude toward gender and sexual issues. Would she have felt out of place at a modern scholarly conference on these topics? A variety of stories offer conflicting accounts of her marital history. It is said that she broke off an early romance or that she married but was almost immediately divorced. Other stories tell that the famed rabbi of Chernobyl intervened to press her to marry. Professor Deutsch offers much evidence that she never had a full scale marriage or children. Yet, Janusz Bardach, who has written the book's introduction, claimed that he was the great-grandson of the Maiden. Bardach grew up in Ludmir and his statement cannot be lightly disregarded. (It should be noted that Bardach, who became a prominent plastic surgeon, is the author of a very important memoir on his experiences in the gulag.) Yet, Professor Deutsch does not seem to follow through on Bardach's genealogical claim.

Marriage is a major issue in the book because the author devotes much effort to assessing the Maiden's gender role, particularly in the light of certain expressions in the Kabbalah and even in the background of East European Christianity. He often cites the studies of David and Rachel Biale who have written on eros and women's issues in Jewish life. Many readers will not accept literally and unquestioningly the idea quoted from David Biale that for Hasidism "the only legitimate function of the physical is as a vehicle for its own elimination." (p. 105) Professor Deutsch criticizes, again relying on David Biale, the supposed bad effects of early marriage among the Hasidim. This is an interesting matter, which requires more elucidation than simply a quotation from Professor Biale. One might wonder what the modern USA with its breakdown of family life has to teach about successful marriage or sexuality.

There is a sense through this book that we moderns may set certain standards of gender or egalitarianism and then assume the authority to judge others—e.g., the Hasidim of the Maiden's times—by those standards. This is a risky practice for a historian and less valuable than trying to understand the ways such people viewed themselves on their own terms and in their own vocabulary.

A children's novel by Gershon Winkler on the Maiden provoked a negative reaction in certain Orthodox circles, and Professor Deutsch is troubled by "the intransigent sexism" of these critics. Chabad's approach was softer. However, Professor Deutsch asks, would they accept such a woman into their own community.

Much of this book is speculative. It is replete with words like "maybe," "probably," "perhaps," "what if," "could have," "may have," and "if true." For example, a possible point of comparison between the Maiden and the last Lubavitcher Rebbe may hold true "if" the author's interpretation of the rebbe's behavior in the matter is correct and then "if" the Maiden indeed was prompted by motives similar to the rebbe's. Speculation has its legitimate place, but sometimes there really is a simple answer to a problem. Professor Deutsch remarks that "Rabbi

Leib Sarah's" was buried in Ludmir and tells a story of the Maiden visiting his grave there. Then a footnote adds that some believe he was buried in Yaltushkow, near Rovno. The easily verifiable fact is that he was buried in Yaltushkow, and the Ludmir story is flawed.

The Maiden's years in Jerusalem reached near the close of the 19th century so that decades into the 20th century, there were still people who claimed to remember her and even her husband. She continued to serve during her last years as a teacher and advisor primarily to the women of the Old Yishuv and probably on occasion to Arab women, and there are accounts of the Maiden leading groups of women to pray at the tomb of the matriarch Rachel and of her visiting Safed to study kabbalah.

*Matthew B. Schwartz is a professor in the history department at Wayne State University and is a contributing editor.*

## By Way of Introduction: Reflections on Israeli Women's Studies: A Reader

**N.J.: Rutgers University Press**

By Esther Fuchs

When I published my monograph, *Israeli Mythogynies: Women in Contemporary Hebrew Fiction* in 1987, there was but a single book-length scholarly anthology in Hebrew on Israeli women. While a few edited volumes appeared since then in both Hebrew and English, mostly in the social sciences, the first and so far the only interdisciplinary anthology of feminist essays *The Equality Bluff* was published in 1991. Since then, however, numerous book-length studies and scores of essays were published in sociology, political science, anthropology, literature and history. The purpose of this anthology is to introduce major trends that developed in the 1990s, as well as work done in the 1980s and even in the 1970s. The chronological overview matters because it helps us understand a trajectory of scholarly evolution as well as its most significant results.

Guiding my selections was not just a scholarly principle, but a pedagogic one as well. In 1995 I began teaching a course on Israeli women. While I could not possibly use resources in Hebrew, a language that was inaccessible to most of my students, I found that resources in English are far too specialized for this kind of course. The available anthologies in English were special issues in academic journals, mostly in the social sciences, which made them rather difficult to use in the classroom. The students showed great interest in the articles I assigned, and so the next year I proceeded to add a few articles. Despite the avid interest in the materials I had them read, everyone agreed that it would be nice to have a textbook, something we could "hold in our hands."

True to the original title of my course, I selected scholarship by and about Israeli women. Israeli women are both the object of inquiry

and the subjects who constructed the research. As subjects, they include Israeli scholars teaching in Israel as well as in Europe and the United States. The essays I selected are either significant historically, substantively or theoretically. They begin new lines of inquiry, make connections between disparate bodies of knowledge, offer innovative methodologies or shed light on uniquely Israeli configurations. For the most part I opted for non-technical and not overly theoretical essays that may be valued by scholars and students in women's studies in general as well as in Israel studies, Jewish studies and Middle Eastern studies. Therefore, though all the articles have gone through a refereeing process, I believe they should appeal to the non-specialist and to non-academic readers.

If national identity is a criterion of selection, theory and method are another. Israeli women's studies are a field that is not simply interested in women as topics, or objects of inquiry. It is rather a field of critical studies using gender as a basic analytic category. Whether the object of critical inquiry is society or literature, politics or culture, Israeli feminist scholarship challenges rather than describes the status quo. It is thus not only by and about, but also for Israeli women. In this sense it is an engaged, deeply political, though not necessarily partisan, scholarship. Its critical inquiries seek to reintroduce and re-evaluate women's experiences and discourses as valid, even crucial objects of inquiry. For the most part it focuses on social processes and structural dichotomies (e.g., public/private; national/feminist) that have hindered equality and empowerment. Though critique is at the very center of this academic enterprise, scholars are equally interested in reconstructing the neglected social and literary history of Israeli women. Produced in both the social sciences and the humanities, Israeli feminist scholarship is both empiricist and poststructuralist, seeking to reveal the "truth" or "reality" beneath popular representations, as well as to expose the gendered narratives, or meta-narratives through which truths and realities are constructed.

The earliest essays of the 1970s argued that gender disparity is a social and legal problem that could somehow be remedied through

appropriate change and reform. Based on this research, Anglo-American feminist work, and the work of the Israeli feminist movement, popular publications began to criticize the Israeli myth of equality. In the 1980s scholars sought to exemplify and document the manifestations of inequality in the workplace, the legal system, the kibbutz, the army and the family. The first phase of Israeli women's studies sought to open up a space in academic discourse for feminist analysis. In the 1990s the concern is to explain how and why inequality works, linking it to fundamental social structures and cultural processes that could not be easily changed. While the early phase focused on society, the second focused on the nation, moving from a reformist vision to a more radical one. The compass in the 1990s was broadened from a concern with state apparatus to national ideologies although both continue to be foci of concern. The pioneers of the field sought to open up a space within the Israeli academe for feminist analysis and discourse, while their followers linked this analysis to fundamental concerns in Israel's national life, war and peace, security and survival. The exclusive focus on the social sciences in the 1980s has begun to include cultural and literary studies as the interest in history and literature as modes of narrating the nation grows. As Israeli feminist scholarship increases in volume and as its scope broadens, it has become increasingly self-conscious, turning the lens of critical inquiry on itself, its own theories and methods of inquiry. "Israeli women" has become a problematic, totalizing category as specific national and ethnic minority discourses are asserting their differences.

The discussion of gender in the following articles straddles the modern and postmodern divide, as some scholars tackle the issue of sexual politics—power relations between "real" men and women, while others focus on textual politics or the hegemony of masculinity as repressive power in cultural scripts and national discourse. Gender is discussed as both the social construction of sexual difference and as the masculine control, via interlocking systems of knowledge and representation, of women's bodies, activities and subjectivities. Masculinity then is an epistemological and discursive regime, and men too can participate in

dismantling it. The essays I included here reflect the critical investigation of woman as other, as the devalued side of the gender binary, as well as to woman as historical subject creating social change, and re-visioning traditional texts and conventional discourses. Both projects of critique and reconstruction are necessary methodologies or research procedures; both are based on a feminist theory of revision. The essays make the gaps in knowledge about and by Israeli women visible, and interrupt the silences by analyzing and interpreting Israeli women's experiences and texts. Feminism inspires here both the critique of the organization and institutional manifestations of the state and the Zionist ideology that has inspired its establishment in 1948. This reader then offers a first comprehensive feminist revision of Zionism as a meta-narrative (or totalizing interpretation) and Israel as a political reality.

Despite their diverse approaches, most of the essays grapple with the deeper roots of gender asymmetries in Israel. While social scientists see the root of the problem in social processes and political constructions, cultural critics find it in the masculine hegemony inscribed in representational and symbolic systems, in the structure of the literary and cinematographic canons and in nationalist mythologies. The section on myth and history deals with the mythological interdependence of Zionism and masculinity in the late 19th century, and the social structures and political pressures that have pushed women and feminism to the periphery during the early decades of the 20th century. The next section on law and religion traces the causes of disparity even further back to halachah, or Jewish religious law, and its imbrications with the secular legal system in Israel. The section on society and politics exposes the social and political constructions of gender, the ways in which relations of center and periphery in society and politics are maintained and reproduced by patriarchal dichotomies (e.g., public versus private, national versus feminist, majority versus minority) that determine and define the collective behavior of men and women. The section on war and peace exposes the ways in which the Arab-Israeli conflict exacerbates gender hierarchies and how Israeli women politi-

cize their marginal status to counter both militarism and sexism. The section on literature and culture delineates the exclusion of women from privileged representations and analyzes work by contemporary women authors and film producers to claim their own space and voice.

In the 1990s a growing awareness of the traditional exclusions of citizen Arab authors from the Israeli literary canon was combined with a growing awareness of similar exclusions of Mizrahi authors. A new consciousness of Holocaust survivors and their descendants, the suppression of testimonies and memoirs in the 1950-60s, the "second generation," has emerged as a previously silenced Ashkenazi group within the Israeli cultural panoply. Though regarded as a privileged Ashkenazi immigration, gender stereotypes of Jewish immigrants from the former USSR, and of the less privileged and smaller Ethiopian immigration reveal an ambivalent attitude toward the newcomers on the part of Israeli citizens. The influx in the 1990s of Jewish immigrants choosing to (in the case of the Russians) or doomed to (in the case of the Ethiopians) cultural autonomy, in addition to the massive influx of non-Jewish "foreign" workers add to the growing perception of the general decline of "Israeliness" as a unitary national identity. Because multicultural and postcolonial discourses are still in the process of emerging in Israel's intellectual life and in its academe, difference, in general, is not yet regarded as a source of empowerment for individuals and as a symptom of intellectual maturity and academic sophistication.

## Israeli Literature and Israeli Politics

### **Identity, Nation and Canon: Political Perspectives on Israeli Literature**

A Review Essay by Esther Fuchs

The books I review here offer political approaches to understanding Israeli literature. Though they differ in their interpretation and evaluation of specific works and authors, they all agree that the literary canon is a product of political, rather than aesthetic or artistic processes. Drawing on theories of the nation, post-colonialism, cultural theory, and feminist theory, the authors reviewed here suggest that a political understanding of the Israeli literary canon reveals both lines of struggle and resistance, as well as lines of collaboration and ideological “bonding,” which are essential to a complete and more balanced appreciation of the complexity of Israeli national culture and collective identity. Central to all three books are concepts of national and political minority discourses, the uses of Hebrew as a radical invention of a modernist tradition, the relationship between Europe and the West to Israel and the Middle East, Arab-Israeli relations, theories of homeland and exile, and the formative and constitutive function of literature. Literary texts are understood here not as reflections of artistic values, but as instruments that shape national identity. All these books recognize that cultural production is inseparable from politics, that the literary is political.

**I. Hannan Hever. *Producing the Modern Hebrew Canon: Nation Building and Minority Discourse*. New York and London: New York University Press.**

Hever sees Hebrew literature as a Western modernist national phenomenon, rather than as a uniquely Jewish one. The Hebrew literary canon enshrines works that validate Zionist ideologies, not merely works of great artistic genius. In this book Hever attempts to trace an alternative historiography by focusing on the suppression of dissident,

heterodox or minority discourses that shaped what we know today as the Hebrew literary canon. Drawing on postcolonial theories, and theories of nationalities, Hever seeks to expose the hegemonic Zionist meta-narrative or “cover story that represses and excludes social, ethnic and national minorities” (p. 4).

The first three chapters of the book deal with the suppression of writing by non-Zionist authors in 19th century Eastern Europe who opposed the anti-Diaspora doctrine, and who hoped to establish a Hebrew literary tradition as a minority discourse in Europe. The first few chapters trace the development of the debate between the anti-Diaspora Zionist authors (e.g., Y.H. Brenner, M.Y. Berdichevsky, S.Y. Agnon) who promoted the idea of a unitary and exclusive cultural center in Palestine and their opponents who remained by and large outside of the literary canon. “The Zionists equated Hebrew culture with the Zionist negation of the Diaspora” (p. 7), and this equation seemed to constitute the standard that determined who was to be included in the literary canon.

The next chapters focus on the emergence of canonic writing in Palestine. In the late 1930s and 1940s the voices that were suppressed belonged to the anti-Zionist secular Canaanites, led by the poet Yonatan Ratosh. This group claimed that the emerging national identity in Eretz Israel should not depend on ties with Jewish historical memory or connection to Jews in the Diaspora. Thus Aharon Amir and Shraga Gafni wrote from a Canaanite, amoral stance that considered Arabs and Jews equal natives in a shared territory. Yet their minor counter-literature was excluded from the literary canon that accorded a place of honor to S.Yizhar, for example, who tended to stereotype his Arab characters as victimized Others. In chapter six Hever focuses our attention on the ethnic process of suppression that determined the formation of the canon in the 1950s. Despite their considerable differences, Amos Oz and Amalia Kahana-Carmon, and A. B. Yehoshua used an Oedipal code that appealed to the Ashkenazi sensibilities of the critical establishment, while the Iraqi born writer, Shimon Ballas, who used the Oedipal code differently, and whose work described the

trauma of ethnic alienation and dislocation experience, did not speak to the hegemonic Ashkenazi elite.

The last two chapters deal with the national suppression of minority discourses. In chapter seven, Hever discusses the status of the Arab Christian writer, Anton Shammas, whose Hebrew novel, *Arabesques* (1986) represents a challenge to the Israeli canon on several levels. As a novel that wrestles with the question of national identity—Israel homeland or exile—Shammas may have penned the most quintessentially Israeli novel ever produced. In chapter eight, Hever argues that as minority discourse, Arab literature, whether written in Hebrew or translated into Hebrew, must be recognized as part of the Hebrew literary canon. Emil Habibi who won the Israel Prize in 1992 is a case in point. Habibi's novel *The Pessoptimist* is critical both of the Jewish majority and the Palestinian minority in Israel. The Hebrew reader can read Habibi both internally, as part of the Israeli canon and externally, as outside it. At the end Habibi remains, like Shammas, on the borderline of canonic legitimacy.

**II. Michael Gluzman. *The Politics of Canonicity: Lines of Resistance in Modernist Hebrew Poetry*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.**

This book explores the politics of selection and inclusion that shaped the Hebrew poetic canon during the Yishuv, the pre-state era of nation building. It argues that an adherence to Zionist ideology, including a fierce critique of the European Diaspora and Yiddish culture, was major for inclusion in the poetic canon. While M.Y. Berdichevsky and H. Y. Brenner rejected Ahad Ha'am's narrowly defined nationalist norms, they did not reject the foundational tenets of the Zionist imperative. This guaranteed them a central status in the formative period of Hebrew literature.

The Zionist imperative that emerged from the cultural debate, according to chapter one, was to write the nation and to "(un)write the self," or to focus on the public rather than the private. H.N. Bialik, the

designated national poet, sought to fuse the private with the public, the personal and the national in conjunction with this desideratum. The emphasis on the public, the national homeland, was contrary to the prevailing modernist European norms that emphasized the private, and the state of exile. The poets Alexander Penn and Leah Goldberg, who promulgated a cosmopolitan, international and diasporic sense of identity, did not attain the central place in the canon that Avraham Shlonsky attained in the 1930s and 1940s. In chapter three, Gluzman re-reads the "minor writing" of Avraham Fogel, a poet who was marginalized in the 1930s and criticized by the likes of Uri Zvi Greenberg and Avraham Shlonsky for his poetics of simplicity. Gluzman argues that Fogel must be understood within a European modernist context and that his minimalist aesthetics of simplicity was a radical option he offered to his nationalist peers.

In chapter four Gluzman argues that modernist women's poetry of the 1930s-40s including Rachel, Esther Raab, Anda Pinkerfeld, Yocheved Bat Miriam and Leah Goldberg also has been suppressed because it belonged to the aesthetic tradition of simplicity and "minor writing." Associated with the private, occasional and emotional, women's poetry in general has been dismissed as self-involved, limited, minor and amateurish. The obsessive focus on Rachel's biography, for example, did not allow for a careful examination of her poetry within the context of Hebrew and international modernisms. The dismissal of Esther Raab failed to note her choice of minimalism and rejection of the male tradition as too bound to the past and to the collective, and as such restricts personal expression. That Rachel, Raab and Pinkerfeld resisted the modernism of Avraham Shlonsky and Natan Alterman resulted in their exclusion from the Hebrew canon. Chapter five focuses on the exclusion of Avot Yeshurun from the center of the canon. Though Yeshurun was belatedly recognized in 1992 as the recipient of the Israel Prize for Literature (along with Emil Habibi), Gluzman suggests that this exclusion was the result of Yeshurun's resistance to Zionist normative separatism and his pro-Palestinian stance, as expressed, for instance in the hermetic poem "Passover on Caves," a poem Gluzman

analyzes here in detail.

In his epilogue Gluzman clarifies that the systematic and consistent exclusion of “minor” authors is often a political decision to suppress dissent and resistance rather than an aesthetic decision. Nevertheless, this process is not necessarily conscious or intentional in the conventional sense of the word. Even as he affirms the other’s right to speak differently, Gluzman rejects the concept of an intentional conspiracy that is attributable to specific individuals. The politics of exclusion and inclusion are ideological and as such concealed even from its practitioners and followers.

**III. Rachel Feldhay Brenner. *Inextricably Bonded: Israeli Arab and Jewish writers Re-Visioning Culture*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.**

This book suggests that political dissent is at the very heart of landmark canonical works by both Israeli Jewish and Arab writers. Brenner argues that both “Israeli Arab and Jewish writings call into question the Zionist exclusionary claim to the land” (p. 5). Against the doctrine of exclusion, the literary representations reassert the denied histories of both the Palestinian Arab and the Diaspora Jew. The book consists of three parts. The first part, “Zionism and the Discourses of Negation: Is Post-Zionism Really ‘Post?’” deals with the history of political dissent within Jewish Zionist thought. Brenner traces an anti-exclusivist and anti-supremacist idea of Zionism to Ahad Ha’Am (1856-1927) and Martin Buber (1878-1965). Both thinkers rejected the doctrine of the “negation of the Diaspora” as well as the doctrine of the “empty land” calling attention to the Arab residents and the urgency of creating peaceful relations with them. Both thinkers feared that by becoming like all other nations and states, the Jewish people would forfeit their historical destiny as “light to the nations.”

The second part, “Dissenting Literatures and the Literary Canon,” analyzes the European influence on the secular and modern foundations of Hebrew literature. The nationalist Western orientation of Hebrew

literature did not change when the center of Hebrew culture was transferred from Europe to Palestine by the end of the 1920s. On the one hand, Zionist ideology and Hebrew literature share a symbiotic relationship as both used Hebrew, the modern secular language of Jewish revival as a medium of communication. On the other hand, leading authors used this medium to criticize basic Zionist tenets, including its separatism and exclusivist claim to the land. What made it possible for these authors (e.g. S. Yizhar, Amos Oz, A.B. Yehoshua and David Grossman) to gain canonic status was the existentialist and psychological, humanitarian and universal interpretations and acclamations by leading Euro-centric critics, like Gersohn Shaked, Menachem Perry, and Nurith Gertz. Similarly, critical works by Atallah Mansour, Emile Habiby and Anton Shammas are unsparing in their "representations of Israeli domination...colonialist dispossession, discrimination and the brutality of conquest and occupation" (p. 111). Brenner argues that both in their Hebrew translation and in their originally Hebrew rendition (in the case of Shammas), these works were well received by Israeli critics who saw in them fictional, subjective, psychological expressions that are legitimate literary articulations by the Western standards of literary criticism. The price of canonic legitimacy has been the limited appreciation of the subversive and political implications of these works.

In part three, "Discourses of Bonding" Brenner calls for a critical re-evaluation of both Jewish and Arab texts of political defiance. The chapters included in this part consist of an analysis of four pairs of authors, S. Yizhar's "Hirbet Hizah" and Emile Habiby's *Pessoptimist*, A.B. Yehoshua's "Facing the Forests" and Atallah Mansour's *In a New Light*, Amos Oz's *My Michael* and Emile Habiby's *Saraya, Daughter of the Ghoul*, and David Grossman's *Smile of the Lamb* and Anton Shammas's *Arabasques*. Whether they deal with traumatic memory of victimization, or with the tormenting effects of collective guilt, the narratives illuminate and complement one another. By replacing the aesthetic lens with a political one, Brenner offers a vibrant and refreshing approach that challenges readers to re-read familiar canonic Hebrew texts, and consider reading "other" texts generated by a socially and culturally

marginalized minority.

*Esther Fuchs is professor of Near Eastern Studies Department, the University of Arizona, Tucson, and a contributing editor.*

## More in than Out

By Richard E. Sherwin

its time to die quick  
before all my friends are gone  
and no one's left to  
say kaddish for the rest of  
my soul so irascible

here only worms writhe  
as much --or is it maggots  
cleaning away sins  
and leaving me stripped down pure  
and ready for atonement

its my mind not flesh  
thats corrupt so at least earth  
gets a decent meal  
to repay the ones I skimmed  
off so blithely as its son

the sons of heaven  
skipped over my genes dishing  
out hunks of soul stuff  
and Ive gone hungry for God  
all my lives disbelieving

the best I could do  
was try and be decent to  
those I stumbled on

along the way one foot on  
banana peel one in graves

I nearly got more  
friends in graveyards than out its  
gotten so pretty  
soon no one but God will call  
me by my covenant names

*Richard E. Sherwin is a professor of English (retired) at Bar Ilan University, Israel.*

## Revisiting Old Themes Through a Contemporary Lens

***A Rumor about the Jews: Antisemitism, Conspiracy, and the Protocols of Zion* by Stephen Eric Bronner. New York: Oxford University Press.**

***And the Dead Shall Rise: The Murder of Mary Phagan and the Lynching of Leo Frank* by Steve Oney. New York: Pantheon Books**

A Review Essay by Steven Windmueller

At a time of increased anti-Semitism, it seems appropriate to examine one of the principal documents associated with Jewish hatred, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and one of the central events in shaping 20th century violence directed against Jews, the murder of Mary Phagan and the lynching of Leo Frank. Bronner provides some historical insights into the creation and uses of the *Protocols* as a tool employed by the enemies of the Jewish people. Oney reconstructs in detail the events surrounding the Leo Frank story, focusing on the mob mentality that ultimately undermined the Georgia legal system and created an environment of anti-Semitism.

In the Bronner book, we are not only introduced to the text of the *Protocols* but are provided with the historical context associated with this material as well as the contemporary uses of these anti-Semitic notions. Bronner's cumbersome writing style makes this a far more difficult read than it need be. Unfortunately, the author is not content to simply describe the impact of the *Protocols* on the well-being of the Jewish people but seems driven to describe the crisis of Jewish continuity and identity as well. In a unit entitled "The Vanishing Jew," Bronner seeks to confront the new challenges to Jewish life, driven by assimilation and the internal, fractious nature of the modern Jewish experience.

Having offered these concerns, the materials incorporated into this short volume are essential in any study on 20th century anti-Semitism.

The book, in my opinion, fulfills four primary goals. First, it provides a context associated with the construction of the document. Secondly, it introduces and analyzes the core elements associated with the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Third, this text focuses attention on the immediate uses of these ideas in the Czarist regime. Finally, this text provides some historical context in describing how the *Protocols* were incorporated into Nazi propaganda and beyond by other states and dissident elements.

If Bonner's work provides a general overview to the theme of anti-Semitism, then Steve Oney's book must be described as an investigative inquiry into the Leo Frank case. Formerly a staff writer for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Oney examines all aspects of this complex story. Written in a style reminiscent of a 19th century novel, the author reconstructs the events surrounding the murder of Mary Phagan and the trial and lynching of Leo Frank. The book is in part constructed around four key players: Jim Conley, the state's primary witness against Frank; William Smith, who prosecuted the case but later would have a change of heart regarding the outcome; Lucille Frank, the widow of Leo Frank; and Tom Watson, the principal player in arousing the populace to take justice into their own hands.

In some measure the Leo Frank case will never be formally or legally resolved, as Oney notes in his concluding pages. He suggests that "the underlying tensions are too great." The case has a kind of historic life that will not allow it to disappear. "The hosts still clamor to be heard and the trial refuses to end and the sons re-fight their father's battles and like a transfiguring scar, the events that made up this saga have grown ever more vivid."

Likewise the *Protocols* will seemingly never disappear. Bronner offers the following assessment: "The *Protocols* provides a mirror image of history: the powerless become all powerful and the all powerful become powerless. The pamphlet turns truth on its head. But the truth doesn't disappear."

Today, we encounter global anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, and anti-Israelism. Those who promote such ideas seek to introduce many of the core themes found in the *Protocols*. Similarly, we are faced with reckless charges directed against “unnamed spies for Israel” working within the government, reminding us of the Leo Frank case. Clearly, anti-Semitic notions remain embedded within the social norms and political practices of particular societies and groups.

Less than a century after these original ideas and events unfolded, we find ourselves once again responding to such destructive notions and dangerous behaviors.

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## The World of Rabbi Nathan

***The Making of a Sage: A Study in Rabbinic Ethics* by Jonathan Wyn Schofer. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.**

A Review Essay by Peter J. Haas

Nearly 30 years ago, William Scott Green published his study on the early rabbinic sage, *Persons and Institutions in Early Rabbinic Judaism*. His was the first substantial attempt to fix the character of the rabbinic sage on the basis of a literary-critical and historical-critical reading of the texts. In light of the developments that have taken place in the study of early Rabbinic Judaism—in literary theory and in our understanding of Roman and Persian civilization and culture in Late Antiquity—one would expect the book before us to build on and carry forward the work of Green. In this, Schofer's volume disappoints.

Although it is not clear from the title, *The Making Of A Sage: A Study In Rabbinic Ethics* is in fact not a study of the Rabbinic sage per se, but is rather a commentary on a single work, namely *The Fathers According To Rabbi Nathan* (to be referred to hereafter as ARN = *Avot d'Rabbi Natan*), albeit with an eye on what it says about the sage. In other words, the author's intention is to use ARN as a springboard for launching us into an examination of what it meant to be a rabbi and a sage in Roman Late Antiquity (and so, one suspects, what it means to be one today). To this end, Schofer tells the reader right at the outset that he intends to address three distinct but inter-related topics: what did it mean to be a rabbi in the classical period, what were the ethics of this rabbinic estate, and how do rabbis and their ethics fit into the culture and society of Roman Late Antiquity.

At first glance this agenda seems to be too broad and comprehensive to be satisfied through the reading of one book, particularly one as compositionally complex as ARN. As the author himself is careful to point out, we have no firm knowledge about the date, place or manner of the book's compilation. Given the uncertainties of ARN's prove-

nance, it is hard to see how it can be used as an historical source. For Schofer, however, this complexity and ambiguity is not a weakness but in fact a strength. It is precisely this indeterminacy that allows him to claim that the book is not the voice of a single person or perspective, but is in some way representative of the rabbinic community in general, in Palestine during the late Tannaitic/early Amoraic period. That is, Schofer claims that the very composite nature of ARN allows us to treat it as reflective of the mainstream rabbinic consensus of its time and place. It should be noted that Schofer does not go so far as to say that ARN represents all Jewish points of view at the time. He notes, for example, that the ethics of ARN seem to be tension with other voices, such as "the Hasidism". But with this qualification acknowledged, the author does claim that through an examination of this text we can adduce a broad picture of what the normative rabbinic Jewish leadership of the time regarded as the quintessence of the sage.

I shall return to this foundational assumption in a moment, but for the time being let us grant the author's claim, at least for argument's sake, that ARN is roughly representative of classical rabbinic ethics in the Palestine of its time. We can then turn to the method by which information will be gleaned from the work. The first of Schofer's three chapters is devoted to this task. We begin with what might loosely be called a form-critical analysis. The predominant literary form of the work, he notes, is the maxim; that is, the wise saying of the sage. This is opportune since such maxims are, of course, prime sources for adducing ethical perspectives. Further, the author notes that in ARN, as in rabbinic literature in general, the maxims are arranged not by ethical topic but by sage. This mode of compilation, Schofer claims, grows out of the rabbis' valuation of genealogy and the chain of tradition over the creation of systematic, ahistorical, philosophical inquiry.

Besides maxims, two other literary forms are detectable in ARN: The commentary and the narrative. The commentary form grows out of the fact that ARN presents itself as a commentary on the earlier *Ethics (or Chapters) of the Fathers (Pirque Avot)*. Thus the specific message of a passage in ARN can be adduced by understanding the passage

on which it is commenting and the direction the comment takes in the generative passage. The narratives, on the other hand, through the stories they tell, provide us with exemplary illustrations of virtuous behavior. It is our task as readers to adduce the meaning of these various forms by placing ourselves in the cultural context out of which ARN grows and in which it assumes its readers to be situated. This context, we are told as though it were self-evident, is the rabbinic school with its teacher-disciple relationship and a mutually supporting peer group among the students (I assume Schofer has the Talmudic "hevruta" in mind here). Once we understand how it is we are to read ARN, we turn, in the second chapter, to an actual reading of ARN to identify the ethics of the sage that the book articulates and promotes.

The overall thesis in Part Bet, "Rabbinic Tradition," is articulated in the conclusion, wherein it is asserted that, "according to the prescriptions of *Rabbi Nathan*, a rabbinic student becomes a sage through a process of subordination to, and internalization of, the Torah" (p. 116). This conclusion is hardly surprising and, despite its placement in the conclusion, is in fact assumed from the outset. That is, rather than leading us through a reading of the text and discovering this vision of the sage in it, Schofer assumes this result at the outset and then illustrates it and fleshes it out by selective citations from the text. The method, then, is deductive rather than inductive.

In other words, Part Bet is devoted to spelling out in more detail the inner workings of this ethic. The vision of the sage operative in ARN assumes, according to Schofer, that all humans contain within themselves basic impulses ("lev," "yetser") and that shaping the ethical life is a process of delimiting ("fencing in"), cultivating or governing these impulses as appropriate. The tools for determining what is appropriate, and for how one is to carry out the proper cultivation or governance, are illustrated in the rabbinic traditions about the life and teachings of the ideal sages. With this fundamental anthropology in mind, Schofer proceeds to illustrate, nuance and develop this view through his series of commentaries on selected readings of ARN.

This literary strategy is important for understanding the mission of the book before us. It is not, as we noted above, a study of an early rabbinic text as an historical and social document. It is rather the use of an early rabbinic text to illustrate certain preconceived notions of what early rabbinic Judaism must have been. In other words, the real subject of the book is a certain reading of classical Rabbinic Judaism, not the particular compilation known to us as the *Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*. The operative mindset out of which this method grows can be identified by looking at two great theoreticians of how rabbinic texts should be read: Max Kadushin and Jacob Neusner. By approaching ARN as he has, Schofer has taken a clear stance on a methodological issue that has divided the world of the modern academic study of rabbinic literature. Let me explain.

For Max Kadushin, there is such a thing as “the” rabbinic tradition. To be sure, this tradition is hardly monolithic and stable across time and space; it acts rather like a living, growing organism, adjusting to exterior influences yet maintaining its internal integrity. On this view, there is no such thing as a definitive and final statement of the “doctrines” or “dogmas” that make up the tradition. Rather the tradition receives expression through a multidimensional network of symbols that interact and combine with each other in complex arrays of semi-otic relationships. The governing idea is an organism as opposed to a system. One ramification of viewing the rabbinic tradition in this way is that one can see any major work as reflective, if only partially so, of the larger whole. In other words, in some ways every rabbinic book can be seen as a microcosm of the rabbinic macrocosm, containing in itself the essential patterns of thought that characterize the tradition at large. It is on the basis of this logic that Schofer can claim that ARN is representative of the rabbinic community in general.

Jacob Neusner, in contrast, began a series of studies nearly 40 years ago in which he stipulated that before one could make grand claims about “the” rabbinic tradition of Late Antiquity” (or any other era), one had to read the actual texts one by one, each on its own terms. Thus there is a bounded and distinct Judaism of the Mishnah, for example,

that is different from the Judaism articulated in the Jerusalem Talmud on the one hand and the Babylonian Talmud on the other. This is not to say that these various “Judaisms” are totally distinct and unrelated, but it is to say that they are not entirely interchangeable. The job of the modern scholar is to be sensitive to the differences that animate each text. This is possible only if the scholar reads the texts as each authorship presents it, not by chopping the text up according to categories brought in from beyond the borders of the text. ARN, in this view, should not be seen as a microcosm of some macrocosm, but as its own statement of Judaism, built as a commentary on (and so a re-statement of) an earlier, received tradition, in this case, Pirque Avot. This is not to deny outright that ARN is not representative of a broader community of rabbinic Judaism, it simply means this last claim has to be shown, not assumed. Put in another way, the ethics of the sage in ARN needs to be adduced from this document alone, and then compared to the results of conclusions reached from the reading of other texts. Only with all this comparative data on the table can the scholar begin the synthetic work of seeing what commonalities exist as to what constitutes a “sage” in classical Judaic culture.

The methodological disagreement between Kadushin and Neusner sketched above is not merely a matter of strategy but in fact reflect two radically different epistemologies. For Kadushin, there is an essence, or “Geist” that gives shape to the macrocosm and so animates all of its particular textual expressions. Such an abstract essence can be accessed through any and all of its expressions, be this literary, artistic or linguistic. This is a view that was very much bound up with the *Wissenschaft des Judenthums*. Neusner’s break with this scholarly tradition was founded on the text- and form-critical analysis that had been developed in modern biblical studies. What was of interest was not so much the commonalities, but the individual and particular. In a sense for him there was no “rabbinic Judaism” per se, but only a range of “Judaisms” and their texts, reading and commenting on each other so as to create a certain cultural and religious continuity (which then could be labeled, loosely to be sure, “rabbinic Judaism”). What

this approach loses in global understanding is made up by insight into the multidimensional texture of the Jewish religious tradition as it was lived out in its various communities.

That Schofer indeed adopts the Kadushin model and not that of Neuser can be shown by his treatment of the two different versions of ARN (conventionally labeled "A" and "B" following the first scientific publication of the work, by Solomon Schechter in 1887). For the Neuserian approach, one would need to select one version as the basis of the study because it is the text as we have it that is our primary datum. Schofer, in contrast, feels free to pick and choose among the two versions as the need to illustrate his thesis dictates, although he relies mostly on "A". Where Schofer does note differences between the versions, these are treated as essentially of little weight or meaning. There is no systematic attempt to see if some theological, literary or other principle underlies these divergences. Instead, both versions are treated as composing a single coherent textual corpus.

The third part of the book deals with rabbinic theology. The central theme here is, as expected at this point, drawn from the outside. It is "divine reward and punishments." The author comes to the obvious, really inevitable, conclusion, namely, that God rewards obedience and good behavior and punishes disobedience and bad behavior. What of course makes this conclusion "new" here is that it is asserted to be the governing trope of ARN. But the relationship of this theological theme and the content of the actual document Schofer is claiming to explicate are far from clear. Consider the following sentence that opens the conclusion of this chapter: "The rabbinic theology of reward and punishment consists of interrelated concepts and tropes through which the compilers of Rabbi Nathan frame the totality of their practice and set it in relation to normative ideals" (p. 145). In other words, the trope "divine reward and punishment" already exists out there in rabbinic theology and provides the framework within which the compilers of ARN crafted his text. The problem with this view and its formulation is that it is tautological. The existence of the trope is posited, examples are then carefully teased out and examined, and the results are then

used to demonstrate that the trope indeed exists.

As in Part Bet, Schofer does go into some greater detail as to the content of this trope. The text sets up a series of values by which the sage is to instruct his disciples. The values to be inculcated uphold the value of scholarship and obedience to Torah, God's word. In particular, the sage is to train disciples to be careful with speech and to nurture a certain character by controlling the heart, or yetser. By so doing, one earns God's reward. These are the values, embedded in rabbinic Jewish thought in general, that are found to be characteristic of ARN as well.

At the end, Schofer turns to one of his three governing questions, namely, how this ethic relates to the Greco-Roman world and its culture in Late Antiquity. To this basic question Schofer turns out to have no answer. He concedes that on this point his answer is "heuristic rather than historical" (p. 165). The rabbinic world, he notes at the end, was after all a distinct community which in its literature rarely references the outside world. Once again, the premise of the book turns out to be self-fulfilling. *The Making of a Sage* proceeds from the assumption that it represents a closed community internally consistent and externally distinct from its surrounding.

In the end, then, the book is less a scholarly study of the ARN text, despite its 100 pages of endnotes (for a text of roughly 170 pages), than it is a scholarly commentary on the ARN literature as a microcosm of classical rabbinic literature more generally. To be sure, the discussion is rich and nuanced, and the author's passion for the rabbinic values he sees at the heart of ARN is clear. But this is really a rabbinic discourse on a rabbinic textual tradition about a putative rabbinic ethic. It should not be approached as an academic book that uses modern methods to socially locate and critically analyze from a neutral standpoint a text from Late Antiquity.

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## Noteworthy Books

Editor's Note: The following is a list of books received from publishers but, as of this edition, have not been reviewed for Menorah Review.

***Jewish Radicalism: A Selected Anthology***, edited by Jack Nusan Porter and Peter Dreier. New York: Grove Press, Inc.

***From the Gestapo to the Gulags: One Jewish Life*** by Zev Katz. New York: Vallentine Mitchell.

***The Dynamics of American Jewish History: Jacob Rader Marcus's Essays on American Jewry***, edited by Gary Phillip Zola. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England/Brandeis University Press.

***Pilgrimage from Darkness: Nuremberg to Jerusalem*** by David E. Feldman. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

***Classic Yiddish Stories of Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, Peretz***, edited by Ken Frieden. University of Syracuse Press.

*Golden Medina* by Jack LaZebnik. Academy Chicago Publishers.

***Ethics of Maimonides*** by Hermann Cohen, translated with commentary by Almut Sh. Bruckstein. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

***The Bielski Brothers: The True Story of Three Men Who Defied the Nazis, Built a Village In the Forest, and Saved 1200 Jews*** by Peter Duffy. New York: Perennial.

***Rising from the Muck: The New Anti-Semitism in Europe*** by Pierre-Andre Taguieff. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher

***Golems among Us: How a Jewish Legend Can Help Us Navigate the Biotech Century*** by Byron L. Sherwin. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher

***Inge: A Girl's Journey through Nazi Europe*** by Inge Joseph Bleier and David E. Gumpert. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing

Co.

***We Jews and Blacks: Memoir with Poems*** by Willis Barnstone.  
Bloomington: Indiana University Press

***A Jewish Renaissance in Fifteenth-Century Spain*** by Mark D.  
Meyerson. Princeton University Press.

***Jews and the Olympic Games*** by Paul Yogi Mayer. Portland, OR:  
Vallentine Mitchell.

***Women and Gender in Jewish Philosophy***, edited by Hava Tirosh-Samuelson. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

***Antonio's Devils: Writers of the Jewish Enlightenment and the Birth of Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature*** by Jeremy Dauber. Stanford University Press.

1652. ***Sanctifying the Name of God: Jewish Martyrs and Jewish Memories of the First Crusade*** by Jeremy Cohen. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

***An American Orthodox Dreamer: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveichik and Boston's Maimonides School*** by Seth Farber. Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press/UPNE

***Questioning Judaism, Interviews by Elisabeth Weber, translated*** by Rachel Bowlby. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

***Legends Of Our Time*** by Elie Wiesel. New York: Schocken Books.

***GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation*** by Deborah Dash Moore. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (advance reader's edition)

Hasia R. Diner. ***The Jews of the United States*** by Hasia R. Diner. Berkeley: The University of California Press.

David Ellenson. ***After Emancipation: Jewish Religious Responses to Modernity***. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press.

***The Jew and the Other*** by Esther Benbassa and Jean-Christophe Attias. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

***Race, Culture, and the Intellectuals 1940-1970*** by Richard H. King. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.

***After Emancipation: Jewish Religious Responses to Modernity*** by David Ellenson. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press.

*Outrage 2000* by Levie Kanés. Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House.

***Out of the Shtetl: Making Jews Modern in the Polish Borderlands*** by Nancy Sinkoff. Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies

***Jewish Displaced Persons in Camp Bergen-Belsen 1945-1950: The Unique Photo Album of Zippy Orlin***, edited by Erik Somers and Rene Kok. Seattle: University of Washington Press with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

***Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God from the Bible to the Early Kabbalah*** by Peter Schafer. Princeton University Press.

***Mystics, Mavericks, and Merrymakers: An Intimate Journey among Hasidic Girls*** by Stephanie Wellen Levine. New York University Press.

***Abraham's Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations*** by Michael Wyschogrod. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

***The Song of Songs: Love Lyrics from the Bible***, translated by Marcia Falk. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press.

***The Tenement Sage: The Lower East Side and Early Jewish American Writers*** by Stanford Sternlicht. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.

***And the World Closed its Doors: The Story of One Family Aban-***

***doned to the Holocaust*** by David Clay Large. Boulder, CO: The Perseus Books Group

***Blood Ritual in the Hebrew Bible: Meaning and Power*** by William K. Gilders. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

***From Ancient Writings to Sacred Texts: The Old Testament and Apocrypha*** by S. A. Nigosian. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

***Joseph Szyk: Artist, Jew, Pole*** by Joseph P. Ansell. Portland, OR: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization.

***The Tree of Life: A Triligy in the Lodz Ghetto*** (Book One: On the Brink of the Precipice, 1939) by Chava Rosenfarb. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

***A Jewish Family in Germany Today: An Intimate Portrait*** by Y. Michal Bodemann. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

