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VCU Menorah Review

For the Enrichment of Jewish Thought

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Books in Brief

***Jewish Spain: A Mediterranean Memory* by Tabeaa Alexa**

Stanford University Press

What is meant by “Jewish Spain”? The term itself encompasses a series of historical contradictions. No single part of Spain has ever been entirely Jewish. Yet discourses about Jews informed debates on Spanish identity formation long after their 1492 expulsion. The Mediterranean world witnessed a renewed interest in Spanish-speaking Jews in the twentieth century, and it has grappled with shifting attitudes on what it meant to be Jewish and Spanish throughout the century.

At the heart of this book are explorations of the contradictions that appear in different forms of cultural memory: literary texts, memoirs, oral histories, biographies, films, and heritage tourism packages. Tabea Alexa Linhard identifies depictions of the difficulties Jews faced in Spain and Northern Morocco in years past as integral to the survival strategies of Spanish Jews, who used them to make sense of the confusing and harrowing circumstances of the Spanish Civil War, the Francoist repression, and World War Two.

Jewish Spain takes its place among other works on Muslims, Christians, and Jews by providing a comprehensive analysis of Jewish culture and presence in twentieth-century Spain, reminding us that it is impossible to understand and articulate what Spain was, is, and will be without taking into account both “Muslim Spain” and “Jewish Spain.”

***Jerusalem Unbound: Geography, History & the Future of the Holy City* by Michael Dumper**

New York: Columbia University Press

Jerusalem’s formal political borders reveal neither the dynamics of power in the city nor the underlying factors that make an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians so difficult. The lines delineating Israeli authority are frequently different from those delineating

segregated housing or areas of uneven service provision or parallel national electoral districts of competing educational jurisdictions. In particular, the city's large number of holy sites and restricted religious compounds create enclaves that continually threaten to undermine the Israeli state's authority and control over the city. This lack of congruity between political control and the actual spatial organization and everyday use of the city leaves many areas of occupied East Jerusalem in a kind of twilight zone where citizenship, property rights, and the enforcement of the rule of law are ambiguously applied.

Michael Dumper plots a history of Jerusalem that examines this intersecting and multileveled matrix and in so doing is able to portray the constraints on Israeli control over the city and the resilience of Palestinian enclaves after forty-five years of Israeli occupation. Adding to this complex mix is the role of numerous external influences — religious, political, financial, and cultural — so that the city is also a crucible for broader contestation. While the Palestinians may not return to their previous preeminence in the city, neither will Israel be able to assert a total and irreversible dominance. His conclusion is that the city will not only have to be shared, but that the sharing will be based upon these many borders and the interplay between history, geography, and religion.

***A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish* by Kathryn Hellerstein**

Stanford University Press

In this book, Hellerstein explores the roles that women poets played in forming a modern Yiddish literary tradition. Women who wrote in Yiddish go largely unrecognized outside a rapidly diminishing Yiddish readership. Even in the heyday of Yiddish literature, they were regarded as marginal. But for over four centuries, women wrote and published Yiddish poems that addressed the crises of Jewish history — from the plague to the Holocaust — as well as the challenges and pleasures of daily life: prayer, art, friendship, nature, family, and love.

Through close readings and translations of poems of eighteen writers, Hellerstein argues for a new perspective on a tradition of women Yiddish poets. Framed by a consideration of Ezra Korman's 1928 anthology of women poets, Hellerstein develops a discussion of poetry that extends from the sixteenth century through the twentieth, from early modern Prague and Krakow to high modernist Warsaw, New York, and California. The poems range from early conventional devotions, such as a printer's preface and verse prayers, to experimental, transgressive lyrics that confront a modern ambivalence toward Judaism. In an integrated study of literary and cultural history, Hellerstein shows the immensely important contribution made by women poets to Jewish literary tradition.

***Exploring Our Hebraic Heritage: A Christian Theology of Roots and Renewal* by Martin R. Wilson**

Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Co.

In this sequel to his book *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith*, Marvin Wilson illuminates theological, spiritual, and ethical themes of the Hebrew scriptures that directly affect Christian understanding and experience.

Exploring Our Hebraic Heritage draws from both Christian and Jewish commentary in discussing such topics as thinking theologically about Abraham, understanding the God of Israel and his reputation in the world, and what it means for humans to be created in God's image. Wilson calls for the church to restore, renew, and protect its foundations by studying and appreciating its origins in Judaism.

Designed to serve as an academic classroom text or for use in personal or group study, the book includes hundreds of questions for review and discussion.

***The Aura of Torah: A Kabbalistic-Hasidic Commentary on the Weekly Readings* by Rabbi Larry Tabick**

Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society

Because a welter of details sometimes conceals the Torah's aura of holiness, Jewish mystics and spiritual teachers for centuries have attempted to reveal that aura through creative interpretation. *The Aura of Torah* explores these attempts in an effort to bridge the gap between the Torah text and the modern Jewish spiritual quest.

The book collects a wide variety of interpretations of Torah passages, commentaries, and midrash rooted in the mystical side of Jewish tradition, translated by Rabbi Larry Tabick, with original Hebrew and Aramaic texts included. The quoted authors span many centuries and speak from many schools of thought: kabbalists writing within the tradition of the Zohar and other gnostic works; Hasidic teachers from the modern movement founded by the Ba'al Shem Tov in eighteenth-century Ukraine; and German pietists, or Hasidei Ashkenaz, of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Tabick examines how these texts build on the underlying principles of the Torah — the supremacy of God, the interconnectedness of nature and morality, and the unique (though not exclusive) role of the Jewish people in the divine plan for all humanity — to point to a deep spiritual truth in the world of the divine and the soul.

***Bar Mitzvah: A History* by Rabbi Michael Hilton**

Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society

The Jewish coming-of-age ceremony was first recorded in 13th century France, where it took the form of a simple statement by the father that he was no longer responsible for his 13-year-old son. Today, bar mitzvah for boys and bat mitzvah for girls are more popular than at any time in history and are sometimes accompanied by lavish celebrations.

How did bar mitzvah develop over the centuries from an obscure legal ritual into a core component of Judaism? How did it capture the imagination of even non-Jewish youth? *Bar Mitzvah, A History* is a comprehensive account of the ceremonies and celebrations for both boys and girls. A cultural anthropology informed by rabbinic knowledge, it explores the origins and development of the most important

coming-of-age milestone in Judaism. Michael Hilton has sought out every reference to bar mitzvah in the Bible, the Talmud, and numerous other Jewish texts spanning several centuries, extracting a fascinating miscellany of information, stories, and commentary.

***Politics, Faith and the Making of American Judaism* by Peter Adams**

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press

Adams describes the journey American Jews took through the 19th and early 20th centuries to create a modern and uniquely American Judaism. He underscores the link between the debates over liturgy inside the synagogue and the drive to become fully Americanized outside the synagogue. They were, Adams contends, mutually energizing. The sparks that initiated these debates were incidents abroad, such as the Edgar Mortara affair in Italy, and an anomalous spike in anti-Semitism in the United States during the Civil War. American Jews recognized that their voice as a religious minority would be ignored if they continued to adhere to manners, occupations, and religious practices that seemed alien to their Protestant neighbors. They also realized that the best defense against any resurgent anti-Semitism would be greater congregational unity and a more assertive participation in the political process. Adams looks at the differing paths two major Jewish immigrant groups took to acculturation: The Germans who arrived in America after 1848 and the East European immigrants of the 1880s and 1890s. He shows that while the two groups held each other in suspicion (and often contempt) they worked together to carve out a denominational Judaism that was well suited to American conditions.

The Jewish Book Council calls Adams's study "a valuable contribution to the historical literature."

***Memoirs of a Grandmother: Scenes from the Cultural History of the Jews of Russia in the Nineteenth Century, Volume Two* by Pauline Wengeroff, Translated with Introduction, Notes and Commentary by Shjulamit S. Magnus**

Pauline Wengeroff's *Memoirs of a Grandmother* offers a unique first-person window into traditionalism, modernity, and the tensions linking the two in nineteenth-century Russia. Wengeroff (1833–1916), a perceptive, highly literate social observer, tells a gripping tale of cultural transformation, situating her narrative in the experience of women and families. In Volume Two, Wengeroff claims that Jewish women were capable and desirous of adopting the best of European modernity but were also wedded to tradition, while Jewish men recklessly abandoned tradition and forced their wives to do the same. The result was not only marital and intergenerational conflict but also catastrophic cultural loss, with women's inability to transmit tradition in the home leading to larger cultural drift. Two of Wengeroff's children converted when faced with anti-Jewish educational and professional discrimination, unwilling to sacrifice secular ambitions and visions for the sake of a traditional culture they did not know. *Memoirs* is a tale of loss but also of significant hope, which Wengeroff situates not in her children but in a new generation of Jewish youth reclaiming Jewish memory. To them, she addresses her *Memoirs*, giving an "orphaned youth" — orphaned of their past and culture — a "grandmother."

***Jewish Meaning in a World of Choice: Studies in Tradition and Modernity* by David Ellenson**

Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press

Internationally recognized scholar David Ellenson shares twenty-three of his most representative essays, drawing on three decades of scholarship and demonstrating the consistency of the intellectual-religious interests that have animated him throughout his lifetime.

These essays center on a description and examination of the complex push and pull between Jewish tradition and Western culture. Ellenson addresses gender equality, women's rights, conversion, issues relating to who is a Jew, the future of the rabbinate, Jewish day schools, and other emerging trends in American Jewish life. As an outspoken advocate for a strong Israel that is faithful to the democratic and Jewish

values that informed its founders, he also writes about religious tolerance and pluralism in the Jewish state.

The former president of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, the primary seminary of the Reform movement, Ellenson is widely respected for his vision of advancing Jewish unity and of preparing leadership for a contemporary Judaism that balances tradition with the demands of a changing world.

Scholars and students of Jewish religious thought, ethics, and modern Jewish history will welcome this erudite collection by one of today's great Jewish leaders.

Conservative Judaism at a Crossroads?

A review essay by Steven Windmueller

***The Birth of Conservative Judaism* by Michael R. Cohen**

New York: Columbia University Press

At a point in time when there has been a considerable degree of discussion over the future of the Conservative Judaism, we are introduced to this excellent reflection focusing on the founding of this American religious enterprise. Michael Cohen has done a masterful job in unpacking the elements that define the origins and controversies surrounding this religious movement.

If the Reform Judaism is understood to be a movement centered on its congregations and its umbrella organizing structure, the Union for Reform Judaism, then Conservative Judaism's centerpiece must be seen as the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Established in 1886, in response to the earlier creation of the Hebrew Union College in 1875, JTS would be understood by its creators to be an alternative expression of American Judaism. At the outset, JTS would symbolize "traditional" Jewish thought and practice in contrast to the progressive notions being introduced by Isaac Mayer Wise.

Established in 1886, in response to the earlier creation of the Hebrew Union College in 1875, JTS would be understood by its creators to be an alternative expression of American Judaism. At the outset, JTS would symbolize "traditional" Jewish thought and practice in contrast to the progressive notions being introduced by Isaac Mayer Wise.

In the early decades of the 20th century, it would be important to understand that Schechter's graduates continued to seek affirmation within the world of American Orthodoxy. This attempt to maintain authenticity and adherence to Jewish law and practice would meet with criticism from within the yeshiva world on the one hand and would be challenged by more liberal elements within the Seminary orbit as not

truly defining the special place of Conservative Jewish thought and practice on the other.

This small volume has a bit of mystery appeal as the level of infighting and institutional tension featuring JTS faculty and alumni, Orthodox critics, and congregational laity seem to leave the reader with a degree of uncertainty as to whether the lead character, namely “Conservative Judaism,” can withstand the intrigue and drama surrounding its early history.

Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist Movement, would play a central, yet divisive, role in this story, breaking with Schechter and his JTS colleagues around a host of theological and structural questions. Cohen does a masterful job in capturing the political landscape both inside the Seminary and beyond involving Kaplan and an array of other Conservative leaders from the period of the mid-Twentieth Century.

A whole array of issues would serve as a litmus test of whether the graduates of the Seminary would see themselves as a distinctive voice within American Judaism or an appendage within the complex world of Orthodoxy. The challenges between “traditionalist” and liberal rabbis would center around the decisions of the RA (Rabbinic Assembly) to create various prayer books for the movement during the period covering 1927 through 1945; the divisive responses in trying to resolve the issue of the Agunah (granting a religious divorce in the case of an absentee husband); and the fallout from “The Things That Unite Us,” a 1927 paper produced by Louis Finkelstein designed to identify shared principles of religious practice and faith that represented an effort to bind the world of the Seminary with traditional Jewish life.

In his concluding comments Cohen seeks to grasp the impact not only of Schechter but of his disciples in ultimately building a movement. The success of Conservative Judaism represents a post-Second World War story. Cohen offers a number of reasons for the movement’s emergence during this period. As Americans “moved to the center”,

Cohen noted that Conservative Judaism “rejected what its representatives claimed where the extremes of both Orthodoxy and Reform.” The movement’s appeal to suburban Jewry and its legal decisions in the 1950’s permitting members to drive to synagogue and to use electricity on the Sabbath provided additional incentives to attract other constituencies.

In writing this story, Cohen provides a context to the developments surrounding the creation of this movement by employing an array of theoretical principles extracted from the disciplines of sociology and leadership theory. Further, Cohen introduces historical data, permitting the reader to compare the specific developments that he is examining with other religious experiences.

While certainly unable to predict the future of this movement, Cohen candidly notes that “Conservative Judaism today stands at a crossroads. Recent decades have seen its numbers sharply decline.” Referencing the controversial decision by the Seminary to ordain gay and lesbian rabbis, he concludes “The movement still grapples with the question of how to create a distinct platform while embracing its diversity.”

Dr. Steven Windmueller is the Rabbi Alfred Gottschalk Emeritus Professor of Jewish Communal Service at the Jack H. Skirball Campus of Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles.

Franz and Edith Rosenzweig: Hero and Heroine

An essay by Jack D. Spiro

It is probably true, as Jonathan Swift once wrote, that “whoever excels in what we prize appears a hero in our eyes.” What do we prize. If we want to know who a hero is, the first step might be to consider what values, qualities, and achievements we prize. But suppose someone can excel in those things we prize, but without any apparent struggle at all. He reaches the heights with ease; nothing whatever stands in his way. He pays no “price,” in hardship or in sacrifice, in his climb to the peak. Is he a hero? Not quite. It would seem that we demand something more of a hero beyond merely excelling. He has to “pay” somehow; he has to surmount great difficulties.

Surely on the basis of Jewish experience — and it is experience, the best of teachers, that should inform our definition — one of the essential ingredients of heroism is the willingness to overcome obstacles and dangers of every kind. The course of Jewish history itself is a story of heroism. Innumerable Jews were heroic in their will to live as Jews in spite of untold dangers and mortal threats. Here is the key that unlocks the meaning of heroism as Jews have understood the word: *in spite of*. The phrase in Hebrew is “af al pi chen” How does this phrase help us define heroism?

Abraham was comfortable as the son of a merchant in the city of Ur. He could have enjoyed a life of ease, inheriting his father’s shop — the idol business was flourishing. But he willed to believe in the one God and to cultivate a new religion in a new land — “af al pi chen” — in spite of the dangers, known and unknown, that he would have to face in the land of Canaan.

Moses was a prince in Pharaoh’s court. He too could have looked forward to a life of luxury had he not felt a deep compassion for downtrodden slaves. He willed to rally masses of slaves to flee from Egypt for a life of wandering in the desert, “af al pi chen,” in spite of the

palace he left behind.

Jeremiah came from a family of priests and could have lived comfortably all his days with inherited status in the priesthood. But he willed to be a prophet “af al pi chen” — in spite of the loneliness and contempt to which he would be subjected.

There were countless examples throughout Jewish history. In modern times, there is the example of Theodor Herzl. He was a successful journalist and playwright. A dream suddenly came to him out of the nightmare of anti-Semitism. He dreamed that the Jews could live in their own promised land once again after centuries of tormented wandering. Others had this same dream, but Herzl said: “If you will it, then it is no dream.” The dreamer also willed the fulfillment of the dream “af al pi chen.” In spite of his career, literary reputation, and promising future, Herzl threw it all away to struggle for his people.

These great personalities possessed what William James called a “pure inward willingness” despite deterrents. This phrase is an accurate definition of the heroic spirit in Jewish experience. Notice that such a definition has nothing to do with the outer trappings we usually associate with heroes — the brass bands, the medals, the ticker-tape parades — or with fame or fortune. Justice Benjamin Cardozo may have been influenced by his Jewish heritage when he said that “the heroic hours of life do not announce their presence by drum and trumpet.” Heroism can be quiet and inconspicuous of the spirit and not of power. The “inward willingness” — that is, the stubbornness of the will — to struggle, regardless of consequences or obstacle, is the true mark of the hero whether in the limelight of crowds or the solitude of his own mind.

Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929), one of the great Jewish thinkers of modern times, lived many “heroic hours” during the short 43 years of his life — a life that poignantly dramatizes the meaning of “af al pi chen.” Although he was a man of the spirit, a philosopher of religion, he found himself at a young age during World War I in an anti-aircraft

unit on one of the fronts. He felt that he was "a coward by nature" and "much too nervous to make a good soldier. But it had to be." Having no choice about being in a war he detested, he nevertheless willed to make the most of it. While mortar shells blasted all around him, he practiced his violin and each Sunday gave lectures to the troops. He received a medal for bravery but made light of it. While he was brave in spite of his feeling that he was a coward. Rosenzweig displayed his real heroism, according to our definition, by making up his mind to continue to think, to study, and to write in the muddy, putrid trenches. War has a way of brutalizing humans, of turning them into snarling beasts. But Rosenzweig, in spite of war, struggled to retain his humanity and creativity.

His first writing feat on the battlefield was an essay, "It Is Time," which outlined his reasons and plans for the reconstruction of Jewish education. Later, when he was discharged, he carried out his plans for establishing the Free Jewish Lehrhaus (academy for Jewish education) which became the focus of Jewish culture and learning in Frankfurt, Germany.

This was only the beginning. For next he began what eventually became his "magnum opus," a classic book called *The Star of Redemption*. He wrote most of this masterpiece in the trenches bit by bit on army postcards which he mailed one by one to his mother for copying. Even as he was writing, he suffered an attack of malaria. But, as he said, the book "grew out of an ardent longing." It was this longing (or "pure inward willingness") that produced a masterwork for posterity — "af al pi chen."

After the war, Rosenzweig continued to develop his philosophy and to organize the Lehrhaus. But, only three years after his discharge, he began suddenly to stumble and fall for no apparent reason. Now, at 35, he was to enter an eight-year period of agony, of constantly increasing pain, but also constantly creative zeal — "af al pi chen." This is what his physician wrote about him:

"Without bitterness, without a trace of 'gallows humor,'

he transformed a dismal situation tactfully and gracefully into one devoid of pathos. The patient took my findings very calmly. His whole interest seemed centered on the diagnosis: amyotrophic lateral sclerosis with progressive paralysis of the bulba. The end was expected in a year."

In a letter to a friend, Rosenzweig wrote:

"I do not take my illness lightly. The trouble is central. The thing is simply taking its course and, while one might try any number of things, all one can really do is wait and see. All in all, the future begins to press uncannily close on me now, as though it no longer had time to wait until I reach it."

In other letters he added these thoughts:

"People think I am unhappy. They feel sorry for me. Nobody has a right to feel that. Nobody knows whether I may not be happy. I am the only one who can know this. I read, carry on business, pull strings, and, all in all, enjoy life, and besides I have something looming in the background for the sake of which I am almost tempted to call this period, in spite of everything [!], the richest of my life....This might strike the bystander as funny, and even during the war I myself had only weak and rare intimations of it, but now it is simply true: Dying is even more beautiful than living."

One year after the onset of his illness, Rosenzweig could no longer write by himself. His speech was indistinct. Even when he read, his physician wrote that "nurses were summoned to turn the pages by a clearing of the throat or turning of the head. Before the night nurses had been engaged, he would ask to be given very difficult reading matter, which he could master only very slowly, such as the Talmud, out of consideration for his entourage."

In spite of the mounting agony, "it is simply the elementary desire to live," wrote Rosenzweig, "and an infinite ability to enjoy that keep me from the thought of suicide, which for most people in my situation would be the normal way out." But he was not like "most people." He viewed his suffering as "only a sum of great difficulties that have to be overcome."

Those who knew the man and witnessed his condition realized that he was different from most people. Thus, one of his friends wrote:

"Whoever stepped over the threshold of Franz Rosenzweig's room entered a magic circle and fell under a gentle yet potent spell. Behind the desk in the armchair sat not, as one had imagined on climbing the stair, a mortally sick, utterly invalid man, almost totally deprived of physical force, but a man, well in the fullest sense, free of life's pettiness and constriction. Whoever came to him he drew into a dialogue; his very listening was eloquent in itself."

But, if he was physically incapable of writing or speaking, how did he possibly continue to create? His physician's notes tell us the astonishing answer:

"When in December, 1922, he lost the use of his hand, the patient had to begin dictating to his Edith, his wife, which he found very hard. But this oral dictation soon came to a stop because of the increasing paralysis of the organ of speech. In the spring of 1923, a typewriter was bought to facilitate communication; the construction of this machine was such that the person working it had only to move a simple lever over a disk containing all the characters until the point indicated the desired character and, at the same time, one pressed a single key to make the imprint. At first, Rosenzweig was able to operate the machine by himself, but later on he had to point out the characters with his left hand. Arm and hand were supported in a sling hanging from a bar next to the sick man. The key was operated by someone else, usually by Edith.

"Eventually, his ability to indicate the characters lessened, so that they had to be ascertained by guesswork. Again, Edith was the only person who could do this. The patient's extraordinary memory enabled him to 'dictate' and have typed in this fashion, during three or four hours of work, the final draft of what he had worked out [in his mind], down to the smallest detail, during a sleepless night."

Toward the end of his life, Edith began reciting the entire alphabet, stopping when she saw faint signals from his eyes to indicate the correct letters.

Through these eight years of gradually increasing paralysis and agony, when even digesting small amounts of food became a giant physical feat, Franz Rosenzweig managed to write a translation of poems by Judah Halevi, with notes and epilogue; several major essays on theology and Bible; and the translation of 12 books of the Bible, including the entire Torah. Even after his wife had to guess letter by letter what

he wanted to write by the flicker of his eyes, he continued to create.

What he was able to accomplish, in spite of everything, underscores the definition that we have ascribed to the hero. In his earlier years, when he was still a man of health, Rosenzweig wrote a description of the hero, not knowing of course, that before long he would himself “successfully” meet his own test of the heroic spirit: “The hero is every inch a human being. He quivers in every limb with mortality. His joys well forth from this earth and this sun shines upon his sorrows.... Everything is volition, everything action and reaction.”

Everything is volition in the heroic life — a “pure inward willingness” to defy all the forces that may possibly deter the hero from the fulfillment of his dreams and goals. Rosenzweig did not succumb to the awesome powers of paralysis. His life was one of “action and reaction” despite the total deactivation of his physical being. His physician originally gave him one year to live. Rosenzweig defied death for seven years longer because he had something to accomplish through sheer will. That “something” can be summarized in the words of the Psalmist — and the words may also very well serve as the hero’s declaration of faith according to the Jewish idea of heroism:

“I will not die but live, And declare the works of the Lord.” – Psalm 118.20

Franz Rosenzweig devoted his brief, tortured life to trying to understand and declaring the works of God, examining the infinite ways that the divine spirit acts upon the world and humanity. He came to his Jewish heritage out of a background of assimilation and secular culture. Having flirted with Christianity in his youth, suddenly, one Yom Kippur, he reached the decision to commit himself to a rediscovery of Judaism. From that moment on, he willed to live as a Jew and to probe the meaning of Judaism as a philosophy and way of life. This process of discovering the rich legacy of Judaism became, through the influence of his writings and the example of his heroic life, the legacy that Franz Rosenzweig and Edith bequeathed to us.

Have You Heard This One?

A review essay by Matthew Schwartz

Ruth R. Wisse. *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor.*

Princeton University Press, 2013

The ancient Greeks could express their humor through their theater, but perhaps the earliest mention of laughter in Greek literature comes in Hesiod when Zeus laughed in sinister joy at the nasty trick he has played on mankind and on Prometheus by giving Pandora to Epimetheus. Ancient Israel had no Biblical theater, and its humor begins as a way of interpreting events, not as entertainment.

The occasional op-ed penned by Professor Ruth Wisse seems to support an amendment of the Mishnaic passage: If all the sages of academia stood on one side of a scale and Professor Wisse on the other, she would outweigh them all. *No Joke* is a brief, readable study of Jewish humor. The reader need only glance at the cover to see the caricature of Groucho Marx, a blurb from Cynthia Ozick, the great novelist and literary critic, and Professor Wisse as the author, to raise expectations of a good read. The reader will not be disappointed. There are a number of well-told really funny stories but, more important, Professor Wisse has a gift for presenting insights clearly and precisely.

Several surveys of a generation ago reported that well over 70% of leading American comedians were Jews. Can we account for this dominance? Professor Wisse avoids any facile general theory or any quick answer and instead maps out a series of centers where Jewish humor thrived, beginning with two centuries ago. The book recounts some wonderful jokes and stories, but it is more a serious study of Jewish humor, starting with Heinrich Heine, a classical German writer of mordant wit, brilliant in his essays as well as his poems. Literally hundreds of Heine's poems were set to music by leading composers — Schubert, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Schumann and even the anti-Semitic Wagner. In fact, Wagner apparently borrowed both his *Flying Dutchman* and *Tann-*

hauser from Heine. He actually credited Heine for the former, but then retracted in a later writing. Theodore Herzl, a budding playwright and journalist in Vienna before devoting himself to Zionism, also used wit in his *Alt Neu Land*, portraying his dream of settlement in Israel. Another German speaker, Sigmund Freud, was very interested in humor, especially Jewish. He said that he knew of no other nation making such fun of its own character. Jewish jokes were an expressive venting of a Jewish people who lived under collective responsibility to behave well among the nations. The Jews of Central Europe were, for the first time, entering into society, but one which still mistrusted them, and the Jews also mistrusted the society. Heine, and later Kafka as well, sensed the limits of comedy that emerge from comedy itself.

Eastern Europe presented several types of humor. Sholom Aleichem profoundly revolutionized Jewish culture, inventing Jewish people who laughed their way through crises, so that Tevye the dairyman and the fictional town of Kasrilevke became existential prototypes. A Haskala humor had already developed in which modern German speaking university students outwitted hassidic charlatans, both sides on occasion denouncing each other to czarist authorities. Hassidic humor employed paradox, contradiction, and incongruity in the nature of the Talmudic *Adraba -ipkha mistavra* — ideas may be turned over and over and completely reconsidered. The parables of Rabbi Nachman or the wit of Hershele Ostropoler are within this genre. Hershele is a trickster somewhat in the style of Till Eulenspiegel. However, unlike Till, Hershele is also a man with a family to support, as well as being a pious and somewhat learned Jew who could use a good quotation to put the finishing touch on a story. The yeshivas of Eastern Europe were seedbeds of a third form of wit, the Misnagdic, featuring the verbal ingenuity and the many-sided subtlety of Talmudic study. Yiddish humor continued even in the United States with new writers like Itzik Manger, Moshe Nadir, and Moshe Kulbak. Isaac Bashevis Singer became the most successful, winning the Nobel Prize in 1978.

America's Jewish comedy emerged in a society where Jews were not separated from their neighbors by legal barriers, but where there was

also no automatic trust. Jewish comedians combined mockery with self-mockery. Yet writers like the British Israel Zangwill presented on the stage Jews who have not lost their regal bearing despite poverty and hardship, unlike Heine's Jews, who could seem fully human only on the Sabbath.

The Borscht Belt was the starting point for many Jewish comedians and an incubator for a style of comedy that emerged into the American mainstream. The list of comedians includes, only under the letter "B" for example, Milton Berle (Berlinger), Joey Bishop (Gottlieb), Mel Brooks (Kaminsky), Lenny Bruce (Shneider), George Burns (Nathan Birnbaum), and Red Buttons (Aaron Chwart). These began as tumblers who mastered timing and delivery just as radio was opening wide new opportunities. It was a form of comedy that appealed to non-Jews but was not overtly eager for their approval. A few years later, the fiction of Bellow, Malamud, Roth and others signaled a shift to more Freudian themes — overbearing mothers and sexual conflicts as well profanity and overt insults to non-Jews. Roth's character Portnoy says, "You stupid goyim! Reeking of beer and empty of ammunition, home you head, a dead animal (formerly alive) strapped to each fender so that all the motorists along the way can see how strong and manly you are." Portnoy says too, "What kind of base and brainless schmucks are these people to worship somebody who, number one, never existed and, number two, if he did, looking as he does in that picture, was without a doubt the Pansy of Palestine."

Jewish humor played its role even in the murderous times of Hitler and Stalin. Jokes circulated in the Warsaw ghetto, their dark humor and euphemism reflecting the times: "God forbid that this war should last as long as we are able to endure it." Modern Israeli humor similarly reflects the mood of a nation constantly at war.

Professor Wisse does not seek a grand theory of the roots of humor. Instead, she explores Jewish humor and comedy in a very specific manner. The reader is treated to close up looks at figures from Heinrich Heine through Shalom Aleichem to Isaac Babel to Howard Jacob-

son, who received England's Man Booker Prize in 2010 for *The Finkler Question*, a humorous study of that nation's growing Judeophobia.

Professor Wisse ends the book creating a remarkable perspective with the wish that others might also learn to spoof themselves; imagine Muslim terrorists satirizing jihad.

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Judaism in Israel

A review essay by Philip Hollander

***Between State and Synagogue: The Secularization of Contemporary Israel* by Guy Ben-Porat**

Cambridge University Press

When asked about Judaism's place in Israel, many Israelis would respond that since the Labor Party's electoral defeat in 1977 religious parties, a religious agenda, and religious practice have become increasingly dominant in the public sphere, a change that has come at the expense of secular Israelis whose contribution to the state outweighs that of their religious brethren. Rather than accepting this widespread belief *prima facie*, Guy Ben-Porat carefully investigated Judaism's place in Israel and his new challenges popular conceptions of Judaism's place in Israel, the way that contemporary Israeli politics function, and the nature of secularization.

By distinguishing between secularism and secularization, Ben-Porat introduces an effective way to investigate the place of Judaism within the Israeli public sphere. Although the State of Israel's founders were proponents of a form of secularism, an ideology or worldview grounded in a lack of religious faith, the state they created neither developed a pluralistic public sphere guaranteeing individual freedom nor hermetically sealed itself off from religion. Rather the famed "Status Quo" agreement and the subsequent laws and agreements on related issues made in its spirit gave religious Jews authority over all Israeli Jews in diverse areas including personal status, burial, food consumption, and observance of the Jewish Sabbath. While staunch secularists always found the state's decision to cede its authority in such areas as onerous, the overwhelming majority of Israelis saw these instances of ceded authority establishing "rules of the game" for Israeli society and failed to question them. With the immigration of a million Jews from the former Soviet Union, the introduction of a neoliberal economy and

the globalization of Israeli society, and the development of religious and spiritual alternatives to those offered by conservative Jewish religious authorities starting in the 1980s, pressure developed to change these rules of the game, and secularization which can be understood as a process whereby religious institutions are challenged and religious authority is eroded, began to make inroads in Israel.

By the early twentieth-first century secularization's pace accelerated, despite the decision of many Israeli Jews to maintain or develop ties to spirituality. Multiple options for marriage ceremonies administered in accordance with the participant's desires, easy facilitation of civil marriages abroad, and easier recognition of common law partnerships by state authorities reduced the Israeli rabbinate's control over marriage; the opening of private cemeteries, where secular Jewish Israelis can be buried in a manner they and their loved ones find tasteful, and civil cemeteries, where Israelis, including non-Jewish Israelis and Israelis whose Jewishness is questioned by religious authorities, can find burial alongside Jews, and the opening of crematoriums undermined the previously monopolistic authority of religious burial societies; easy access to pork products and other non-kosher delicacies undermined state-supported kashrut laws grounded in religious and nationalist doctrine; the opening of diverse entertainment and shopping venues on the Sabbath undermined Sabbath-observant Jews' efforts to restrict how other Jews spend their leisure time.

One of Ben-Porat's important insights concerns how the secularization process gathered strength and made its mark on Israeli society. While it would be easy to assume that Israeli secularists achieved these widespread changes through an all-out war against the religious parties and their conservative agendas, the current secularization of Israeli society took place largely outside the political system, because secular-religious cleavages present within it created general paralysis concerning matters related to religion. Both legislative initiatives and legal challenges taken to the Supreme Court were capable of bringing about only limited change and were also available to those looking to strengthen religious authority. As a result, as Ben-Porat effectively

demonstrates, secular entrepreneurs motivated by factors like financial gain, the opportunity for greater spiritual expression, and the freedom to marry whom they wanted and to eat what they enjoyed, began working on the margins of the law to achieve their aims. Loopholes in the political system allowed entrepreneurs to develop spaces where religious authorities had only limited powers to reign in secular initiatives. Examples of such secular entrepreneurship include the opening of stores on the Sabbath in shopping malls outside of urban centers; the offering of fee-based burial of non-member Jews in kibbutz cemeteries following funeral ceremonies conducted in accordance with the deceased and their relatives' wishes; the opening of supermarkets selling pork and other non-kosher foods in urban industrial areas where municipal authorities could not argue that they offended religious inhabitants' sensibilities. Ben-Porat's discussion of secular entrepreneurs clarifies the need to adopt a broader definition of politics that encompasses more than the formal arena of parties and elections to get at changes underway in Israel.

Finally Ben-Porat pushes readers to reject a monolithic view of secularization and its effects on individual identity. While proponents of secularism view secularization's spread as a part of a political project committed to the development of tolerant liberal citizens, Ben-Porat's discussion of personal status, burial, food consumption, and Sabbath observance in Israel points to the haphazard nature of secularization that doesn't always align itself with liberalism or tolerance. Instead "secularization unfolds in a bricolage of changing beliefs, practices, and affiliations that do not always move in lockstep with one another." Such a view of secularization goes a long way to making sense of the lives of the majority of Israeli Jews existing between the poles of secularism and ultra-orthodoxy whose identities mix secular and religious elements in diverse ways.

The theoretical sophistication, complex modeling, meticulous organization, lucid presentation, and innovative conclusions of this work make it one of the most important books published in Israel Studies in recent years.

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Moreshet: *Guide for the Perplexed* by Moses Maimonides

Chapter 51

I will begin the subject of this chapter with a simile. A king is in his palace, and all his subjects are partly in the country, and partly abroad. Of the former, some have their backs turned towards the king's palace, and their faces in another direction; and some are desirous and zealous to go to the palace, seeking "to inquire in his temple," and to minister before him, but have not yet seen even the face of the wall of the house. Of those that desire to go to the palace, some reach it, and go round about in search of the entrance gate; others have passed through the gate, and walk about in the ante-chamber; and others have succeeded in entering into the inner part of the palace, and being in the same room with the king in the royal palace. But even the latter do not immediately on entering the palace see the king, or speak to him; for, after having entered the inner part of the palace, another effort is required before they can stand before the king — at a distance, or close by — hear his words, or speak to him. I will now explain the simile which I have made. The people who are abroad are all those that have no religion, neither one based on speculation nor one received by tradition. Such are the extreme Turks that wander about in the north, the Kushites who live in the south and those in our country who are like these. I consider these as irrational beings, and not as human beings; they are below mankind, but above monkeys, since they have the form and shape of man, and a mental faculty above that of the monkey.

Those who are in the country, but have their backs turned towards the king's palace, are those who possess religion, belief, and thought, but happen to hold false doctrines, which they either adopted in consequence of great mistakes made in their own speculations, or received from others who misled them. Because of these doctrines they recede more and more from the royal palace the more they seem to proceed.

These are worse than the first class, and under certain circumstances it may become necessary to day them, and to extirpate their doctrines, in order that others should not be misled.

Those who desire to arrive at the palace, and to enter it, but have never yet seen it, are the mass of religious people; the multitudes that observe the divine commandments, but are ignorant. Those who arrive at the palace, but go round about it, are those who devote themselves exclusively to the study of the practical law; they believe traditionally in true principles of faith, and learn the practical worship of God, but are not trained in philosophical treatment of the principles of the Law, and do not endeavor to establish the truth of their faith by proof. Those who undertake to investigate the principles of religion have come into the ante-chamber; and there is no doubt that these can also be divided into different grades. But those who have succeeded in finding a proof for everything that can be proved, who have a true knowledge of God, so far as a true knowledge can be attained, and are near the truth, wherever an approach to the truth is possible, they have reached the goal, and are in the palace in which the king lives.

My Friend and I

A poem by Richard Sherwin

my friend cant sleep nights
dreams his family keeps calling him to save them
from the german furnaces
fertilizing europe with jewish ashes

he comes early sabbaths to synagogue
after me
saying I must be hoping to catch Gd
awake

me Im trying to catch me awake
wake up says one lapel button
stop illusions says another
my hari krishna friend gives me

how can you live without illusions
asks my belgian diamond merchant friend

how do you wake up I ask
and why should I want to

he dreams reality
unable to sleep

the lord's supposed not to slumber
and this is israels redemption begun

whod I be awoken

whod we be

one long war with breaks in between

all our lives

jewhaters bombing our borders

gdhaters stoking furnaces

i gave my soul to gd

to wake and sleep at will

my first sergeant got my body

decades ago

no jonah no job no jesus

except on yom kippur

when all of us come for counting

They Will Revere His Glory in the East (Isaiah 59:19)

A review essay by Peter Haas

***The Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Making of Modern Judaism* by Eliyahu Stern**

New Haven: Yale University Press

In 1947, David ben Gurion sent his famous letter to the leadership of Agudat Yisrael guaranteeing the religious “status quo” in the Jewish yishuv that was about to become the State of Israel. His concession to the ultra-Orthodox grew largely out of his need to have as much unity as possible in the face of the coming national struggle. At the same time, however, he regarded Jewish (ultra-) Orthodoxy as a traditionalist movement that was at any rate destined to wither away, and so concessions given now would not have major long term consequences. This second conviction did not come out of nowhere. It was simply taken for granted by Western intellectuals, Jewish and not, that in the great struggle between modernity and tradition, modernity would inevitably and decisively triumph.

We now know of course that Jewish orthodoxy along with other traditional religions, far from fading away, have become powerful force in the modern world. Clearly the sharp dichotomy that was once drawn between “modernity” and “orthodoxy” was misconceived. In his book, Eliyahu Stern addresses this false dichotomy head on by showing us is that one of the persons most associated with Orthodox Jewish anti-modernism, namely the Vilna Gaon, can in fact be read as quite modern in his own way. What we come away learning from this book is that there are many ways to be modern, and that the modernity of Western European Jews, symbolized often by Moses Mendelssohn, is not the only possibility. Stern notes in his introduction that maybe it is better to see modernity not as a (somewhat monolithic) movement but rather as a condition that all religions have had to face and make accommodation to in one way or another. In this view, the great shapers

of modern Jewish traditionalisms (such as the Vilna Gaon, the Hatam Sofer, and even mutando mutandis the Hassidic Rebbes) were not so much anti-Modern as they were modern in different sorts of ways. What these different ways were, and why Elijah of Vilna's approach was so prominent, constitute the intellectual exploration on which this book embarks.

The story of Elijah of Vilna begins inauspiciously enough. At the time of his birth (1720), Vilna itself was in a small town in serious decline due to war, famine, fires and plagues. Nor did Elijah, although clearly brilliant (he is supposed to have mastered the Talmud by age nine), seem to be destined for a great career. He was, as Stern describes him, something of an introvert and a loner who had little interest or regard for his struggling town, its Jewish community or even his family. To be sure, he did duly marry at age 18, but he seemed always to have been much more devoted to his books than to his wife and children. He had no great teacher or mentor and his writings, while erudite, were scattered and episodic and so of very diffuse impact. From Stern's perspective, then, neither Vilna nor its Gaon showed much promise up to the middle of the 1700's.

But all that changed. After an unsuccessful attempt apparently to travel to the Land of Israel, Elijah returned in 1748 to a Vilna that had recovered from the ravages of the previous half century and to a Jewish community which was enjoying renewed growth and vigor. Elijah was still, however, not really a part of the life of the city. He continued to hole himself up in his study and to devote every spare moment to the study texts, mostly Kabbalistic. Stern even argues that he reputedly was reluctant to give up study time even for such mundane duties as eating and sleeping. He had minimal contact with the outside world and still published little (there is no response literature from him, for example). Nonetheless in this awakened and energetic town, Elijah slowly gained a certain renown and following. It is not clear as to whether Elijah's repute contributed to the growing status of Vilna, or whether it was the other way around. In any case, the stature of both grew in the following years, just as the phenomenon of Hassidism was

starting its sweep across Central and Eastern Europe.

As noted, reconstructing the life of Elijah turns out to be remarkably difficult. There is of course the problem of the opacity of his early life when he was, the use Stern's language, an "obscure recluse". Student notes, as well as his own writings, reveal a remarkably wide-ranging thinker but it is hard to collate all these documents to adduce a coherent personal or intellectual biography of the man. What is clear is that as his renown as a teacher grew, he displayed a remarkable breadth of knowledge from Talmud to midrash to halachah to Kabbalah to apparently even some of the science and philosophy of his day; he supported the translation the ancient Greek mathematician Euclid into Hebrew, for example. Despite these difficulties, Stern nonetheless makes in Chapter Two a valiant, and compelling, attempt to capture Elijah's mature worldview in line of the great debates and thinkers of his day — creation and theodicy on the one hand, the philosophies of Nicolas de Malebranche, Leibniz and Christian Wolff on the other. Elijah's own conviction, very much reminiscent of Leibniz's version of modernity, was that rationality was the key to knowledge and even redemption. Part of his obsession with emending rabbinic texts was precisely to bring these texts back into line with the Grand Idea they were articulating. As Stern puts it, if the Idea is the subject, then the texts have to be the perfect predicates. Like his contemporary Mendelssohn further west, Elijah brought rational focus to understanding the texts of Judaism, only for Elijah it was not Tanakh, but the Talmudic and kabbalistic literatures that wanted attention.

This comparison of Elijah to Moses Mendelssohn turns out to be heuristically laden for Stern. On the surface we might regard the two thinkers as virtual polar opposites (modern versus traditional). But for Stern, they in fact inhabit remarkably similar worlds. Both, Stern seems to want to say, are influenced by the enlightenment and both returned to the traditional texts to tease out the foundational elements for a Judaism proper to their time. The big difference, for Stern, is that Mendelssohn came out of a minority religious group in Berlin and needed to speak to an audience that consisted of both assimilating

Jews and powerful non-Jews. So for him, the rational exposition of the commonly shared Bible took a prominent position. Elijah, on the other hand, was a leading authority in a vibrant traditional community that virtually dominated his city. His writings, for Stern, reflect the confidence of a distinguished Jewish scholar in a self-assured Jewish community, virtually the inverse of Mendelssohn's situation. So for Elijah it was the rabbinic and kabbalistic traditions that demanded a renewed rational exposition. What this led to ironically, in Stern's reading of matters, is that Mendelssohn was at the end of the day more conservative in some sense, having to press the authenticity and coherence of Judaism while Elijah was more free to challenge the Judaism of his day and chart out a reform that took issue with his predecessors and contemporaries. But in either case, both were influenced by the same dawning modernity that demanded a rational analysis of the received religious tradition.

The silence of Elijah as regards Moses Mendelssohn and the Berlin Maskilim contrasts sharply with Elijah's vehement attacks, intellectual and physical, on the Hassidim. Stern tries to account for this by noting that Elijah and Mendelssohn both placed great emphasis on the texts and on textual learning. That they deployed different methods, focused on different texts and drew different lessons was for Stern less important than their shared text-centrism. Hasidic teaching, on the other hand, replaced texts with "devekut" as the human-divine nexus. For the Hasidim, people could directly connect with the divine, through prayer for example, and this led to a corresponding marginalization of textual studies, and maybe to a concomitant antinomianism. It is this displacement of the text, and possibly of the halachah within it, that seems to lie at the heart of Elijah's profound antagonism to what Hasidism represented. Maybe adding fuel to his vehemence was the memory of that other recent charismatic movement which spread into antinomianism, namely Sabbateanism. Another source of concern that Stern identifies was the changing outside political situation in which saw the dissolution of the Council of Four Lands, itself part of broader changes in both how the Jewish community governed itself internally

(the Kehillah system) and how it related to the outside governments of Poland and Tzarist Russia. From Elijah's point of view there were dangers on all these fronts. On the one hand, he felt the arrogation of Jewish communal authorities by the wealthy and those connected to the kehillah undermined rabbinic (that is textual) authority. On the other hand, he felt the charismatic leadership of the Hassidic rebbes undermined the centrality of rabbinic learning (and of course, again, the texts). He also deeply feared the growing inclinations of mitnagdim and Hasidim to call on the interventions of non-Jewish governmental authorities. In this changing landscape of Jewish communal organization, Elijah's battles with Hasidim has to be seen as part of a larger struggle to maintain the purity and autonomy of Jewish (that is, rabbinic) self-governance. In this light, Stern argues, his vehemence rejection of "Sabbatean" Hasidism (whether or not this conjunction was valid) fits into his larger political program.

For Elijah, the heart of the problem, and its solution, lay in yeshivah training. As Stern lays out matters, the core of yeshivah education had become the study of "practical" halachah; that is, the legal codes, most notably the *Shulkhan Aruch*. While this served the "civil service" needs of the kehilla structure well, it essentially subordinated rabbinic teaching, learning and practice to the bureaucratic political needs of the community as institutionalized in the Kehillas and *Vaads* ("Councils"). While of course hardly antinomian, the kehilla yeshiva shared the same epistemological problem as did the Hasidic *Kloyz*, namely an under-emphasis, indeed marginalization, of the rabbinic text par excellence, the Talmud. For Elijah, then, the task was to reestablish what he took to be the only truly authentic and foundational educational program of the Jewish community, namely the intense rabbinic study of the Talmud (and the "Oral Torah" more broadly). Only with a solid foundation in Gemara could students be intellectually prepared to fully understand codes and other later rabbinic genres and so to truly determine halachah. This, in turn, was essential for the survival of Judaism as Elijah understood it. It was not Elijah himself, but one of his students, Hayyim of Volozhin who finally succeeded in establishing

the first such “modern yeshiva” (in Stern’s terms) and not in the major center of Vilna, but in the smaller and quieter town of Volozhin. In this Elijah-inspired yeshiva, with its exclusive focus on Talmud, the course of study stood in sharp contrast to both the Hasidic and the Kehillah models. The new Yeshiva also consciously separated rabbis, and their training, from any connection with the government, whether internal (say, the kehilla) or external (the Polish or Russian administration). The yeshiva world was to stand as a world apart, as a place of true and pure study and so true and pure Judaism. As further west in Berlin, religion was hereby being removed from the public sphere into the private sphere. Elijah’s modern Judaism proved to be just as enduring as Mendelssohn’s, a point Ben Gurion failed to grasp.

In the end, Stern invites us to see the Gaon not as the great representative of “tradition” as opposed to its presumed binary opposite “modernity”. Rather, we get a much more complex picture of a “genius” (a term Elijah helped redefine) who like Mendelssohn created a kind of modern Judaism, but one based on traditional texts and confident Jewish self-assertion. Not only is our picture of Elijah made more complex through this lens of analysis, but so is our understanding of concepts like “tradition” and “modernity” as they apply to European Jewry of the early modern period. Even Elijah’s famous battle with Hassidism takes on shadings, in that he both failed to stop Hasidism (because he based his opposition on the mistaken premise that Hasidism was Sabbateanism?) but also succeeded in “re-rabbinizing Hassidism, as Hasidim gradually adopted the some version of the yeshiva model of education.

In his formulation of a modern Jewish way of being that was a powerful alternative to that of Mendelssohn’s, Elijah helped set the basic tension that has animated Jewish religious, intellectual and political discourse down to our own time. One may disagree with this, that or the other claim Stern makes, but it is clear that the legacy of the Vilna Gaon and his vision of what Judaism should be like is still very much a vital force, whatever Ben Gurion thought.

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Zachor

From Donna Sarah to her husband Solomon

This letter belongs to the private Hebrew letters found in the Genizah. It is addressed to the scribe Solomon who left his home in an Italian town, apparently with the purpose of obtaining release from taxes, and did not return, for unknown reasons. Whether the letter was composed by his wife, Donna Sarah, herself, or by someone on her behalf, we cannot say. The author displays considerable epistolary skill, which enable him or her to plead eloquently the cause of an abandoned wife and mother.

Donna Sarah to Her Husband Solomon.

An Italian town, probably 13th century

May ample peace and welfare be with my master and ruler, the light of my eyes, the crown of my head, my master and husband, the learned Rabbi Solomon, the Scribe, may he live long. May ample peace be bestowed upon you by the Master of peace and from Donna Sarah your wife, your daughters Reina and Rachel, from Rabbi Moses, your son-in-law, and Rebecca.

We are all longing to see your sweet face, as one longs after the face of God, and we are wondering why you have not answered the numerous letters we have sent you. We have written you often, begging you to return, but — no answer at all. If you can manage with the help of the esteemed physician, Rabbi Solomon, may he live long, to obtain release from taxes, it will be greatly to your profit, and this kindness will exceed all benefits which he has conferred on you. May the Lord grant him a rich reward in this world and the world to come, and may he educate his son for Torah, marriage, and good works. And now let us return to the previous subject. We are all assembled, your wife, your daughters, and your son-in-law Moses, to implore you from the bottom of our hearts not to go further, either by sea or by land, because we have heard that you have the intention of leaving for Turkey. I swear to the Lord that, if you do this, you must not speak with us

anymore; and if you do this, which will make the world despise us and cause a quarrel between your son-in-law and your daughter, who is in certain circumstances [sic], you will inflict pain upon your daughter and perhaps she will suffer a miscarriage. And you will also endanger the happiness of your daughter Rachel, who has grown up and has become a beautiful and modest maiden. People will talk scandal and say: "Here is a respectable old scribe, who left his wife and daughters and has been missing for many years. Perhaps he is mad. For he went to a distant county and you know what the verse says: 'The eyes of a fool are in the ends of the earth.'" Beg the physician, Rabbi Solomon, therefore, to provide you a confirmation about the release from the taxes; otherwise come home [in the name of] the Blessed one! ...Do nothing else. And Peace!

