

# ALPERS PERSPECTIVES

*The Magazine of the Association for Jewish Studies*



IN THIS ISSUE:

**“It's the Economy,  
Shmendrick”:  
A New Turn in  
Jewish Studies?**

FALL 2009

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# FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Colleagues,

No one will be surprised by this issue's particular theme. Everyone knows that "It's the economy, shmendrick!" Still, our subject doesn't simply speak for itself. Unraveling it took a great deal of thought and planning, and our guest editor, Jonathan Karp, deserves our thanks for his abundant investment of both time and effort in putting our special section together. We'll leave it to him to tell you more about it.

Following the publication of this issue, we are turning responsibility for *AJS Perspectives* over to new editors, Matti Bunzl and Rachel

Havrelock, and a new editorial board. We are sure that they will discover, as we have, that producing this magazine is both rewarding and enjoyable. The part I myself liked best was receiving the first version of the final proofs of an upcoming issue. It is exciting to download an electronic copy of the prototype laboriously assembled by many people over a period of months and see for the first time how the articles fit together with the artwork. It's even fun to make small, last-minute changes. Once I didn't think that the reddish tint of the issue was appropriate to the subject matter and—presto-change-o—our managing editor, Karin Kugel, gave the order that made everything turn green in no time at all! I doubt that I'll ever possess such magical powers again.

I want to thank the officers and board of AJS for granting me the use of these special powers over the past several years, and I want to

thank the members of the outgoing editorial board as well as the officers of AJS for assisting me so greatly in the exercise of them. But all of us together could have done very little if we weren't able to rely on the availability of experts on virtually everything Jewish who could put anything we dreamed up into words. This is a resource that will not dry up, no matter what happens to the economy, and I look forward eagerly to seeing how the incoming editors of *Perspectives* will tap into it.

**Allan Arkush**  
*Binghamton University*



**The Center for Jewish History** is home to the American Jewish Historical Society, the American Sephardi Federation, the Leo Baeck Institute, Yeshiva University Museum, and YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. As the Center enters its second decade, we seek to broaden our role as a hub for primary source material and research services, to become a professional resource for scholars by providing avenues to present new research findings, receive and offer guidance, coordinate research projects, and find support to move them forward.

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- A **Professional Development Series** in partnership with the AJS that will bring presenters from various fields to address pressing issues facing today's emerging Jewish studies scholars
- A **Visiting Scholars** program to start in Spring 2010 that will offer independent and affiliated scholars an academic community and research support at the Center

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# FROM THE PRESIDENT

*AJS President Sara Horowitz gave the following opening remarks at the World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem on August 2, 2009.  
[Translated from Hebrew]*

Distinguished scholars, colleagues, and friends,

I am honored to say a few words to you at this opening ceremony inaugurating the fifteenth World Congress of Jewish Studies. On behalf of the Association for Jewish Studies I bring greetings and good wishes to you, the international group of scholars gathered in this magnificent setting on Mount Scopus in Jerusalem, to exchange insights over the next few days.

From the antiquities to postmodernism, from biblical interpretation to film studies, the World Congress brings together the finest minds in Jewish studies across disciplines. Jewish studies is not only interdisciplinary but also international. It draws its vitality not only from the brilliance of the individual scholar but from the interaction among professors and students from all over the globe. In formal panels and in impromptu conversations in the hallways, over

slices of watermelon or cups of cappuccino, our field—in all its diversity—is prodded, challenged, stretched, and expanded in energetic and creative ways. That is why, for so many of us, the World Congress is a magnet, drawing us from all parts of Israel and all parts of the world, to this campus on this mountain every four years, both to celebrate and re-energize our thinking.

With your kind permission, I will say a few words in English: Jewish studies today is a robust, diverse, and expanding field. While it continues to maintain strength in the areas which were at its center at the foundation, in 1925, of the university in whose halls we convene today, some of its most creative areas could not have been imagined then, less than a century ago. For those of us who do our academic work at an institution outside of this country, exchange of ideas with Israeli scholars is invaluable. Jewish studies in Israel is focused, daring, innovative, and insightful, and enriches the field globally. I ask that those of you who have traveled here from other countries join me in honoring our Israeli colleagues who are our hosts for this conference.

While the university is sometimes dubbed “the ivory tower,” suggesting that the intellectual work at its center is divorced from what is called “the real world,” the gritty world of society, economics, and politics, I would take exception to that description. The free exchange

of ideas that is the lifeblood of the academy contributes in a vital way to the health of democracies. Correspondingly, the academy is not impervious to political pressures.

At this moment, Israeli academics and academic institutions have come under attack. The boycott movement is an affront to the principles of academic freedom that define our profession. It is particularly ironic, in that Israeli universities support a level of freedom found in few other places in the world. Universities in Israel are an important source of complex and critical discussion. Those of us who have come to this World Congress from other places in the world do so not only out of a desire to participate in a high level scholarly exchange, but also as a palpable repudiation of the call to boycott our Israeli colleagues and the institutions at which they work.

All of us who participate in this conference will come away enriched by the cross-fertilization of ideas, and by the new colleagues we will meet over the course of the next several days. We will bring those ideas into our own research and teaching, along with a renewed commitment to genuine, equitable, and meaningful academic exchange on our campuses.

**Sara R. Horowitz**  
*York University*

*The Association for Jewish Studies wishes to thank the Center for Jewish History and its constituent organizations—the American Jewish Historical Society, the American Sephardi Federation, the Leo Baeck Institute, the Yeshiva University Museum, and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research—for providing the AJS with office space at the Center for Jewish History.*

*AJS President Sara Horowitz gave the following opening remarks at the World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem on August 2, 2009.*

חוקרים דגולים, עמיתי וידידי -  
כבוד גדול הוא עבורי לשאת כמה מילים בטקס פתיחה זה החונך את הקונגרס העולמי  
החמישה עשר למדעי היהדות. בשם ה-Association  
for Jewish Studies ברכתי שלוחה לכם, קבוצת המלומדים הבינלאומית  
המתאספת כאן במעמד נפלא זה בהר הצופים בירושלים על מנת להחליף דעות  
וחידושים במשך הימים הבאים.

מחקר העתיקות ועד לפוסט-מודרניזם, מפרשנות המקרא ועד לחקר הסרטים,  
הקונגרס מכנס במקום אחד את מיטב הכושר האינטלקטואלי במדעי היהדות בכל  
תחומי הלימוד שלהם. מדעי היהדות הינם לא רק בינתחומיים אלא גם בינלאומיים.  
הם מושכים את כוח החיים שלהם לא רק מתבוננו של החוקר היחידי אלא גם  
מפעולה הדדית והידברות בין פרופסורים וסטודנטים ברחבי העולם. אם בפנלים  
פורמלים, אם בשיחות מאולתרות בתוך פרוזודורי המכון, בין חתיכות אבטיח וכוסות  
קפה הפוך, מקצועינו המגוון נדחף, נמתח, מאותגר, ומתפשט בדרכים אנרגטיות  
ויצירתיות. זוהי הסיבה מדוע, עבור רבים מאיתנו, הקונגרס מהווה מגנט המושך אותנו  
מרחבי הארץ ומכל רחבי העולם לקמפוס זה בהר זה בכל ארבע שנים, כדי לחגוג יחד  
וכדי להפיח רוח חדשה, להמריץ ולפתח את חשיבתנו.

ברשותכם אומר כמה מילים באנגלית -

Jewish studies today is a robust, diverse, and expanding field. While it continues to maintain strengths in the areas which were at its center at the foundation, in 1925, of the university in whose halls we convene today, some of its most creative areas could not have been imagined then, less than a century ago. For those of us who do our academic work at institutions outside of this country, the exchange of ideas with Israeli scholars is invaluable. Jewish studies in Israel is focused, daring, innovative, and insightful, and enriches the field globally. I ask that those of you who have traveled here from other countries join me in honoring our Israeli colleagues who are our hosts for this conference.

בעוד שלעיתים האוניברסיטה מכונה בשם "מגדל השן" מתוך תפיסה שהעבודה  
האינטלקטואלית שבמרכזה מנותקת ממה שנקרא "העולם האמיתי", כלומר העולם  
המוחשי של חברה, כלכלה ופוליטיקה, אני הייתי חולקת על תיאור זה. השיח החופשי,  
שהינו סם החיים של האקדמיה, תורם באופן חיוני לבריאותה של הדמוקרטיה.  
במקביל, אין האקדמיה חסיה מלחצים פוליטיים.

בשעה זו אקדמאים ישראלים ומוסדות אקדמיים ישראלים נמצאים תחת מתקפה.  
תנועת החרם האקדמי סותרת את עקרון החופש האקדמי המגדיר את מקצועינו.  
הדבר אירוני במיוחד מפני שהאוניברסיטאות בישראל תומכות ומעודדות רמה גבוהה  
של חירות אקדמית וחופש ביטוי שכמותם נמצאים רק במקומות מעטים למדי.  
האוניברסיטאות בארץ מהוות מקור חשוב לשיחה ביקורתית ומורכבת. אלה מאיתנו  
שבאו מחוץ לארץ לקונגרס בירושלים עשו זאת לא רק מתוך רצון להשתתף  
בסימפוזיון אקדמי ברמה גבוהה אלא לבטא בכך באופן ממשי את דחייתנו לכל  
קריאה להחרים את עמיתנו הישראלים ואת המוסדות בהם הם עובדים.

אני בטוחה שכל אחד מהמשתתפים בכנס זה יצא נשכר מההפרייה ההדדית  
ומהעמיתים אותם נפגוש בימים הקרובים ונטמיע את הרעיונות החדשים במחקר  
ובלימוד. כל זאת יחד עם מחויבות מחודשת לדו-שיח אקדמי אמיתי, הוגן ומשמעותי  
במוסדותינו.

# FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Dear Colleagues,

Over the past year, discussion among executive directors of learned societies large and small has revolved around the employment security, conditions, and prospects of its members; the impact of the economy on academic publishing; and the financial stability of academic associations, whose destinies are intertwined with that of higher education in general. Of particular concern to virtually all societies has been the ability of scholars to maintain their memberships (oftentimes, in more than one professional association) and to attend annual meetings (oftentimes, more than one a year), at a time of salary, budget, and travel support cuts.

As of the end of October 2009, AJS members have demonstrated their ongoing commitment to our organization by maintaining their membership at the same rate as in previous years, and by registering to participate in the 41st Annual Conference in record numbers for a West Coast location (indeed, submission numbers were on par with those for last year's conference in Washington, DC, a striking fact given that more than 40 percent of AJS members are based in the Northeast). These statistics suggest both the loyalty of AJS members to the organization and the annual meeting, as well as the particular importance of the association's professional services and conference in these difficult times.

What do AJS members tell us about

the impact of the economic crisis on their work and professional lives? Not surprisingly, the reports vary, based upon the type of institution (public or private), the location (hard-hit state, North America, Israel, Europe), the member's position (graduate student, adjunct, tenure track, tenured, endowed chair, retired), the type of program (Jewish studies center, endowed program), etc. No one we have heard from has been untouched. There have been widespread reports of program/department budget freezes or cuts (anywhere from 5–10 percent). Several members report that their institutions have reduced or eliminated travel and research support for tenured faculty (often lumped into one reserve fund or annual cap) in order to preserve funding for assistant professors, for whom participating in scholarly conferences and completing research for articles and books is most time-sensitive. Members holding endowed chairs point out that while they may have access to some travel and research funds due to provisions of their chair, they still face the same furlough days, increased class size, program budget reductions, etc., as scholars without endowed positions. Other members have noted salary and hiring freezes. Hardest hit have been part-time and adjunct faculty, several of whom have found their positions suddenly eliminated; those still holding adjunct jobs have found that they no longer are eligible to apply for institutional research or travel support. A telling statistic is the number of applicants we received for the Conference Travel Grant Program: seventy-four applicants (which represents 15 percent of presenters), most of whom receive no form of institutional support for conference travel.

Of particular concern are graduate students who have recently completed or are near the end of their PhDs. Job prospects for newly minted PhDs was a primary topic of

discussion at the 2009 annual meeting of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS). Societies across the disciplines are strategizing how to help early career scholars, who have invested great time and, in many cases, expense to secure their degrees and in whom institutions have invested so heavily. One approach discussed at the ACLS meeting is to expand the pool of postdoctoral fellowship programs in order to give recent graduates time to turn their dissertations into a book while the job market recovers. Some questioned whether programs in the humanities are simply accepting too many PhD students, and if graduate departments should rethink their admissions policies to better reflect the realities of the job marketplace. AJS's own positions listings have seen a 19 percent drop for the period January 1, 2009 to September 30, 2009 (fifty-one postings), compared to the same period last year (sixty-three postings), pointing to the importance of helping recent graduates stay in the field in a more challenging job market.

I have been asked if Jewish studies has fared better or worse than other fields. Quite frankly, it's difficult to say. One can point to the numerous endowed chairs (more than 230 listed in the directory on the AJS website) and endowed programs in the field, and conclude that Jewish studies has the extra cushioning of these endowments to maintain programming, positions, and courses that would otherwise fall into institutional budget gaps. But no matter how well endowed a program, that program is still part of the universe of the institution and subject to the overall health of its finances and employee policies. Furthermore, these endowments are subject to the same vagaries of the market, and rules regarding endowments that are underwater can severely restrict spending in current and future fiscal years. And while

Jewish studies has benefited greatly from the support of community members and foundations, these supporters' financial challenges necessarily trickle down to the programs they support.

Over the past several months, AJS has launched several programs to meet the evolving needs of our members in these unprecedented times, including the Legacy Heritage Jewish Studies Project, in collaboration with the Legacy Heritage Fund, to support innovative Jewish studies

programming in small to mid-sized cities and to help build ongoing partnerships between Jewish studies programs and the communities that surround them; the AJS/CJH Professional Development Series, in cooperation with the Center for Jewish History, to provide workshops on critical issues in the profession, including career options for recent PhDs inside and outside of academia; and an expanded conference travel grant program to subsidize travel expenses for participants with little to no institutional funding (AJS members

and major foundations were extraordinary in their support for this new initiative, contributing more than \$30,000). AJS relies on feedback and suggestions from its members to develop such new services and opportunities. Please e-mail us at [ajs@ajs.cjh.org](mailto:ajs@ajs.cjh.org) and let us know what additional resources and programs the association can provide.

**Rona Sheramy**  
*Association for Jewish Studies*

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*is pleased to announce that it  
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# It's the Economy, Shmendrick!

## AN "ECONOMIC TURN" IN JEWISH STUDIES?

Jonathan Karp

Writing in the 1977 *AJS Newsletter*, Benjamin Braude noted that Jewish history has been compared to a "head without a body," a history of the Jews' spiritual and intellectual achievements rather than of their material and economic experience. The criticism was not new. As early as the 1910s the Polish-Jewish historian Ignacy Schipper lamented the fact that *Wissenschaft des Judentums* had concerned itself only with the "spiritual riches" of the scholars and intellectuals while ignoring the commerce and labor of the workaday Jew. Bernard Weinryb, a later student of Polish Jews, similarly decried the failure of Jewish historians to engage with economic realities in an honest and unapologetic fashion. And in recent years, Derek Penslar has reasserted the grim diagnosis of a Jewish historiography still essentially disembodied from the economic domain.

While somewhat overstated, these complaints do reflect a longstanding problem: a cloud of embarrassed silence has persistently hovered over the topic of Jewish *commercial*

livelihoods. Shylock has cast a long shadow of defensiveness over Jewish self-perceptions. In making this assessment, however, it ought first to be acknowledged that the list of exceptions to this general tendency is substantial—in fact enough nearly to disprove the rule. To the four names mentioned above could be added those of numerous other scholars who have advanced our understanding of Jewish economic history: Raphael Mahler, Selma Stern, and Arcadius Kahan, to mention just a few. Yet despite their individually impressive achievements, there has never been a systematic and programmatic effort to construct a subfield of economic scholarship within Jewish studies. Today, for instance, there are institutes for Sephardic studies, Yiddish language and culture, and a variety of other important areas, but no institute or center for the study of Jewish economic life. No journal specializing in this topic exists today either. The older, multivolume economic histories of the Jews, although still worth reading, are dated and remain untranslated into English.

Yet the long wait may finally be at an end; in this last decade there have

been notable rumblings of change. Whatever larger cultural developments underpin this apparent shift, it is the work of two scholars in particular, Jonathan Israel and Derek Penslar, that deserves much of the credit. Israel's wide-ranging yet meticulous renderings of the Sephardic trading diaspora succeeded brilliantly in fleshing out Fernand Braudel's earlier impressionistic inference of a massive Sephardic impact on early modern trade. In contrast to all other contemporary trading diasporas, the Sephardim alone, insists Israel, "managed to bridge the gulf between all four of the main early modern religious spheres of Europe and the Near East—that is Protestantism, Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Islam; all six of the western maritime empires; and America North and South as well as the old World." In Israel's depiction the Sephardic merchants of Salonika, Amsterdam, and Recife appear as veritable harbingers of our current globalization. Penslar's *Shylock's Children* (published in 2000), although focusing on mentalities far more than on commercial networks, makes similarly broad claims. The book places economic anxieties—prompted by successive efforts of Jewish elites to reshape the occupational profile of the benighted Jewish masses—at the very heart of modern Jewish identity formation. The hypothesis entails a fundamental

reevaluation of the impetus that drove many political movements in modern Jewish life, including territorialism and Zionism, as well as a reconsideration of the importance of Jewish philanthropy (including projects of occupational restructuring) in forging a secular sense of purpose and belonging for countless Jews.

An impressive sequence of conferences and publications succeeded the publication of Israel's and Penslar's books. A 1997 conference sponsored by the John Carter Library on Sephardic culture and commerce in the Western Hemisphere sought to join Jewish history with the burgeoning field of "Atlantic studies" and resulted in a 2001 collection of essays entitled, *The Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West, 1450 to 1800*. In 2003, Johns Hopkins University hosted a symposium entitled, "Atlantic Diasporas: Jews, Conversos, and Crypto-Jews in the Age of Mercantilism, 1500–1800," featuring the work of Israel along with that of some of his students and critics. This conference, too, has occasioned a (similarly titled) volume of important essays. In 2005 the George L. Mosse Program at the University of Wisconsin–Madison sponsored a two-day "international workshop" entitled, "Jewish History Encounters Economy" (likewise the basis of a forthcoming volume). In this instance the focus was not on Sephardic networks but rather the historiography and imagery of Jews in commerce.

One of the peculiarities of Jewish economic historiography is that some of its landmark studies have been written in order to advance large,

metahistorical claims about the overarching significance of Jews to Western economic development. Such was certainly the case with Werner Sombart's early twentieth-century work and, to some degree, with the recent book by Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*. Both are boldly creative and unabashed efforts to identify Jews with the spirit of modern capitalism, if not necessarily to credit them with its concrete creation. Both yield genuine insights about the special roles Jews came to play within the economic constellation of Christendom and the

ONE OF THE PECULIARITIES OF JEWISH ECONOMIC HISTORIOGRAPHY IS THAT SOME OF ITS LANDMARK STUDIES HAVE BEEN WRITTEN IN ORDER TO ADVANCE LARGE, METAHISTORICAL CLAIMS ABOUT THE OVERARCHING SIGNIFICANCE OF JEWS TO WESTERN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT.

prodigious longevity of their middleman activity. At best, however, both of these works glimpse the forest but miss the trees; that is to say, they heap up numerous examples and statistics while ignoring or discounting contrary evidence; and they eschew comparative analyses with non-Jewish trade networks that could provide essential perspective. Their effect on the course of scholarship is similarly mixed. They usefully puncture the academic silence that obscures a critically important topic, but do so in a manner that lends unfortunate credence to overreactive responses. They thus tend to provide ammunition to those who would argue that any effort to present a master narrative of Jewish economy must inevitably lead to dangerous overgeneralizations and "essentialism," that bogeyman of contemporary academic discourse.

Nevertheless, in the short term, these

works have stimulated debate and generated fresh scholarship. Like Sombart's book, Slezkine's tour de force prompted a burst of lectures, interviews, roundtables, symposia, and colloquia. As the dust settled over Slezkine's thesis that Jews have been the archetypal cultural and economic moderns, the progress that more quotidian scholarship had in the meantime made became evident. One of the clearest indications of the burgeoning field was the decision of the University of Pennsylvania's Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies to devote the entire fellowship year 2009–10 to the topic of "Jews, Commerce, and Culture." The Center hosted twenty-four fellows who presented weekly seminar papers on topics in medieval or modern Jewish economic history.

A three-day international colloquium followed, featuring some twenty-five presenters, whose research will serve as the basis for a future volume.

As further evidence of heightened activity, during the year-long period of the Katz Center Fellowship Program, no less than four monographs were published on aspects of Jewish economic history: Francesca Trivallato's *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period*; Sarah Abrevaya Stein's *Plumes: Ostrich Feathers, Jews, and a Lost World of Global Commerce*; Eli Lederhendler's *Jewish Immigrants and American Capitalism, 1880–1920*; and my own *The Politics of Jewish Commerce: Economic Thought and Emancipation in Europe, 1638–1848*.

Trivallato harnesses her phenomenal mastery of the mechanisms and mentalities of early modern

## STILL, IF THERE IS TO BE A REAL ECONOMIC TURN IN JEWISH STUDIES, SCHOLARS WILL PROBABLY WISH TO FOCUS MORE ON THE ACTUAL THAN THE SYMBOLIC MEANINGS OF THE JEWISH ECONOMIC PAST.

commerce to negotiate a judicious middle ground between competing claims about trading diasporas in general and Sephardic commerce in particular. She sees Sephardic traders as neither exemplars of a decidedly *premodern* form of long-distance commerce nor a hermetically sealed ethnic corporation (as depicted by middleman minority theorists). Rather, her study suggests that strict ethnic boundaries actually enhanced economic openness, opportunism, and flexibility while ties of culture and kinship supplied merely a general framework of “familiarity” but no guarantee of trustworthiness in commercial transactions.

Trivellato rejects that cardinal doctrine of both Weberian theory and neoclassical economics that with the triumphant march to modern market society, ethnic niches must inevitably succumb to the calculative force of rationalistic individuals. Sarah Abrevaya Stein’s study of the international feather trade makes a similar point: ethnic networks not only can survive in a modern economy but may even possess certain advantages. Stein’s book is a historical detective story mining clues from Jewish communities and commercial sites in Lithuania, South Africa, Morocco, London, New York, and California. What her intrepid research uncovers is not a crime (although that sometimes occurred, too) but rather the disappearance and rapid forgetting of a once vital international trade largely controlled by Jews. Unlike many studies of ethnic niches, Jewishness is not merely incidental to the tale she tells. Rather, as Stein emphasizes, it “functioned as the glue that bound together a global market.” Jews were geographically well situated (or in some cases actively resituated themselves) to play instrumental roles in all aspects of the worldwide production, transport, refining, and sale of these luxury goods. The apposite division of Jewish labor within this particular industry makes

it appear as a microcosm of that larger interdependency, ethnic solidarity, and internal class antagonism that characterized Jewry as a whole at the time.

If there is a dissenting voice amidst this chorus celebrating Jewish commerce, it is that of Eli Lederhendler. Stein, for instance, argues that Lithuanian Jews succeeded in the feather business because they possessed a “human capital” derived from an already existing commercial culture in eastern Europe. Although he does not deny that east European Jews may once have comprised a kind of middleman minority, Lederhendler regards this fact as irrelevant to evaluating their status in the late nineteenth century. By that time, he observes, the Jewish masses had become largely declassed (rather than proletarianized), as well as de-skilled and pauperized. Lederhendler thus repudiates the widespread notion that Jewish immigrants to the United States were better prepared for modern economic life than other contemporary ethnic groups. Rather, it was their gradual incorporation into the American working class, their transition from caste to class, that made possible their eventual upward mobility. Although Lederhendler is less interested in Jewish commerce than Jewish conformity, his call for a renewed history of Jewish work life and material circumstance echoes a theme common to the other works discussed here.

That call might well be heeded, assuming that the ghosts of Marx, Sombart, and Shylock on the Jewish Question have been finally laid to rest. My own book, *The Politics of*

*Jewish Commerce*, returns to these and many other now spectral representations of Jewish economy to ask what exactly the economic image of the Jews might have meant to the evolution of European political culture. Jews were overwhelmingly identified with novel economic behaviors and transactions during an era when modern conceptions of citizenship were first forged. Hence their situation suggested to many contemporaries a nexus between economic and political change. Jews served as emblems of rapidly expanding networks of finance and exchange that, depending on one’s perspective, either threatened classical ideals of the virtuous polity or promised to broaden and revitalize criteria of civic membership. Jewish commerce thus took on a theoretical importance that both directly affected the Jews’ own statuses and helped transform European economic and political thought.

Still, if there is to be a real economic turn in Jewish studies, scholars will probably wish to focus more on the actual than the symbolic meanings of the Jewish economic past. This has been the repeated argument of the economic historian Michael Toch, who has for years been challenging longstanding assumptions about the pioneering importance of Jews in the commerce of medieval Europe. Toch’s goal—as manifested in a forthcoming multivolume economic history of medieval Jewry—is to show that Jews were rarely the economic trailblazers or the occupationally anomalous agents of historians’ imaginations, but rather typically just one among a number of commercial populations seeking to eke out an existence within European life.

Indeed, for too long emphasis on what appears anomalous in Jewish economic life has deflected attention from a question that is fundamental to the history of any group: how did their economic behaviors both reflect and reshape their communal institutions, their beliefs, their internal and external relationships,

and their day-to-day lives? As the following essays on American Jewish economy demonstrate, it is a question that historians are now addressing in a variety of ways. I am very pleased to have had the opportunity to assemble such a fine collection.

*Jonathan Karp is associate professor in the Judaic studies and history departments at Binghamton University. He is the author of The Politics of Jewish Commerce: Economic Thought and Emancipation in Europe, 1638–1848 (Cambridge University Press, 2008).*

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# RESPINNING AN OLD YARN: JEWS AND THE INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN USED CLOTHING

*Adam Mendelsohn*

A pungent fug hung over the Old Clothes Exchange in the East End of London, bursting forth anew whenever a ragman opened a sack to reveal his daily harvest of cast-off clothing. The smell and noise of this crowded marketplace was routinely remarked upon by visitors who ventured to what, by the 1840s, had become a shabby site of pilgrimage for slum explorers and journalists. Startled by (and relishing) the exotic scene, few were attuned to the sophistication of the market that they wandered through. What they saw was a central node in an international Jewish ethnic economy that, at its height, stretched from Rag Fair, an impromptu bazaar in Gold Rush Melbourne, to the slave plantations of the American South.

Historians have long been interested in the position of Jews in commodity chains—slaves, spices, grain, cattle, diamonds, coral—in the early modern period. For the most part, these networks were closed to those without capital and consanguinity. By contrast we still know surprisingly little about Jewish participation in international commerce in the modern period, with the exception of Sarah Abrevaya Stein's recent study of the global trade in ostrich feathers. Although the feather trade was characteristic of extractive commodity chains in the long nineteenth century, with agents on the colonial periphery supplying the metropole via a hub and spoke model, Jews were involved in several other branches of international commerce that did not follow this

unidirectional and capital intensive pattern. Modern markets created demand for a panoply of new consumer commodities, and commoditized goods that had previously been of limited value and circulation. Nowhere was this change more dramatic than in the collection and resale of used clothing. Whereas the market for used clothing had once been mostly local, new sources of demand in the first decades of the nineteenth century transformed worn garments into an internationally traded commodity.

## THE COLLECTION AND RESALE OF SECONDHAND CLOTHES HAD BEEN A STAPLE OCCUPATION OF THE JEWISH UNDERCLASS IN ENGLAND FROM AT LEAST THE MIDDLE OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AND LONGER ELSEWHERE IN EUROPE.

The collection and resale of secondhand clothes had been a staple occupation of the Jewish underclass in England from at least the middle of the eighteenth century and longer elsewhere in Europe. This early presence is critical to explaining the centrality of the garment trade to modern Jewish economic history. Longstanding Jewish participation in the trade positioned Jews to take full advantage of the rapid expansion of international demand for used clothing in the first half of the nineteenth century, driven by national and imperial expansion and the rising buying power of the working classes. The Jewish clothing niche became increasingly

elaborate and sophisticated as dealers adapted to new opportunities for profit at home and abroad. This ramification provided a critical advantage in the second half of the century as the market shifted again.

Jewish dealers were able to draw upon existing skills, production techniques and distribution chains to shift into the mass manufacture of cheap ready-made garments. This transition ultimately provided jobs for hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants to the United States and England through the 1920s.

The secondhand garment trade has also been largely absent from studies of Jewish labor and the immigrant experience. Even as the sweatshop has been double-stitched

into popular and scholarly memory of the Jewish immigration to the United States and England, the secondhand clothing trade has frayed and been forgotten. And yet for much of the nineteenth century, Jews dominated the collection, salvaging, and resale of used clothing in both countries. This was a substantial business: before the Civil War most Americans dressed in homespun or secondhand clothing. Although by the middle decades of the century, mass-manufactured garments cut out an expanding section of the clothing market, demand for used clothing accelerated in the colonies of the British Empire, in the American South, and on the western frontier. During these same decades, a

cohort of Jews with expertise in the used-clothing trade discovered that their unglamorous occupation provided a major advantage when entering the nascent ready-made garment industry. By the end of the century an international ethnic economy built upon cast-off clothing had been tapered and transformed into one centered on the mass manufacture of cheap clothing in Leeds, London, and New York's Lower East Side.



"The Peddler's Wagon," wood engraving drawn by Charles Green Bush. Reprinted from *Harper's Weekly* 12, no. 599 (June 20, 1868): 393. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov.

This outcome would seem an unlikely prospect to a visitor to the Old Clothes Exchange in the early 1840s, on the cusp of the mass industrialization of clothing manufacture. The 7,000-square foot clothes bourse was supplied by a legion of Jewish old-clothes men (few itinerant collectors were women) who trudged the streets of London, chanting "old clo'" to attract customers willing to barter worn garments for flowers, cheap crockery, and jewelry. They converged every afternoon at the Exchange to sell their spoils. The dealers who picked through these tattered garments had three markets in mind. "First class" clothes could be "revived [*sic*], tricked, polished, teased, re-napped, and sold" to retailers or pawned for profit. The cleaning, patching, and stitching necessary to transform ragged clothing into saleable garments was done within the surrounding neighborhoods, part of an ethnic service economy that sprung up around the clothing trade. "Second class" clothing was exported to the settlement colonies, Holland, Ireland, and the Americas. "Third class" clothing was unsalvageable. Woolen clothing too

tattered for reuse was purchased for recycling by the shoddy mill; linen shirts beyond repair were bought for paper mills.

Court records reveal that dealers were astute speculators. Some clothing changed hands multiple times on the Exchange within a single day, passed between dealers until it found a purchaser confident of extracting the maximum value upon resale. Dealers appear to have

the second hand habiliments of the empire" passed through the marketplace at some point in their life cycle. A substantial portion of this clothing was exported to the United States, seemingly to the Jewish dealers who dominated the used clothing market in New York.

If Petticoat Lane became synonymous with Jews and the street trade in old clothes in London in the mid-nineteenth

## STARTING IN THE 1830s, RESIDENTS AND VISITORS TO THE CITY BEGAN TO COMPLAIN ABOUT THE VOLUBILITY AND VIGOR OF JEWISH SALESMEN WHO WAYLAID AND WHEEDED PASSING PEDESTRIANS.

specialized in different categories of clothing. They were certainly a cosmopolitan group; Irishmen competed with Jewish buyers from France, Holland, central Europe, and North Africa. According to a contemporary observer, the Old Clothes Exchange handled the export of about twelve bales of cast-off clothing and fabric each week. By one exaggerated estimate, "half

century, Chatham Street was its New York counterpart. Starting in the 1830s, residents and visitors to the city began to complain about the volubility and vigor of Jewish salesmen who waylaid and wheedled passing pedestrians. As in London, the area was a patchwork of slops-sellers, hawkers, and used-clothes dealers selling to a working class clientele. Their stock was a mix of

imported and local garments, the latter comprising forfeited pledges from pawnbrokers, wardrobes sold by the impecunious, and clothing collected by peddlers. Although Philadelphia, Baltimore, Boston, and Chicago also had streets tightly packed with Jewish clothiers, the old clo' dealers of Chatham Street became embedded in the popular imagination. This reputation was exported overseas. In the 1860s and 1870s, foreigners in Canton, China, referred to a street of old clothes sellers as the "Chatham Street" of the city.

Jewish dealers in New York purchased used clothing to ship to the South and West. Demand was particularly strong from plantation owners who purchased cheap fabric and slops to outfit their slaves.

Perhaps because of their shoddy and drab work clothing, slaves with access to a small income often spent their limited earnings on ostentatious finery. Much of this was sold or bartered by Jewish peddlers. A willingness to barter was essential. Many rural and poor urban customers had little access to ready money, but had plenty of items that an enterprising traveling salesman could resell for profit in a market where such goods were scarcer.

Rags—clothing and fabric beyond repair—and tattered garments formed a central part of this barter economy. In nineteenth-century America, rags were collected in greater quantities than any other domestic recyclable. In many households rags were collected by women, who also interacted directly with the peddler and often

controlled the spending of this "rag-money." Not only did rags and old clothing serve as a currency for the peddler and his customers, but also as a commodity valued by the wholesalers and dealers who supplied the peddler with his merchandise. Rather than returning to the depot for resupply with an empty pack or wagon, the peddler carried recyclables that he could trade at a favorable rate of exchange for new stock. Some retailers and wholesalers collected rags directly from peddlers for barter or sale to

ALTHOUGH THE JEWS WHO TRADED IN USED CLOTHING IN LONDON AND NEW YORK COMPETED AGAINST ONE ANOTHER, THEY ALSO FORMED A MUTUALLY ADVANTAGEOUS CLUSTER OF EXPERTISE IN REPAIR AND CHEAP RETAILING. DEALERS WHO SUBCONTRACTED THE CLEANING AND REPAIR OF WORN AND DAMAGED CLOTHING TO OTHERS WERE ABLE TO TRANSFER THE METHODS OF PUTTING OUT AND PIECEWORK TO THE SEWING OF NEW CLOTHING.

shoddy mills and paper manufacturers. Others relied on middlemen who aggregated the raw material for bulk sale and shipping. As in Britain, used clothing collected by peddlers and ragmen in America was more valuable if repaired than if resold as scrap. Such salvaged clothing was bought by dealers, mended, and restored in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, and then shipped to the South and West for resale.

Thus the used garment trade operated as a series of interconnected circulatory systems. A centripetal system aggregated clothing collected by ragmen in London and peddlers in the South, adding value by repairing and sorting this motley harvest. A

centrifugal system dispatched the garments in bulk to distant markets, often to be distributed and sold by co-ethnics. This dynamic commercial chain could easily be turned to the distribution of ready-made clothing once the input costs of manufacturing declined. Indeed Jewish used clothing dealers were fortuitously positioned for this transition.

Although the Jews who traded in used clothing in London and New York competed against one another,

they also formed a mutually advantageous cluster of expertise in repair and cheap retailing. Dealers who subcontracted the cleaning and repair of worn and damaged clothing to others were able to transfer the methods of putting out and piecework to the sewing of new

clothing. They could draw upon a pool of local contractors and workers familiar with this system. They also gained a competitive advantage over their competitors by drawing upon existing distribution chains to market new merchandise. In London, the Old Clothes Exchange became a channel for the distribution of new clothing. In the United States, the peddlers who supplied dealers with worn garments from the countryside now carried new clothing to sell to their provincial and rural consumers. Potential customers already came to Petticoat Lane and Chatham Street in search of bargains. These same shoppers, whose disposable income and purchasing power were boosted by the growing industrial economy, were the target market for the cheap

fashions sold by manufacturing retailers.

While several clothing dealers rapidly (and profitably) exchanged the used clothing business for manufacturing—most prominently Henry Moses—there is little to suggest that Jewish traders were more attuned to the vagaries of the market, or more flexible in forsaking older patterns of conducting business. Many Jewish ragmen and dealers remained in the secondhand trade, or traded in both used and new clothes. Even after some of the most successful of the early Jewish manufacturers left the public trappings of the old clothing business behind, their businesses often remained in a symbiotic relationship with the secondhand trade. E. Moses & Son, for example, the most successful of the early Jewish retailers of cheap ready-made clothing in London, offered suits on yearly contract, essentially a

lease scheme that required the return of the worn jackets and trousers after a year in exchange for a new set. This retailer profited twice, retailing the new garments and reselling the used suits on the secondhand market. Yet over time those who remained dependent on used clothing were squeezed by competition from ready-made clothing emporia and the declining prices of new garments.

The concentration of Jews in the secondhand trade ensured that even if few dealers successfully transitioned to manufacturing, a substantial proportion of them were Jewish. Although clothing producers suffered high rates of bankruptcy since demand oscillated during periods of boom and bust, Jewish manufacturers developed an additional ethnic edge. The arrival of scores of poor Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe provided an easily exploitable labor pool for the

expansion of the subcontracting system. Whereas these immigrants might have once been drawn into the bottom rungs of the clothing trade as rag collectors and peddlers, many more now became the poorly paid sewers and cutters who underpinned an entire ethnic economy.

The secondhand clothing business played a profoundly consequential role in modern Jewish economic history. Unjustly discarded by Jewish historical memory, it is time for this unglamorous trade to come out of the closet to be properly aired, if not “revived, tricked, polished, teased, [and] re-napped.”

*Adam Mendelsohn is assistant professor of Jewish studies at the College of Charleston. He is co-editor of Jews and the Civil War: A Reader (New York University Press, forthcoming in 2010).*

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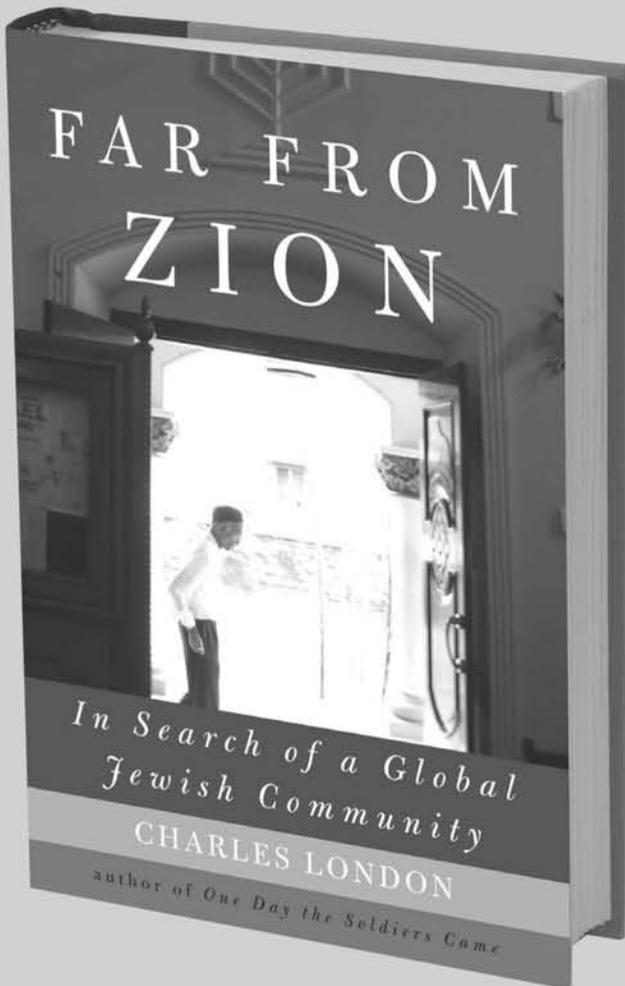
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# JEWISH IMMIGRANT “BANKERS,” FINANCIAL FAILURE, AND THE SHIFTING CONTOURS OF AMERICAN COMMERCIAL BANKING, 1914–1918

Rebecca Kobrin

On August 30, 1914, one of the largest finance-motivated riots in New York City history erupted on Canal Street. Fears of a long and protracted war had prodded thousands of east European Jewish immigrants to withdraw money from small businesses (commonly referred to by their Yiddish moniker, *banken*) to send back to their relatives still in Europe. Unable to return depositors’ funds, one institution on the Lower East Side, with more than sixty-thousand clients, was forced to shut its doors. Several thousand depositors marched to city hall where they attacked clerks and policemen and demanded that the municipal government guarantee the return of their funds. A riot ensued; nine were arrested. Order was restored only after the state’s most revered judge, Learned Hand, was assigned to handle the case. Discovering that much of this institution’s missing assets were tied up in Harlem real estate that could not be quickly liquidated, Hand wrote precedent-setting judicial decisions that crafted new state banking legislation requiring increased regulation of immigrant “banks” and forbidding any deposit-taking

institution from investing in real estate. These new laws would fundamentally change the face of commercial banking in New York City, a city that functioned as

to shut down. But such drastic measures were deemed necessary by Hand who believed such regulation would protect New York State from future panics caused by “speculitis,” a disease that William Gladden, an early twentieth-century New York City preacher, argued was disfiguring not only New York but America itself.



The Jarmulowsky Bank, corner of Orchard and Canal Streets, New York City, 1912. Reprinted from “Building for S. Jarmulowsky,” *Architects & Builders Magazine* XLIV (November 1912): 447.

America’s financial capital, forcing hundreds of other small immigrant businesses that took deposits, sold ship tickets, and invested in real estate

The failure setting all this chaos in motion was that of Jarmulowsky’s Bank, founded by Russian-Jewish immigrant Sender Jarmulowsky in 1873. Few people today recognize the name Jarmulowsky or can identify its main branch—nicknamed “the Temple of Capitalism”—which still stands on the corner of Canal and Orchard streets on New York’s Lower East Side. But the nexus of real estate speculation and bank failure sounds eerily familiar to contemporary ears. Today, many debate the impact that the 2008 downfall of Lehman Brothers—the oldest Jewish-founded investment bank in America—had on the country’s banking infrastructure; yet, no scholar has yet commented on its significance for the annals of American Jewish life, perhaps fearing dredging up antisemitic sentiment. A similar silence characterizes the virtual erasure of Jarmulowsky from the narrative of American Jewish history, even though

Sender Jarmulowsky, as the popular Yiddish newspaper *Tageblatt* exclaimed in 1912, was known to “every Jew in both the old and new world” on account of his business dealings and philanthropy. His “bank’s” stunning fall reshaped the world of commercial banking just as its spectacular rise had revolutionized the business of mass migration, or more specifically, the trans-Atlantic shipping industry that saw migrants as commodities.

Through such business practices as selling tickets on installment through his “bank’s” system of multilingual agents, Jarmulowsky captured the bulk of the steerage class ticket market for the Red Star Line. But when the North Atlantic Passenger Conference in 1892 rendered the selling of ship tickets no longer profitable (only the shipping lines, not the agents, could set the price of the tickets), the Jarmulowsky family sought its profits through real estate investment.

Sender Jarmulowsky’s tale along with the stories of dozens of other immigrant Jews who also dabbled in the businesses of shipping, retail banking, and real estate development brings into sharp focus a critical question for scholars interested in the economic dimensions of American Jewish life: at which moments and in which ways did immigrant Jews, their financial enterprises, as well as their failures, play a central role in reshaping America’s economic development? Indeed, while there is already an expansive body of literature on German Jewish bankers’ contribution to the world of investment banking and eastern European Jews’ role in the garment industry, little attention has been paid

to the ranks of eastern European immigrant entrepreneurs like Jarmulowsky, whose failures reshaped America’s ever-evolving banking system. More broadly, as historian David Hollinger points out, “the failure to conduct a straightforward historical and social-scientific study” of what enabled immigrant Jews to economically succeed so quickly in the United States in the first place has perpetuated the mystification of Jewish history and subtly reinforced invidious distinctions between descent groups in American society.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed the virtual absence of the

SENDER JARMULOWSKY’S TALE ALONG WITH THE STORIES OF DOZENS OF OTHER IMMIGRANT JEWS WHO ALSO DABBLED IN THE BUSINESSES OF SHIPPING, RETAIL BANKING, AND REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT BRINGS INTO SHARP FOCUS A CRITICAL QUESTION FOR SCHOLARS INTERESTED IN THE ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS OF AMERICAN JEWISH LIFE: AT WHICH MOMENTS AND IN WHICH WAYS DID IMMIGRANT JEWS, THEIR FINANCIAL ENTERPRISES, AS WELL AS THEIR FAILURES, PLAY A CENTRAL ROLE IN RESHAPING AMERICA’S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT?

Jarmulowsky family from the annals of American Jewish history exemplifies, as Tony Michels has argued, that “American Jewish history has been turned into a celebration of winners for whom winning comes easily and without costs.”<sup>2</sup> If we do not grapple with stories of Jewish financial failure, like that of the Jarmulowsky family, we will never properly grasp how immigrant Jewish entrepreneurs fit into the larger fabric of American capitalism.

Sender Jarmulowsky embodied the Horatio Alger myth for the millions of Jews living on New York’s Lower East Side at the turn of the twentieth century. Born in Russian Poland in 1841, Jarmulowsky graduated from

the illustrious Volozhin Talmudic Academy with rabbinic ordination. But he chose the world of business instead of the rabbinate, earning his first fortune by betting that Jews’ dissatisfaction with the czarist empire would lead to mass migration. Moving to Hamburg in 1868, Jarmulowsky opened a “passage and exchange” office, where he bought steerage passages in bulk and extended credit to east European Jews so that they could leave Europe. Jarmulowsky pioneered a system that sold prepaid tickets. Such a system favored speculation since the prepaid

tickets were valid for a year. Thus when prices were lower during the winter, Jarmulowsky ordered prepaid blanks in bulk with tickets written out to fictive people. When prices increased these were sold with extra profit margin. If prices dropped or tickets could not be sold in time the agents’ loss was limited to the 5 percent cancellation

fee. Jarumulowsky also developed a network of multilingual agents to sell the tickets he purchased, attracting loyal clients from all over eastern Europe.

Sender Jarmulowsky ventured to America in 1873, where he expanded this system by offering customers a way to “pay out” in installments the cost of bringing their European relations to America. By extending credit, operating in the foreign currency markets, and branching out to take deposits, Jarmulowsky was able to build the largest commercial bank on the Lower East side, holding the deposits of more than sixty-thousand east European Jewish immigrants and exchanging millions

of greenbacks for Russian rubles to send back to the old country. With the fortune he amassed, he soon became one of the greatest philanthropists of the Lower East Side, overseeing the erection of the Eldridge Street Synagogue (1887), the founding of the Orthodox Union (1898), and the reestablishment of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (1902). Upon his death in 1912, the widely popular Yiddish newspaper *Morgen zhurnal* asserted that “Jarmulowsky was living proof that in America one can be a rich businessman but also be a true, pious Jew.”<sup>3</sup> Leaving his bank to his sons, Louis and Meyer, Jarmulowsky believed that future generations would continue to associate the Jarmulowsky name only with financial prowess and generous philanthropy.

But in the face of increased regulation of ship ticket agents, Jarmulowsky’s sons turned to real estate to earn money. Buying up thirty-seven buildings in Harlem during a decade in which real estate speculators, known in Yiddish as *realestateniks*, drove up housing lot prices from \$50 per lot to more than \$3,000 per lot in northern Manhattan, Meyer Jarmulowsky believed they would easily make millions by quickly reselling their purchases. Unfortunately, events in Europe thwarted his plans. Upon hearing of the outbreak of war in July 1914, thousands stormed the bank, demanding their deposits so that they could send money to relatives in Europe. With only \$654,000 in assets and over 1.75 million dollars in liabilities tied up in mortgages, the bank was forced to close its doors. The thirty-seven buildings the Jarmulowsky brothers purchased were placed in escrow. When the buildings were finally sold in 1918, only \$371,850 was realized from the sale. By the end of World War II, Sender Jarmulowsky’s descendants had all changed their surnames to either Jarmel or Jarmuth, unable to cope with the

stain of the Jarmulowsky name.

The failure of Jarmulowsky family’s business was not exceptional; thousands of immigrant Jews failed to make it in America. But Jarmulowsky’s spectacular rise and fall casts a different light on the narrative of American Jewish immigration, so long shrouded by Emma Lazarus’s powerful imagery. The “huddled masses” of east European Jews who came to American shores were embedded in a larger system of distribution in which migrants served as a lucrative commodity, a commodity expertly exploited by men like Sender Jarmulowsky. Developing and deploying various business practices, businessmen like Jarmulowsky enabled, fueled, and molded not only the ever-shifting contours of American shipping and money exchange practices but the process of migration itself, a process that would emerge as integral to American nationalist mythology by the twentieth century.

Sender Jarmulowsky’s spectacular ascent resulted from his ability to help Jews come to America. His sons’ failure to return these same immigrants’ hard-earned money suggests that Jews not only reshaped the world of American business through their successes but by their mishaps as well. Their failure and the ensuing riot, which was widely covered by all the New York City newspapers, became central to a larger debate on the interrelationship of American character and capitalism, a literature that rarely grappled up front with the roles played by Jews. The discomfort of New York’s Protestant elite with immigrant speculators, as exemplified by the Jarmulowsky family, was rooted in a general anxiety with the role speculation played in America’s rapid advance as a world economic power. While America’s founding fathers explained American affluence as rooted in celebrated Protestant values of hard work, saving, and methodical planning,

those closer to the world of banking quickly recognized that thrift and circumspection were not rewarded. Speculation was the engine driving America’s economic expansion in the first decades of the twentieth century, just as its “frontier spirit” had driven America’s geographic expansion in the previous generation. As social gospel preachers warned, in this new America, the nexus between commercial banking and speculation was dangerous; it directly challenged the country’s celebrated Protestant ascetic roots as it encouraged ambitious young men to embrace risk rather than hard work. Despite preachers’ admonitions, speculation would continue to shape American business—and particularly the world of American finance—for the next century. As American capitalism came of age and risk-taking, self-made men became the primary model of American identity, we cannot forget the families like the Jarmulowskys, who may have ultimately failed in this nation that worships success, but whose creativity, hard work, and bad luck left an indelible imprint on its growth and development.

<sup>1</sup> David Hollinger, “Rich, Powerful, and Smart: Jewish Overrepresentation Should be Explained Rather than Mystified or Avoided,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* (Fall 2004): 596.

<sup>2</sup> Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Harvard, 2005), 19.

<sup>3</sup> “*Yarmulowski gebrakht tsu keverah mit groys kavod*,” *Morgen zhurnal*, June 4, 1912, 1.

*Rebecca Kobrin is assistant professor of history at Columbia University. She is the author of Jewish Bialystok and Its Diaspora (Indiana University Press, forthcoming in 2010).*

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# ETHNIC CREDIT AND ECONOMIC CRISIS

Shelly Tenenbaum

Ernest Baum,<sup>1</sup> a young boy growing up in San Francisco during the Great Depression, described how the economic crisis affected his family: “My mother really bore the brunt of it. We were very poor, poverty stricken, but she didn’t really let us know it. She took most of it onto herself.” When asked how she did that, Baum replied: “By working hard and by utilizing every . . . service of the Jewish Community . . . My father’s a very proud man, and my mother’s a very pragmatic person and that helped a great deal.”

For Baum, the intersection between Jewish mutual aid institutions and his family’s economic experience was evident. In contrast, ethnic and religious organizations have received little attention within studies of Jewish economic life possibly because a dominant narrative that celebrates American rugged individualism has submerged the importance of collectivism. A study of the relationship between Hebrew free loan associations and Jewish entrepreneurship during the 1930s helps rectify this omission by showing the value of communal strategies during times of crisis.

Organized around biblical and Talmudic proscriptions against charging interest, Hebrew free loan societies provided borrowers with interest-free loans. They raised capital from supporters’ contributions and then loaned the funds without interest to borrowers who furnished

diverse as Des Moines, Nashville, San Francisco, and New York.

During the Great Depression, a time when thousands of people lost their jobs and poverty statistics were escalating, the central mission of Hebrew free loan societies to help people to remain in business became urgent. At the height of the crisis, the president of the New York Hebrew Free Loan Society said that the free loan was

“usually successful in tiding them over a difficult place, in enabling them to get on their feet again, to pay pressing bills, to supply a shortage in money with which to carry on their business and, thus, it means continued employment for many who otherwise would be thrown out of their jobs.” Similarly, in 1931, while making a payment to the Cleveland Hebrew Free Loan Society, a borrower told a *Cleveland News* reporter that access to capital was critical for her entrepreneurial survival. She explained: “If it wasn’t for the money I borrow here I couldn’t keep on in

business. It’s a hard business, selling stockings, dresses, whatever they will buy from me. But it keeps me alive.”

Pittsburgh Hebrew Free Loan Association applicants took out twice as many loans for their businesses as for all other reasons combined throughout the Depression era. Examples of individual borrowers illustrate the



Article from the *Omaha Daily News*, April 21, 1912. Photograph from the collection of the Nebraska Jewish Historical Society.

names of approved endorsers. The endorser system, predicated on mutual trust, proved so effective that most societies experienced very low default rates. Beginning in the 1880s, east European Jewish immigrants transported Hebrew free loan societies (known in Europe as *hevrot gemilut hasadim*) from their hometowns to America and by 1927, more than five hundred existed in communities as

interconnection between credit and entrepreneurship. In order to complete a 1932 bricklaying job, Ike Becker, a contractor and father of two children, relied on a \$200 loan to buy materials. Between 1934 and 1936, Harry Ehrens, a broom peddler, borrowed a total of \$250 to purchase brooms. During the same two-year interval, Sam Bronstein, owner of a candy business, borrowed \$500 to buy supplies. Between September 1935 and November 1936, Eva Bernstein, a widow with six children, took out three loans for a total of \$550 to buy chickens for her poultry store. Irving Deutsch, who sold butter and eggs, borrowed \$100 for his business on three different occasions in 1933 and 1934. Rose Dorman, a widow and mother of four, peddled dresses to support her family and received five \$50 loans between 1933 and 1936 for stock money. With two \$100 loans in 1935, Moses Cronin expanded his business from nuts to potato chips and pretzels. Toward the end of the economic crisis, Esther Berger borrowed \$200 to purchase machines for her gym and bathhouse.

Throughout the Depression years, Hebrew free loan societies helped entrepreneurs hold onto the businesses they had started before the stock market crash. With the assistance of these ethnic credit institutions, people were also able to embark upon new economic ventures during this period. A dentist who moved from Brooklyn to Cleveland took out an interest-free loan to start over again. In 1932, Bennie Chernin borrowed \$100 from the Pittsburgh Hebrew Free Loan Association to start a tobacco factory. His venture clearly took off, since records indicate that he requested another factory loan in 1936. In 1934, Abraham Tulchinsky received a \$500 interest-free loan from the San Francisco Rehabilitation Loan Fund to begin

## THROUGHOUT THE DEPRESSION YEARS, HEBREW FREE LOAN SOCIETIES HELPED ENTREPRENEURS HOLD ONTO THE BUSINESSES THEY HAD STARTED BEFORE THE STOCK MARKET CRASH. WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF THESE ETHNIC CREDIT INSTITUTIONS, PEOPLE WERE ALSO ABLE TO EMBARK UPON NEW ECONOMIC VENTURES DURING THIS PERIOD.

in either the cigar or candy business. Married and the father of two children, he had been the owner of a Sacramento clothing business before it failed in 1931.

As more and more people like Abraham Tulchinsky lost their businesses and slid down the economic ladder, Hebrew free loan societies faced increasing demands during the 1930s. Hebrew free loan officers noticed that even former contributors to their organizations were appearing on their doorsteps for loans. Speaking at the 1931 annual meeting of the Pittsburgh Hebrew Free Loan Association, the president noted how “in previous years, we used to point with pride to former borrowers becoming contributors . . . In 1930, we regretfully note that due to general business depression and unemployment former contributors have become borrowers.” To help former philanthropists, the San Francisco Hebrew Free Loan Association made special accommodations by augmenting their maximum loan amount to \$1,000 for this group compared to the \$500 cap for other borrowers.

Until the Depression, Hebrew free loan associations experienced a steady increase in the amount they loaned. Once the crisis struck, however, there was no longer one discernible pattern. While some associations suffered serious declines, others increased their operations. Both the Trenton and

Birmingham Hebrew free loan associations were infused with new energy during the early 1930s. According to the Trenton Hebrew Free Loan Association secretary, the organization “made a new turn” in 1931 and “began to grow.” Similarly, the Birmingham institution reorganized in 1930. The Los Angeles and Detroit Hebrew free loan associations respectively loaned over 100 and 200 percent more in 1932 than they had prior to the crisis. In contrast, the free loan societies in Baltimore, Providence, and San Francisco loaned less in 1932 than they had just a few years before. The Lafayette (Indiana) Orthodox Hebrew Free Loan Association was in such dire financial straits during the Depression that the board seriously considered liquidation. In contrast, however, to banks that failed in large numbers—between 1929 and 1933, nine thousand or one-third of the nation’s banks folded involving deposits of nearly \$7 billion—there is no evidence of a single Hebrew free loan society closing its doors during the economic crisis. There are even records of a few new organizations emerging on the scene. On opposite coasts, for example, Providence and Los Angeles women founded Hebrew free loan societies in 1931 and 1934, respectively. The Providence women formed their organization when they were denied loans at the local Hebrew free loan society unless they acquired their husbands’ signatures.

At the same time that Hebrew free loan societies were not immune to the ills of the Depression, they succeeded in serving as an economic cushion during the harsh financial times of the 1930s. The New York Hebrew Free Loan Society alone disbursed approximately one million dollars annually during the Depression years. Having had a network of ethnic loan societies that was just one part of an impressive range of organizations that was in place before the crash may have helped Jews to survive the economic crisis better than many other Americans. In addition to

interest-free loans, communal institutions provided poor and working-class, Depression-era Jews with cash assistance, student scholarships, subsidized hospital stays, children's summer camps, vocational guidance, aid to prisoners and to the mentally ill in state institutions, Passover *matzot*, eye glasses, and medical appliances, as well as housing for orphaned children, young single women, and the elderly. Collectivism, then, may have been at least as important as individualism for Jewish economic development.

<sup>1</sup> All borrowers' names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

*Shelly Tenenbaum is professor of sociology at Clark University. This essay is based on previous research that appeared in her book A Credit to Their Community: Jewish Loan Societies in the United States, 1880–1945 (Wayne State University Press, 1993).*

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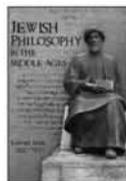
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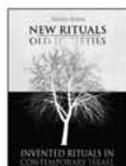
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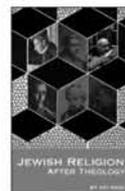
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# THE MISSING PIECE: JEWISH SHOPKEEPERS IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

Stephen J. Whitfield

Picture this: the tin or tar-paper shacks within walking distance of the town center, where a monument to a Confederate general or simply to a Johnny Reb is conspicuously placed, the simple, mostly Protestant churches made of brick or wood, the dusty roads and the humid air, the signs advertising a regional soft drink like Coca-Cola or perhaps Dr. Pepper, the atmosphere of languor and ease. This was the paradigmatic village of the American South, from roughly the era of Reconstruction throughout much or most of the twentieth century. The economy was overwhelmingly agrarian; and the landscape was overwhelmingly rural, with metropolises few and far between. One institution is missing from the picture of this archetypal village: the dry-goods store, the clothing store, the hardware store, the furniture store, the department store that was, with charming frequency, owned and run by Jewish families. Occasionally the towns were even named for the merchants who moved there—like Kaplan, Louisiana; Marks, Mississippi; and Felsenthal, Arkansas.

Operating on Main Street, these mercantile families were crucial to the economy of the South, selling to black and white customers alike. From which other retailers would even many Klansmen have bought their denims, their shoes, even their sheets? The dominance of these stores and the families that built and sustained them in the Southern imagination may be due to the occupational structure of the Jewish population of the region. Because industry, with all sorts of notable

exceptions, could gain so little traction, because cities had to struggle for life against the economic and ideological influence of agrarianism, no significant proletariat developed among Southern Jews. With few first-class colleges and universities, a professional class needed more time to emerge than elsewhere in the United States; and because boondocks bohemia are so freakishly rare, artistically inclined Southern Jews usually had to pursue

BECAUSE INDUSTRY, WITH ALL SORTS OF NOTABLE EXCEPTIONS, COULD GAIN SO LITTLE TRACTION, BECAUSE CITIES HAD TO STRUGGLE FOR LIFE AGAINST THE ECONOMIC AND IDEOLOGICAL INFLUENCE OF AGRARIANISM, NO SIGNIFICANT PROLETARIAT DEVELOPED AMONG SOUTHERN JEWS.

their dreams somewhere else. The groove was established in the mid-nineteenth century by German Jews, who often started their business careers as peddlers. Even when eastern European Jews began arriving about half a century later, as Lee Shai Weissbach has shown in *Jewish Life in Small-Town America* (2005), the pattern was generally reproduced. As a result, the impact of the mercantile class upon not only the small-town but also upon the communal character of Southern Jewry was largely uncontested. In exploring the Southern Jewish past, we really mean business.

Yet historians have yet to do justice to this feature of the American Jewish experience. The saga of department

stores and other mercantile establishments has yet to be distilled and analyzed in a single book, much less a scholarly one. Probably the most broadly conceived study remains Elliott Ashkenazi's monograph, *The Business of Jews in Louisiana* (1988). But it is confined to merely a third of the nineteenth century and to only one state. Studies of particular families and companies exist, as do memoirs and novels and sections of books devoted to particular communities. No serious volumes devoted to this theme are extant, however; and no scholar has acted upon the claim of the University of Kentucky historian Thomas D. Clark, who found it "impossible to consider Southern economic and social history with any degree of thoroughness without also considering" this

particular minority. The Southern Jew as *homo economicus* (much less his wife, who often shared responsibilities for minding the store) remains to be fully portrayed.

For scholars pursuing this topic, the documentary record is uneven. The unsuccessful, for example, tend to leave behind few traces of their business careers. The thwarted dreams of the *luftmenschen* usually escape the clutches of historians, though the credit reports of R. G. Dun (archived at the Harvard Business School) can be used to track down the failures as well as the merely moderately prosperous. Retailing is, after all, a risky business. Just ask Ulysses S. Grant, who failed in running a general store, or the

luckless haberdasher Harry S. Truman. Both of them had to pursue other lines of work (like running the country). But however incomplete the paper trail, there is no denying how frequently Southern Jewry displayed a flair for enterprise. The beginnings were invariably impoverished. But usually within a couple of generations, thanks to fortitude and perseverance, astuteness and luck, material comfort had been achieved; and some enjoyed genuine wealth. In virtually every city, a dry goods store became a major department store: Godchaux in New Orleans, Thalheimer's in Richmond, Goldsmith's in Memphis, the Gus Blass Company in Little Rock, Rich's in Atlanta, Levy's in Savannah, Cohen Brothers in Jacksonville, Pizitz's in Birmingham, Neiman Marcus in Dallas, Sakowitz's in Houston, the May Company in St. Louis, Hecht's in Baltimore, and Garfinckel's in Washington, DC.

Nor is the evidence of entrepreneurial triumph something that was especially pronounced a century or so ago. Atlanta's Home Depot, founded primarily by Arthur Blank and Bernie Marcus in 1978, became the nation's second largest

general retailer (after Wal-Mart). Charlotte can boast the Family Dollar variety store chain, which Leon Levine, the son of a Rockingham, North Carolina, department store owner, founded in 1959 at the age of

2,200 retail outlets of Zales jewelry had their origins in Wichita Falls, Texas in 1924; the company moved to Dallas two decades later. Founder Morris Bernard Zale (né Zalefsky) revolutionized access to what had once been a largely upscale business. Austin has Dell Computer, which founder Michael Dell made into the world's larger manufacturer of personal computers. Nor did everyone prefer retailing. Atlanta's master builder was the Lithuanian-born Ben Massell, who built about a thousand downtown buildings in all. There were so many, in fact, that in 1961 the booster Ivan Allen Sr., a former president of the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, proclaimed that "Sherman burned Atlanta, and Ben Massell built it back."

The region was not inhospitable to Jews and their commercial aspirations. Though hardly enjoying the high status of, say, plantation owners or military officers, tradesmen were not disreputable; permit one example of

tenacity and pluck to be representative. Sam Stein arrived at Ellis Island in 1905 with \$43, and got to Greenville, Mississippi, as a peddler. He wandered from there through the Delta, selling jewelry.

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1993 advertisement for Stein Mart's semi-annual Saks sale. Reproduced by permission from David J. Ginzl, *Stein Mart: An American Story of Roots, Family, and Building a Greater Dream* (University of Texas Press, 2004), 76; in print and available from the publisher at <http://utpress.ut.edu>.

22. Family Dollar has spread into nearly every state, with more than 35,000 full-time and part-time employees; his son Howard Levine is currently the chief executive officer of this *Fortune* 500 corporation. The

But he made his base in Greenville, reputed to be the most tolerant of the villages of the Delta, which was “the most Southern place on earth.” He married another Jewish immigrant. But he died suddenly in 1933, as the Great Depression was wreaking havoc with the prospect of financial security that had propelled Sam Stein from Lithuania a third of a century earlier. His son Jake nevertheless converted the store, named Sam Stein’s and then Stein’s Self Service Store, and finally Stein Mart, into the biggest emporium in the entire Delta. Covering an entire city block, the store promised mouth-watering discounts on discards from chic Manhattan operations like Saks Fifth Avenue.

Formerly a star tackle on the high

## IN JACKSONVILLE, JACOB COHEN MAY HAVE BEEN THE FIRST MERCHANT IN THE SOUTH TO PUT PRICE TAGS ON MERCHANDISE. EVEN IF THE CLAIM WAS INFLATED OR APOCRYPHAL, COHEN BROTHERS HELPED TO SCUTTLE THE BARTER SYSTEM THAT HAD BEEN CUSTOMARY BEFORE THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.

school football team, Jake Stein became the very archetype of the booster, heading the Chamber of Commerce, and serving as a city councilman and as president of the Hebrew Union Temple. Seven days a week he could usually be found in the store. His son Jay, born in 1945, harbored an ambition far vaster than the boundaries of the Greenville where he was born and raised. Jay Stein devoted himself to expanding the mercantile enterprise that his grandfather began. Stein Mart became a powerhouse of upscale clothing and other items that were generally found in department stores but were offered at prices common to discount houses. The growth of Stein Mart was spectacular, especially after Stein moved corporate headquarters

to Jacksonville, Florida, in 1984. Sometimes a new store opened in some community (usually but not always in the South) every three weeks. By the dawn of the twenty-first century, Stein Mart was racking up \$1.2 billion in net sales, earned in 260 stores. Its company historian, David J. Ginzl, concluded that “the company had positioned itself as a distinctive off-price retailer,” offering high-quality merchandise. One of the company advertising slogans was therefore especially enticing: “You could pay more. But you’ll have to go somewhere else.”

What did such retailers do to modernize the South? In Jacksonville, Jacob Cohen may have been the first merchant in the South to put price tags on merchandise. Even if the

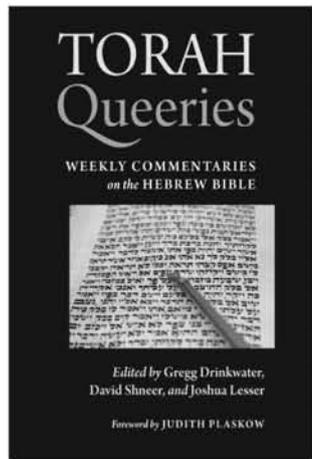
claim was inflated or apocryphal, Cohen Brothers helped to scuttle the barter system that had been customary before the twentieth century. The company and its imitators thus activated transactions of trust between the customers and the sales force, and helped to reduce the power of the unscrupulous, there’s-one-born-every-minute hucksters. Eventually, instead of haggling and bargaining, came the assurance and the probity of “satisfaction guaranteed,” based on fixed prices and the right of customers to return what they had purchased and to get their money back. Competitors were compelled to raise the level of their own game, to become more sophisticated in their marketing and more stylish in their

wares. Merchants even in hamlets had to become more attuned to fashion, and thus served as conduits of cosmopolitanism. Sensitivity to the fluctuations of taste that reverberated from outside was what partly constituted the novelty of the New South—the phrase that Henry W. Grady, the editor of *The Atlanta Constitution*, made famous in 1886 in evangelizing for a region that would achieve postbellum prosperity through capitalist enterprise. The stores that Jews established helped weaken the parochialism of the South (even if its xenophobia hardly vanished).

The department stores and the specialty stores encouraged a consumerist ethos that would eventually bury the agrarian tradition that had so decisively shaped the mind of the South. The balance sheets on which the merchant princes depended can be understood as the death warrants of the old order. Such tradesmen helped their neighbors cultivate a taste for the products of the modern world, and thus altered the atmosphere of towns. The indigenous gave way to the artificial, and traditionalism had to yield to capitalism, though rarely without a fight. Without disparaging any particular ethnic group, the Pulitzer Prize-winning local colorist Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings believed that “something is shriveled in a man’s heart when he turns away from . . . [the soil] and concerns himself only with the affairs of men.” But those very affairs constituted the radical change in consciousness and experience that Jewish merchants in the region helped to instigate. In effect they undermined the assumption that human plenitude has to be autochthonous.

*Stephen J. Whitfield is the Max Richter Professor of American Civilization at Brandeis University. He is the editor of A Companion to 20th-Century America (Blackwell, 2004 [hardcover], 2007 [paperback]).*

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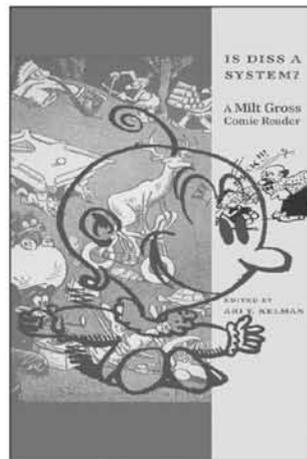


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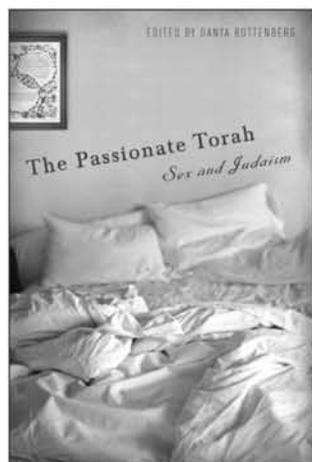


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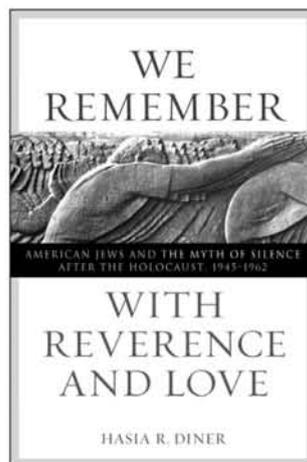


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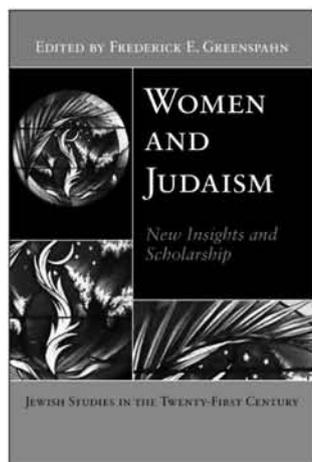


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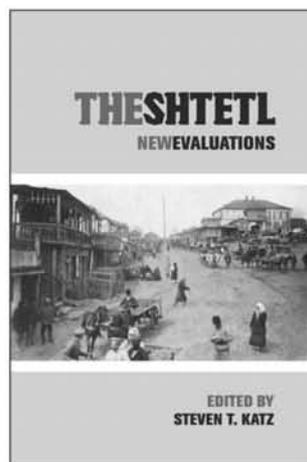


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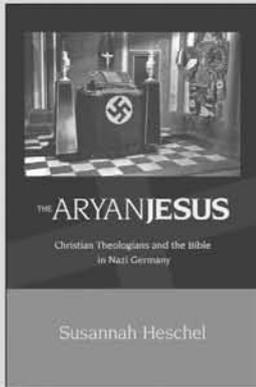
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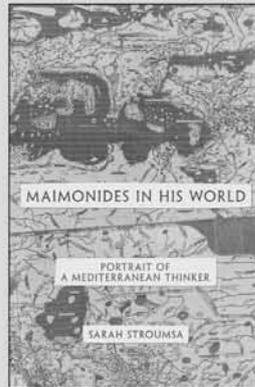
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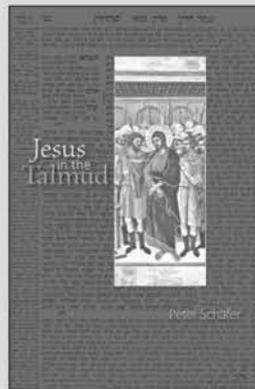
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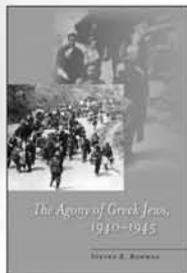
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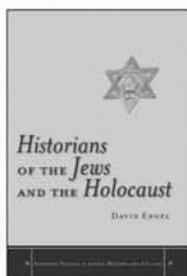
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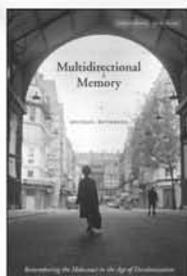
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# ECONOMIC INFLUENCES ON JUDAISM IN AMERICA

*Carmel U. Chiswick*

American Judaism is the branch of world Jewry practiced by nearly half of all Jews alive today. With roots in the Ashkenazi Judaism of non-Mediterranean Europe, it is nevertheless a distinctive religious subculture that is relatively new and still in the process of evolving into its “final” form. This process is affected by economic influences in two ways: by incentives that stimulate a perceived “need” for changes in Jewish observance and by incentives that affect the popular appeal of any specific change. This essay provides a brief overview of the effect of these economic influences on Judaism in America.

## **Economics and American Jewish Traditions**

Modern scholarship on the economics of immigration, immigrant absorption, and ethnic assimilation provides insights that can be applied to much of Jewish history. Even in the Torah itself, the Jewish religious observances of desert nomads during the Exodus from Egypt are specified as being different from those same religious observances during Temple times when the people were settled in the land of Israel and engaged in agricultural pursuits. Jewish observance was modified yet again when the people settled outside of Israel, making pilgrimages to the Temple much more costly. The entire Talmud, Responsa, and later rabbinic literature deal with the same essential problem: how to adapt Judaism to changing socioeconomic circumstances.

The current economic environment has little impact on Judaism’s Great

Tradition, which is invariant across time and space, but it is very important for understanding its Small Traditions. Differences among today’s Small Traditions, as well as changes over time in a given Small Tradition arise not only because of differences in their sociocultural contexts but also—and importantly—because of differences in the economic environment. Given the unprecedented economic circumstances of American and Israeli Jews in the twentieth

AN ECONOMIC GOOD IS CONSIDERED TO BE TIME INTENSIVE IF THE MONEY COMPONENT OF ITS FULL PRICE IS SMALL RELATIVE TO THE TIME COMPONENT. RELIGION IN GENERAL, AND JUDAISM IN PARTICULAR, IS AN EXAMPLE OF A SELF-PRODUCED GOOD—I.E., ONE THAT CANNOT BE BOUGHT DIRECTLY WITHOUT THE CONSUMER’S ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN ITS PRODUCTION—AND AS SUCH IS VERY TIME INTENSIVE. WHEN CONSIDERING THE PRICE OF JEWISH OBSERVANCE IN THE UNITED STATES, ITS TIME COMPONENT IS OF PRIMARY IMPORTANCE.

century, two important new Jewish subcultures emerged; it remains to be seen whether these will fuse into a single Small Tradition or become increasingly distinctive and separate from each other. As with any process of cultural evolution, not every change has survival value. Changes that make Judaism less expensive are likely to have popular appeal, but they may have hidden costs if they contribute to an erosion of Jewish identity. The form in which Judaism survives, however, will depend largely on behavioral

decisions made by individual Jews, and these decisions are affected by their economic context.

## **Economic Influences on Judaism in America**

Economics is the study of how people allocate scarce resources in the pursuit of multiple objectives. The main influences affecting these decisions are the prices of goods and services, and current income augmented by the fruits of past investments that together determine the size of a family’s budget. Since Judaism must compete for resources with other forms of consumption, it is by definition an economic good subject to the same economic laws as other goods and services. For

example, the law of demand implies that if Jewish education is very expensive we can expect to see fewer people choosing it for their children, and that this effect will be most pronounced for families on limited budgets. A family investing in a new home is trying to satisfy multiple objectives, and if their decision takes them far from a synagogue they will attend only if they drive.

*The Price of Judaism in America*  
The prices of goods and services

have two components, money and time, and each of these comes from its own budget. Most people are accustomed to thinking about money budgets and income, but every act of consumption also requires time and our time is limited to twenty-four hours per day. We need to budget this scarce resource just as we need to budget our money: we speak about *spending* time, *saving* time, *wasting* time, the *value* of time, and the *efficiency* with which time is spent. An economic good is considered to be time intensive if the money component of its full price is small relative to the time component. Religion in general, and Judaism in particular, is an example of a self-produced good—i.e., one that cannot be bought directly without the consumer's active participation in its production—and as such is very time intensive. When considering the price of Jewish observance in the United States, its time component is of primary importance.

Modern scholarship has paid much attention to the economic characteristics of self-produced goods and to the problem of imputing a money value to an hour of time. The hourly wage that a person earns in the labor force is a good first approximation of the value of an hour of his or her time in that it represents what would be given up if the person worked one hour less. The equivalent of an hourly wage must be imputed for people not in the labor force (because they are students, housewives, retired or disabled) and for the unemployed, the self-employed, and those paid by salary or commission. The basic concept, however, is the same for everyone: each person's hours are priced according to their value in the labor market.

One implication is that the value of time can be different for different

people. Some people feel more time constrained than others even though everyone has exactly the same twenty-four hours in a day. A related implication is that people

as well as other goods and services. If most people's income comes from their own earnings, however, most people with high incomes would also have high wage rates and

## LIKE ALBERT EINSTEIN, MANY JEWS IN WELL-PAID PROFESSIONAL OCCUPATIONS CONTINUE TO IDENTIFY WITH RELIGIOUS JUDAISM BUT RARELY ATTEND A SYNAGOGUE SERVICE.

with high wage rates will face a higher full price—i.e., money plus the value of time—than people with low wage rates for any consumption item, even though the money price is the same for both. The difference is especially large for time-intensive goods, of which Jewish observance is a prime example. The law of demand thus leads us to expect high-wage earners to reduce their observance of time-intensive religious practices much more than low-wage earners. American Jewry as a community experienced great upward economic mobility during the twentieth century and is currently composed largely of people in relatively high-wage occupations. This goes far to explain not only the emergence of time-conserving American synagogue movements (Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist) but also their pervasiveness and persistence in the American Jewish community.

### *Other Economic Influences*

The effect of high wages on the full price of Jewish observance should not be confused with the effects of high incomes, although the two are often seen together. In general, people with high incomes can and do spend more than people with low-incomes on everything. Judaism is no exception to this rule. Among people with the same wage rate, and thus facing the same full prices, those with larger budgets can be expected to spend more on Judaism

thus face high full prices. Rising incomes would have a positive effect on religious observance in general, but rising wage rates would counteract this by increasing the relative price of time-intensive practices. During the first half of the twentieth century the wage effect was so strong that it dominated the income effect and religious consumption appeared to decline with income. More recently, however, the American Jewish community displays greater diversity in its sources of income so that the association between high wages and high incomes is much looser. Although American Jews still have high wages and tend to favor the time-saving practices of American synagogue movements, their income levels are no longer good predictors of their choice of religious affiliation within that category.

The effects of high wages on religious choices are also often confused with the effects of education. If highly educated American Jews seem to be religiously nonobservant, this may have more to do with the high wage rates that their education commanded than with the substance of that education per se. Like Albert Einstein, many Jews in well-paid professional occupations continue to identify with religious Judaism but rarely attend a synagogue service. Secularism has a wide appeal for many educated

Jews, either as an alternative to religious Judaism or as the “secular Judaism” counterpart to the modern synagogue movements. Yet religious secularism is not confined to the highly educated, nor is it a necessary consequence of advanced secular learning. As was the case with incomes, higher education may be associated with reduced synagogue attendance primarily because of the higher wages that education confers rather than the education in itself.

Having said this, it is also true that education is a transformative experience, whether we are talking about basic literacy, rocket science, or advanced literary studies. Although schooling is often motivated as an investment in skills that will yield higher earnings in the labor market, it affects skills used in all aspects of a person’s life, if not his or her very identity, and how he or she relates to the world. The advanced level of secular education typical in the American Jewish community has important implications not only for its income and for the price of Judaism to its members, but also for the resonance of Jewish rituals and traditions. The sophistication of a congregation’s mastery of history, geography, political science, and sociology influence its understanding of the weekly Torah reading as much as its mastery of Jewish knowledge. Education may be the consequence of an economic decision, and it may have an important indirect effect on religious observance by raising the price of time, but it may also have a direct effect on the efficacy of

various rituals and traditions as a form of religious expression.

### **The Relationship Between Religion and Economics**

People make many investments in themselves apart from the schooling that provides labor market skills. They make many health-related investments, both preventative and curative, and they make many family based investments like marrying and raising children. They also invest in religious training for themselves and their children. Each of these investments forms a different type of human capital, and most forms of human capital are mutually complementary. This implies that the more of one type that you have, the more profitable it is to invest in the others. Specifically, people with a higher level of secular education face higher rates of return from investments in on-the-job training, in health, in family, and in Jewish education. Any reader who finds this claim to be counter-intuitive is encouraged to pursue the matter further in the substantial economic literature on human capital and on demography.

The relatively new field of economics of religion has also been providing evidence that religion itself affects many of our decisions regarding human capital investments. Both religious affiliation and the degree of religiosity have been shown to be important for studies of labor force phenomena (e.g., participation, employment, earnings, occupation), demographic patterns (marriage, divorce, fertility, mortality,

migration), and health behaviors. Jews behave differently in some respects than people with other religious affiliations, but Jews share with most non-Jews the same effects of religiosity, as measured by the intensity of belief and the amount of observance. The economic mechanisms underlying these relationships have yet to be well understood.

Taken as a whole, these findings raise important questions for the field of Jewish studies. What is it about Judaism that causes Jews to make different economic decisions than non-Jews? How do these differences depend on which non-Jews are being used for comparison? Have changes in the economic environment of American Jews affected these differences, causing them to change over time? If so, how has this been reflected in the history of American Jewry, and American Judaism, in the past 130 years since the start of large-scale immigration from eastern Europe? What inferences can be drawn for projections of American Jewish life into the future? What aspects of the economic environment affect the religiosity of American Jews, and what are their implications for Jewish family life? And, finally, how can Jewish communal organizations be most effective in the economic environment of the twenty-first century?

*Carmel U. Chiswick is professor emerita of economics at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She is the author of Economics of American Judaism (Routledge, 2008).*

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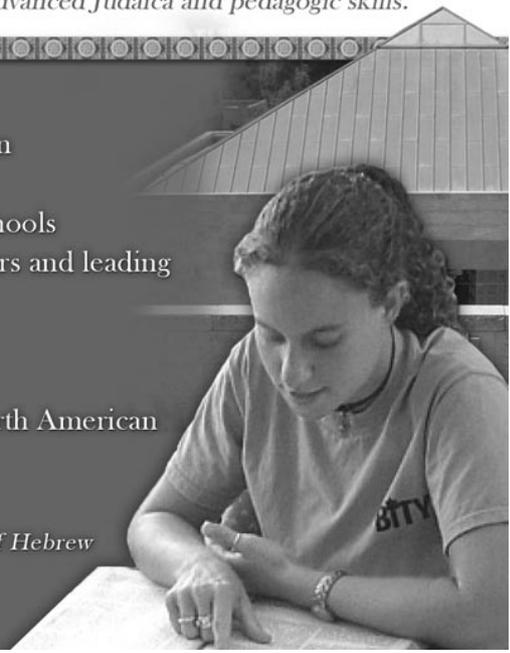
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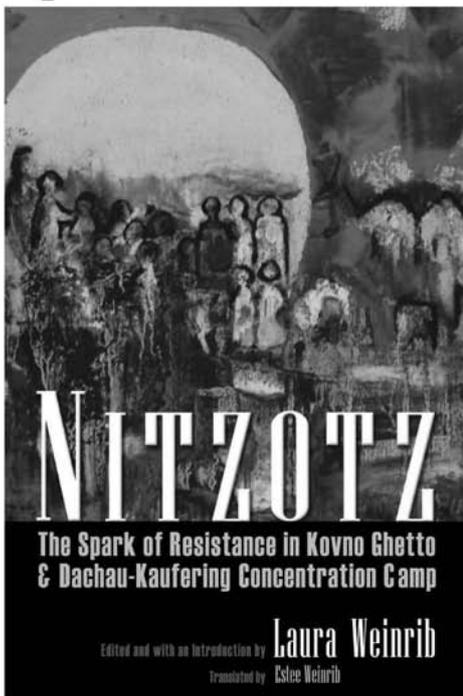
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## ONLINE RESOURCES FOR JEWISH ECONOMICS

Heidi Lerner

### Introduction

In recent decades, a growing number of scholars have become interested in the economic dimensions of Judaism and Jewish life. They have introduced new, social scientific, quantitative methodologies into fields traditionally dominated by qualitative, interpretive approaches. For example, Drs. Barry and Carmel Chiswick have carried out pioneering research on the economic characteristics of American Judaism and Jewish life. During the 2008–09 academic year, scholars gathered at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Jewish Studies at the University of Pennsylvania to study the history of Jewish commercial, financial, and business activities from the Middle Ages to the present. Other factors also have spurred this new interest in Jewish economic history. Today, as we move into the second decade of the twenty-first century—under the shadow of the current economic crisis—Jewish communal leaders are energetically seeking to raise and maintain financial capital for the Jewish community. Philanthropy has grown into a big business and it's not surprising to find new studies of Jewish philanthropy. In Israel, meanwhile, after decades of economic fluctuations and a move to a free market economy during the last quarter of the twentieth century, the Jewish state's modest, developing economy has been transformed by high tech industries and new waves of immigration. As a nation-state, Israel, too, is analyzing and reevaluating its social and economic development to better

understand how it fits into the global marketplace.

This article provides a sampling of online resources that are freely available for scholars interested in analyzing the changing economic

(GIS) maps of the U.S. enabling users to create reports by areas.

The North American Jewish Data Bank ([www.jewishdatabank.org](http://www.jewishdatabank.org)), housed at the University of Connecticut, is the main “repository for social scientific studies” of North American Jewish communities. The site, established in 1986, includes among its holdings national surveys of the U.S. Jewish population in 1971,

TODAY, AS WE MOVE INTO THE SECOND DECADE OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY—UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE CURRENT ECONOMIC CRISIS—JEWISH COMMUNAL LEADERS ARE ENERGETICALLY SEEKING TO RAISE AND MAINTAIN FINANCIAL CAPITAL FOR THE JEWISH COMMUNITY. PHILANTHROPY HAS GROWN INTO A BIG BUSINESS AND IT'S NOT SURPRISING TO FIND NEW STUDIES OF JEWISH PHILANTHROPY.

climate at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century and its impact on diaspora Jewish life, particularly in North America and within the state of Israel.

### North America

#### *Data Archives/Statistical Information*

The American Religious Data Archives ([www.thearda.com](http://www.thearda.com)) makes available to researchers a number of data sets on American religion. Users can search data files by topic; they can look at national profiles by nation or region and compare results; they can search through U.S. congregational membership by reports or maps; and they can explore denominational profiles. The sites also include sets of Geographic Information Systems

1990, and 2000–01. Also accessible via its public, web-based interface are more than ninety local Jewish community studies, dating from the 1960s to the present.

The most comprehensive, contemporary statistics and analyses about the American Jewish community derive from two major surveys that were conducted around the same time: the National Jewish Population Survey ([www.ujc.org/page.aspx?id=33650](http://www.ujc.org/page.aspx?id=33650)) and the American Jewish Identity Survey (<http://prog.trincoll.edu/ISSSC/DataArchive/index.asp>). The National Jewish Population Survey was sponsored by the United Jewish Communities and the Jewish Federation system. The American Jewish Identity Survey was undertaken by the Center for

Jewish Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, with Egon Mayer, Barry Kosmin, and Ariela Keysar as principal investigators. Both data sets are now publicly available and have been used by Jewish Federations and other Jewish communal agencies for policy and planning decisions.

The full text of the American Jewish Year Book is available online at the American Jewish Committee website ([www.ajcarchives.org/main.php?GroupingId=40](http://www.ajcarchives.org/main.php?GroupingId=40)). It contains demographic, historical, and communal information and analysis about the American Jews, and also Jews internationally.

### Resources on Nonprofits

In July 2009, Dr. Steven Windmueller, the Rabbi Alfred Gottschalk Professor of Jewish Communal Service and dean at the Los Angeles campus of the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, published a paper on the impact and possible repercussions of the economic crisis on American Jews (available at [www.jcpa.org](http://www.jcpa.org)). As institutional and communal leaders assess and evaluate their responses to the growing crisis, some tools exist to provide reference data and information.

GuideStar ([www2.guidestar.org](http://www2.guidestar.org)), a national database of nonprofit organizations, is a leading source of information about American nonprofit organizations declared tax exempt by the Internal Revenue Service under Section 501(c) of the U.S. Tax Code. The website maintains that it provides information for “individual donors, nonprofit leaders, grant makers, government officials, academic researchers, and the media.”

Another clearinghouse of information on the American nonprofit sector is the National Center for Charitable Statistics

The screenshot shows the website for the Israel Social Sciences Data Center at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The page title is "Economic Time Series for Israel (ETSI)" and the source is cited as "Bank of Israel and the Central Bureau of Statistics". A table lists various data series with columns for Subject, File, Period Type, Worksheet, Number of Series, and Start Year.

Subject	File	Period Type	Worksheet	Number of Series	Start Year
<b>National Accounting</b> <i>Data are presented both in nominal and in real series</i>	E260	quarter	NSNA-R	25	1960
		quarter	OSNA-R	18	1964
		quarter	NSNA-N	20	1964
		quarter	OSNA-N	17	1964
<b>Capital Stock</b>	E261	year	cs_y_series	4	1960
<b>Labor Market</b>	E262	year	lm_y_series	20	1949
		quarter	lm_q_series	45	1958
		month	lm_m_series	11	1961
<b>Public Sector</b>	E263	year	ps_y_series	6	1960
<b>Balance of Payments</b>	E264	quarter	bop_q_series	52	1962
<b>Monetary Series</b>	E265	month	mm_m_series	1	1975
		quarter	mm_q_series	16	1961
		year	mm_y_series	14	1970
<b>Prices</b>	E266	month	pr_m_series	11	1961
		day	pr_d_series	2	1948
		quarter	hm_q_series	51	1962
<b>Housing Market</b> <i>Contributed by Michael Beenstock</i>	E267	quarter	hm_q_series	26	1975
<b>World Data</b>	E268	month	wd_m_series	6	1960
<b>Defence Data</b> <i>Contributed by Michael Beenstock</i>	E269	year	econo	10	1960
		year	eximp	4	1963
		year	m_exp	44	1950
		year	macro	5	1960
		year	IDF	2	1974
		year	middle_east	7	1958

Screenshot from Hebrew University's Israel Social Sciences Data Center website, <http://isdc.huji.ac.il>.

(<http://nccs.urban.org>). The site includes an overview of the nonprofit sector; images of the IRS 990 reporting forms for individual organizations that provide information on the filing organization's mission, programs, and finances; as well as data analysis tools.

### Charity Navigator

([www.charitynavigator.org](http://www.charitynavigator.org)) is an independent, nonprofit organization that provides free evaluations of the “financial health” of more than five thousand American charitable organizations. Users can search by charity name, location, or type of activity.

### Israel Statistical, Economic, and Demographic Data

Among the non-Israeli sources providing background descriptions and profiles of Israel is Economist.com. *The Economist's* Country Briefings Israel ([www.economist.com/countries/Israel](http://www.economist.com/countries/Israel)) includes economic data, the political and economic outlook, and a fact sheet of basic information.

The Federation of International Trade Associations Israel Country

Profile website (<http://fita.org/countries/israel.html>) provides information on Israeli market access, economic indicators, taxes, labor market, and more. The site also includes a link to Exportnavigator ([www.exportnavigator.com](http://www.exportnavigator.com)), which locates surveys of export markets for the international trade community.

Most of the graphic and statistical materials available online about Israel are generated by government agencies or research centers affiliated with universities or non-governmental organizations. Their quantitative and statistical data generally tend to be of high quality and reliability, though it is worth recalling that not all quantitative data is of equal quality or reliability and can vary depending on the sources and methodologies employed in their compilation and presentation. Much of the material is available free of charge to users, with no need to register, obtain a subscription, or pay a fee.

The Israel Social Sciences Data Center (<http://isdc.huji.ac.il>), located in the faculty of social sciences at the Hebrew University

of Jerusalem, collects and maintains a variety of data of interest to the academic community including economic time series data for Israel. Its geobase provides regional statistics on economic activities, labor and wages, population, transportation, tourism, housing, and construction.

The Central Bureau of Statistics, Israel ([www1.cbs.gov.il](http://www1.cbs.gov.il)) is the main body of the Israeli government whose role is to “collect, process and publicize statistical information” on the Israeli population, economy, and society. The site includes last month’s price indices, monthly bulletin of prices, and the monthly bulletin of statistics. The information is available in Hebrew and English. Information is available by topic as well as by statistical series and a range of online tools is available to help manipulate the data.

The Bank of Israel website ([www.bankisrael.gov.il](http://www.bankisrael.gov.il)) is another valuable source of information on the Israeli economy. It provides statistics on the economy and financial systems, information on monetary policy, economic indicators, micro- and macroeconomic information, and banking legislation.

The website at the Israeli Ministry of Finance (<http://147.237.72.111>) contains economic information from its various departments including the Israeli tax authority, international affairs department, economics and research department, and capital markets, insurance and savings department.

The ministry of industry, trade, and labor website ([www.moital.gov.il](http://www.moital.gov.il)) includes links to information and online publications about: research and development, investing in Israel, international trade and cooperation, Israeli labor laws, the

Israeli economy, and a wealth of other information.

The National Insurance Institute of Israel ([www.btl.gov.il](http://www.btl.gov.il)) is in charge of social security in Israel. Its website provides a wealth of information about benefits, insurance, laws and regulations, social policy, and calculators to help individuals determine what kind of benefits they are entitled to.

The Tel Aviv Stock Exchange ([www.tase.co.il](http://www.tase.co.il)) offers information on shares, currencies, and indices, market summaries as well as derivative trading information. Users can download data files. The site provides a listing of the top one hundred shares by sector and alphabetically and maintains a list of many free publications.

### **Jewish Law and Secular Life**

In today’s world observant and even non-observant Jews are often forced to confront complex legal and ethical issues in social, cultural, and economic arenas. The Center for Halacha and American Law sponsors the Jewish law website ([www.jlaw.com](http://www.jlaw.com)). This online resource provides information about “Halacha, Jewish issues and secular law.” It includes many full-text articles that deal with how Jewish law perceives American law and includes topics such as arbitration and

mediation, economics and the marketplace, bankruptcy, property law, and wills, trusts, and estates. A selection of case summaries and legal briefs are given along with a bibliography of articles in law reviews concerning Jewish law.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that there are many locations on the Web for studying the interplay of economics and Jewish life. This list is just a microcosm of online resources.

*Heidi Lerner is the Hebraica/Judaica cataloguer at Stanford University Libraries.*

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# INTRODUCING *THE POSEN LIBRARY OF JEWISH CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION*

James E. Young

Nearly eight years ago, I was invited by Felix Posen to serve as editor-in-chief of a massive anthology project. Its aim was to collect all the primary texts, documents, images, and artifacts constituting Jewish culture and

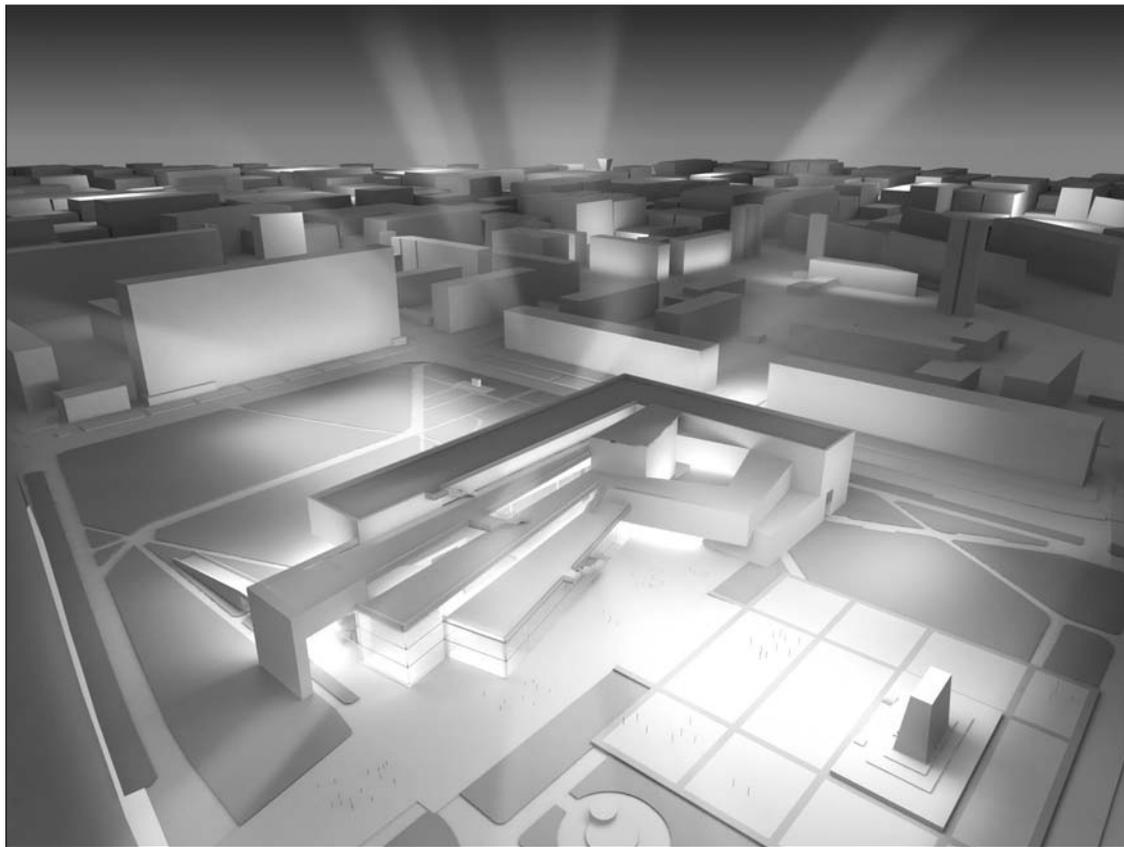
ben-Sasson, Ora Limor, Elisheva Carlebach, Eli Lederhendler, Todd Endelman, Zvi Gitelman, David Roskies, and Deborah Dash Moore, among others. The first two of ten 1,000-page volumes comprising *The Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization* are due to be published by Yale University Press sometime late in

reproductions of illuminated manuscripts, architecture, religious objects, folk art, design, drawings, paintings, sculpture, photography, film, and other arts, high and low, including music and theater, from ancient to present times.

A special effort will be made to include works that have been traditionally neglected and marginalized by prevailing canons. The central mission of this collection is threefold and meant as an explicit mandate: 1. To gather into a single, usable collection all that the current generation of scholars agrees best represents Jewish culture and civilization in its historical and global entirety; 2. To establish an inclusive and pluralistic definition of Jewish culture and civilization in all

of its rich diversity, an evolving amalgam of religious and secular experience; 3. To provide a working anthological legacy by which new generations will come to recover, know, and organize past, present, and future Jewish cultures and civilizations.

From the outset, however, we recognized that our foundational question here, “What is Jewish culture?” needed to be followed (in



Rendering of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews by Israeli architect Zvi Hecker, Warsaw, Poland, 2005. Image courtesy of Zvi Hecker.

civilization, from ancient times to the present. He had approached me on behalf of a sterling editorial board, including some of our generation’s leading scholars and thinkers in Jewish culture. After consulting several of these board members, I accepted, somewhat humbled and embarrassed by the audacity of the project. I then proceeded to write the project’s précis and to appoint a list of volume editors, again, including some of the leading scholars of our age, such as Jeffrey Tigay, Menahem

2010, with two more to be published each year after that until 2013.

For the purposes of the *Posen Library*, expressions of Jewish culture will include, among hundreds of chronologically, geographically, generically, linguistically, and thematically organized entries—extracts from historical, philosophical, religious, legal, literary, exegetical, political, folkloristic, artistic documents, images, and artifacts. All volumes will be richly illustrated with

good Jewish fashion) with several other questions: Toward what ends are we defining Jewish culture? Do we want to know what is essential to Jewish culture? Or what distinguishes it from other cultures? Do we want to know in order to celebrate all the cultural creations of the Jews as essentially “Jewish”? Or to be able to weed out the supposed non-Jewish elements from it? Or to acknowledge the Jewish parts of other cultures (and by extension, to acknowledge the influence of other cultures on Jewish culture)? Do we collect only the “great works,” or the most representative—including the good, the bad, and the ugly? Is Jewish culture global, or is it an aggregate of many local Jewish cultures, each of them formed and defined in the interaction between Jewish and surrounding non-Jewish cultures? Are there essentially Jewish qualities to Jewish culture, or is Jewish culture itself essentially a dialectic between “adaptation and resistance to surrounding non-Jewish cultures,” as David Biale has suggested in his *Cultures of the Jews*? Or should Jewish culture be regarded as something that is produced mostly in relationship to itself, its own traditions and texts, as David Roskies argued in his review of Biale’s volume of essays?

Rather than pretending to answer these questions definitively, and thereby prescriptively suggesting some kind of hard and impermeable canon to be excavated by our volume editors, we have chosen to allow such questions to remain embedded in the multitude of entries to be selected by individual volume editors and their expert advisory boards. That is, insofar as any culture is itself a composite of multiple peoples, nations, languages, traditions, and beliefs, the editors have chosen to recognize the heterogeneity of Jewish culture and civilization. While at times a majority culture in ancient or modern Israel, Jewish culture has historically been more often a distinct

minority culture present in the midst of other nations and peoples.

Historically, there have also been any number of distinctive and parallel Jewish civilizations, some sharing common cultural traits and traditions, some with little in common beyond core religious laws and beliefs. The aim of the *Posen Library* will not be to unify or homogenize expressions of Jewish culture in arbitrarily imposed thematic categories. But rather, the library’s chronological and thematic organization will reflect as closely as possible the multiple, even

world as Jewish texts, or codified and responded to as Jewish texts. Here the stories of Franz Kafka might be regarded as parables for Jewish experience, as might Sigmund Freud’s meditations on dreams and monotheism. This also means that instances of culture produced by non-Jews for Jewish purposes (such as illuminated Hebrew manuscripts, synagogue architecture, and headstone reliefs) can be included, as well.

Indeed, it is clear that this issue of “What is a Jewish text” is also one

THE AIM OF THE *POSEN LIBRARY* WILL NOT BE TO UNIFY OR HOMOGENIZE EXPRESSIONS OF JEWISH CULTURE IN ARBITRARILY IMPOSED THEMATIC CATEGORIES. BUT RATHER, THE LIBRARY’S CHRONOLOGICAL AND THEMATIC ORGANIZATION WILL REFLECT AS CLOSELY AS POSSIBLE THE MULTIPLE, EVEN COMPETING EXPRESSIONS OF JEWISH CULTURE AS THEY EXISTED IN THEIR OWN TEMPORAL AND GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXTS.

competing expressions of Jewish culture as they existed in their own temporal and geographic contexts. For example, the flowering of Hebrew poetry in Islamic lands during the Middle Ages will be regarded as distinct from the rise of Yiddish literature in central and eastern Europe—even as both kinds of literature are necessarily constituent parts of Jewish culture and civilization.

For our purposes, the entries of this anthology may also include texts produced by Jews but not always with explicit Jewish content. Such texts warrant inclusion if they have been inspired by Jewish texts or experiences, received by the Jewish

that arises most prominently in the modern eras of emancipation, assimilation, and national self-definition and may be less pressing in the ancient to medieval times. This said, one of the *Library*’s editorial board members, Yehuda Bauer, insists that Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” is “so similar to a Jewish text that it is absolutely clear to [him] that this was a Jew speaking to Jews” and would have to be included, even if the original words were subsequently Christianized in the context of their redaction as part of the New Testament and depleted of Jewish meaning.

Still, questions of Jewish literature, philosophy, liturgy, music, folk art,

and other forms of material culture before the twentieth century may be easier to navigate than the questions that arise later, such as: What is Jewish art, or photography, or architecture? What makes Barnett Newman, or Philip Guston, or Mark Rothko Jewish artists? Is, for instance, Rothko's iconoclastic insistence on the abstract color field after the Holocaust a gesture toward the second commandment prohibition of images, and if so, does that give him a Jewish sensibility?

Is William Klein a Jewish photographer? Or Weegee (né Arthur Feelig), or Robert Capa (né Andreas Friedmann), or Brassai (né Gyula Halasz)? Aside from its cheekiness, what are we to make of William Klein's mischievous remark that ". . . there are two kinds of photography—Jewish photography and goyish photography. If you look at modern photography you find, on the one hand, the Weegees, the Diane Arbuses, the Robert Franks—funky photographers. And then you have people who go out in the woods. Ansel Adams, Weston. It's like black and white jazz."

Is there such a thing as Jewish architecture? The current generation of Jewish architects is certainly legend (think of Frank Gehry, né Frank Owen Goldberg, Richard Meier, Peter Eisenman, Daniel Libeskind, Santiago Calatrava, James Ingo Freed, Moshe Safdie, and A. M. Stern, to name but a few of the most prominent). But what are we to make of Gehry's suggestion that the undulating steel forms for which he is so famous are inspired by the live carp his grandmother kept in a bathtub before turning it into gefilte fish? I've been asked often if Jewish architects were somehow predisposed toward articulating the memory of catastrophe in their work, in order to explain how Libeskind, Calatrava, and now Michael Arad (designer of the memorial at Ground Zero) have become the architects of record in

post-9/11 lower Manhattan. I've usually answered that I see no direct references to Jewish catastrophe in their designs, but that the forms of postwar architecture itself have surely been inflected by an entire generation's knowledge of the Holocaust.

What strategic purposes are served by attempting to collect in a ten-volume anthology all that this generation deems to constitute Jewish culture and civilization? I believe there are at least two large purposes, each with several parts. First, we hope that the *Posen Library* will open the world's eyes to the extraordinary contributions Jewish thinkers, writers, and artists have made as Jews to dozens of other national cultures around the globe. As a corollary, we also hope that as a process, the *Posen Library* demonstrates that like Jewish culture, all national cultures are comprised of multiple, often competing constituent cultures. Like Jewish culture, national cultures everywhere are formed in the constant give and take, the frisson between and within themselves.

What point is in this? It is to make clear that just as we Jews express ourselves in, participate in, and contribute to national cultures around the world, and just as these national cultures bear the imprint of Jewish culture and experience, so too do these other cultures nourish our own Jewish cultures. We write our literature, poetry, religious thought, Talmudic commentaries, and even treatises on what constitutes Jewish culture in a multitude of tongues. Our Jewish world's experiences are not only lived in, but also framed for us and shaped by, these cultural and linguistic contexts.

In this way, we hope to show that Jewish culture necessarily includes the living, breathing, ever-evolving expressions of Jewish experience in all of its shapes and forms, inside and outside halakhah, and that it is

animated in its constant interrogation, debate, and disputation. As such, the *Posen Library* might serve not only as an outreach to the non-Jewish world, but also as a kind of shaliach to otherwise disaffected and disengaged Jews whose religious identities have lapsed, but whose cultural identification as Jews might now be renewed. It also affirms the cultural expressions of Jews around the world, whose connection to Jewish life may have existed primarily in the struggle with Jewish identity and traditions and not only in its embrace.

Finally, we would like to suggest the *Posen Library* as a model for defining "national culture" as distinct from "nationalist culture." In this approach, we see a national culture as it defines itself by its differences and reciprocal exchanges with other cultures, whereas "nationalist culture" attempts to define itself as sui generis and self-generated, pure and somehow untainted by other cultures and traditions. National cultures grow in reciprocal exchanges with others; nationalist cultures partake in the myth of self-containment and self-creation. For we know too well what happens when nations and cultures attempt to purge themselves of all supposedly foreign elements. They become very small and sometimes so depleted of inspiration and imagination that they collapse inwardly like the hollow shells they have become.

*James E. Young is professor of Judaic and Near Eastern studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He is editor-in-chief of The Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization (Yale University Press, forthcoming).*

# THE TIKVAH PROJECT ON JEWISH THOUGHT AT PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

Leora Batnitzky

What the original proponents of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the academic study of Judaism, once merely hoped for has unquestionably come to pass in the United States: Judaism and the Jewish people are treated as worthy of academic study. In fact, Jewish studies is generally considered a

known, seem to become ever more specialized and compartmentalized, despite the fact that liberal arts curricula, students, and indeed the larger public context of university life increasingly demands broader and more interdisciplinary work.

In our field this situation can be particularly unfortunate since, in its isolation, Jewish studies courses can tend to “preach to the converted.”



2008–09 Tikvah Project Senior Teaching Fellow Michael Fishbane.  
Photo courtesy of the Tikvah Project.

“normal” part of any university’s academic offerings. Yet in some ways Jewish studies in this country has become a prisoner of its own success. Jewish studies programs, centers, and departments are often isolated from other sectors of the humanities and just as often scholars, working within the field of Jewish studies but focused on different time periods or concerned with different sources or methodologies, are isolated from each other. Of course, this is true of most fields in the humanities and their specialties, which, as is well

Whether we like it or not, our student clientele often tends to be predominantly Jewish. But even here we find more specialization: Jewish studies courses often (though certainly not always) attract Jewish students interested in Jewish studies and not Jewish students who think they are not interested in Jewish studies. There is of course nothing wrong with Jewish students being interested in Jewish studies. Most readers of *AJS Perspectives* would, I assume, agree that this is actually a good thing. The problem is that in a university setting Jewish studies, like

everything else included under the rubric of the humanities, ought to be of interest to humanists as such, which means everyone. Any educated person, Jewish or non-Jewish, interested in Jewish studies or not, ought to know something about Jewish thought and civilization.

Princeton University has received a \$4.5 million grant from the Tikvah Fund, whose purpose is to bring Jewish thought into conversation with the broader historical, philosophical, and theological traditions of the West and beyond. The project defines Jewish thought very broadly to include any relevant time period, figure, or topic. It has a twofold goal: to make Princeton a major national forum for exploring Jewish ideas and to create at Princeton a national model for integrating Jewish thought into the humanities. To meet these goals, the project consists of four main components: a fellows program, new courses, academic working groups, and summer seminars.

The fellows program aims to attract scholars and teachers who are interested in grappling with the great human questions from a Jewish perspective and to viewing Jewish thought within wider human debates about big questions. Each year the project will host one to four fellows. During the 2008–09 academic year we hosted our inaugural fellow, Michael Fishbane of the University of Chicago. Professor Fishbane taught a freshman seminar on “The Book of Job and the Problem of Evil” in the fall and in the spring co-taught a seminar with Peter Schaefer on “God and Cosmology in Ancient Israel.” For this coming academic year, 2009–10, the Tikvah Project will have three visiting fellows. Allan Arkush of SUNY Binghamton will be in residence as a research fellow for the year, and Oded Schechter, a philosopher from the University of

Chicago, and Elisha Russ-Fishbane, a medievalist from Harvard, will be postdoctoral fellows for the next three years, during which time they each will teach one course per semester. This fall, Schechter will teach a course on Spinoza with a focus on the relations between philosophy, religion, and politics. Russ-Fishbane will teach a freshman seminar on the history of the virtue of tolerance, which will focus on medieval Jewish-Islamic civilization and medieval Jewish-Christian civilization.

In addition to these exciting courses taught by the Tikvah fellows, the Tikvah Project is also developing a handful of core courses that bridge disciplinary boundaries and are co-taught by permanent members of the Princeton faculty. The first core course “God and Politics” is being offered this fall. Two new courses will be added next year: “Human Nature and Human Flourishing” and “Jerusalem and Athens.” These courses will consider Jewish thought in the context of broad humanistic themes and incorporate Jewish texts and ideas into their consideration of such themes.

The Tikvah Project sponsors a series of thematic working groups, the purpose of which is to spur new thinking and writing on the most interesting questions, subjects, and thinkers. Each working group has a group leader and six to eight scholars, who convene three times over the year in Princeton to work on their common subject, with each participant expected to write a publishable new essay or commentary as the culmination of the group’s work. In keeping with the mission of the project, the make-up of the working groups is neither narrowly construed nor is the focus highly specialized. Instead, the idea is to get different scholars from different disciplines working together and learning from each other. The group leader is usually an

expert in the subject matter but the majority of the group is composed of scholars who have not worked on the subject before. The Tikvah Project is currently running four working groups: “Holiness,” led by Alan Mittleman of the Jewish

## THE TIKVAH PROJECT SPONSORS A SERIES OF THEMATIC WORKING GROUPS, THE PURPOSE OF WHICH IS TO SPUR NEW THINKING AND WRITING ON THE MOST INTERESTING QUESTIONS, SUBJECTS, AND THINKERS.

Theological Seminary; “The Haggadah,” led by Allan Arkush of SUNY Binghamton; “Hans Jonas,” led by Leora Batnitzky of Princeton; and “Messianism,” led by Michael Morgan, emeritus of Indiana University.

The Tikvah Project’s summer seminar program is a two-week intensive workshop (or parallel workshops) for undergraduates and beginning graduate students on “Jewish Thought and Enduring Human Questions,” which focuses on Jewish texts, Jewish thought, and Jewish perspectives on the great questions of human life. Students explore important humanistic themes such as hope, beauty, justice, mercy, love; and issues with a unique resonance for Judaism such as written and oral Torah, the tension between reason and revelation, and the nature and future of Zionism and American Jewish life. David Novak (University of Toronto), Leora Batnitzky (Princeton University), and Suzanne Last Stone (Cardozo School of Law) led this year’s seminars. Twenty additional scholars from North America and Israel will each attend the seminars for one to three days and present in the seminars and participate in discussion with students.

Finally, the Tikvah Project has established a collaborative relationship with the Hebrew University’s newly created honors

graduate program in the humanities. This collaboration will allow advanced graduate students from the Hebrew University to come to Princeton for up to one academic year and pursue their research in cooperation with appropriate faculty

at Princeton. Advanced Princeton graduate students may also pursue their research with appropriate faculty at the Hebrew University. We also anticipate collaborative projects between faculty at Princeton and the Hebrew University. For the 2009–10 academic year, two advanced graduate students from the Hebrew University’s honors program, Yair Furstenberg and Yoel Greenberg, will be visiting researchers at Princeton.

All of these components will have to be tested and appropriately rethought as we see what works and what does not work. But we are hopeful that the time is right for this initiative. After all, students, Jewish or not, are interested in big questions and given the increasing debates about the relationship between religion and politics in American political life, not to speak of the world political situation, lots of people, given the chance, ought to find the complex historical, philosophical, and theological cultures of Jewish thought and civilization of interest and relevance.

*Leora Batnitzky is professor of religion and director of the Tikvah Project on Jewish Thought at Princeton University. She is the author of Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of Revelation (Cambridge University Press, 2006).*

# INTEGRATING TRADITION AND INNOVATION: THE CONNEY CONFERENCE ON JEWISH ART

Ben Schachter

Sally Gross, famed choreographer, is closely associated with the Judson Dance Theater active in 1960s New York. Paradigmatic of the group, her dances include ordinary movements such as walking, reaching and even talking. These ordinary movements, dubbed “pedestrian,” transformed modern dance and performance. Sally Gross’s work is an excellent example of the avant-garde in New York.

On April 23rd, Sally Gross performed at the Conney Conference on Jewish Art at the University of Madison. She presented “One and Another” from 1983. During the piece she moved with a relaxed manner walking and extending her arms softly. Her forward motion was gently arrested to change directions or pause for a moment. As she moved, she spoke in Yiddish, her first language. Her words did not form a narrative and yet they connected with her motions in an experimental way. Ms. Gross later described that she was more concerned with the rhythm than the meaning of what she was saying. Since I do not understand Yiddish, it was exactly the rhythm that I noticed. Her speech and gestures moved with an uncommon ordinary presence as if she was going about her daily routine.

In relation to the avant-garde in the 1960s, Yiddish may seem anachronistic, but at the Conney Conference such convergences of contemporary art and Jewish culture were ideally placed. Sally Gross’s work was not anachronistic, it was Jewish—Jewish in the way it integrated contemporary and

traditional ideas to create a new art form and find new meaning. Other presentations at the conference presented work that exhibited exactly the same freshness of spirit and vital Jewishness.

Directed by Douglas Rosenberg, the Conney Conference, April 21–24, took a broad view of the arts to include dance, film, visual

of an aging Borsht Belt comedian named Uncle Bob. Beginning with a brief description of her personal connection to the Catskills and the fact that members of her family performed there, Ms. Abrams presented the idea of the “Jew-face,” a recognizable expression, or set of expressions, that comedians of that era assumed as a kind of mask. As Uncle Bob, Abrams wears a tired



Danielle Barnett, “Routine” (2008). Performed at Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens’ “Green Wedding.” Photo by Tommy Mintz.

arts, and music. Those in attendance at this year’s conference included artists, musicians, choreographers, arts administrators, and others with a marked interest in Jewish art. But the ideas presented went well beyond traditional notions of Judaica and tourist notions of Israel. In particular, general themes that arose included: How *does* the study of the Midrash inform art? What does the Talmud *say* about materials? How does Judaism *define* space? Beyond character or narrative, what makes an artwork or performance *Jewish*?

Danielle Abrams is a performance artist who has taken on the persona

tuxedo with loosened tie. Uncle Bob’s hair is greased back, like a middle-aged Jerry Lewis. During one routine, while delivering one-liners as if not caring if the crowd laughs or not, Bob dunks parts of his body in a tub of borscht. As his shirt, tuxedo, arms and face become dyed red, Uncle Bob appears on the verge of coronary failure. Not only “sweating” borscht, but his red face appears flushed from high blood pressure and drinking. Overall the performance is lively and melancholy, worn and refreshing and a lot of fun.

Musician Henry Sapoznik brought his Klez-kamp to Wisconsin for the

week prior to the conference. He shared his insights into the successes and failures of the Czernowitz Conference one-hundred years ago. He focused on the cultural and political debate between choosing Hebrew and Yiddish as the national language of the Jews as it occurred in Czernowitz. Practically every other topic at that meeting, as Sapoznik tells it, was superseded by this discussion. Ultimately Hebrew was chosen as the national language greatly altering the linguistic landscape. In the context of the Conney Conference, perhaps this historical event affected the kind of art being made today.

Others took this opportunity to integrate the broad spectrum of work being presented. Catherine Sousloff, editor of *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History*, presented a paper positing a new way of looking at art and culture. Sousloff suggested that discussing style and subject matter alone limit how we see a work of art. She is attempting to find a way to characterize the similarities of approach found across the arts. For example, if both a painting and a dance are “Jewish,” what elements do they share? Her

goal is not to find a list of characteristics that make something Jewish but rather to approach the work with a series of questions that is indeed, a Jewish kind of integrative thinking. Those at the conference know full well that there is no list of things to which we can point and say, “A-ha,” yes that is a

## MORE THAN JUST A REHASH OF STANDARD IDEAS ON ART OR JUDAISM, THE CONNEY CONFERENCE PRESENTED JEWISH ART AS A VIBRANT AND VARIED SUBJECT.

Jewish work of art but rather it is how we approach the work, its creation and interpretation, that is.

According to Stephen Hazan Arnoff, director of the 14th Street Y and founder of the Makor Artist-in-Residence program, it is not the answer to these questions that is most important but rather the kinds of questions being asked. From his perspective, the artist, more specifically the Jewish artist, has the skills to interpret, synthesize, and represent information. Artists can integrate tradition and the contemporary world in ways no other profession can. For Arnoff, it is this skill set that prepares Jewish

artists to take leadership roles in their communities. He presented a radical notion that the Jewish Federations and others should look to the avant-garde for its next generation.

More than just a rehash of standard ideas on art or Judaism, the Conney Conference presented Jewish art as a vibrant and varied subject. Douglas Rosenberg, principle organizer, did a marvelous job of bringing together thoughtful artists and interested historians.

For anyone interested in Jewish culture and lived experience, this is a wonderful conference. What is next for Jewish art? How will it integrate tradition and innovation in the future, and what will its place be in Jewish life as a whole? Those who attended left hopeful for arts’ continued and growing impact on Jewish life.

*Ben Schachter is associate professor of fine arts at Saint Vincent College. He is the author of the catalogue for the upcoming exhibition, “Tzitzit: Fiber Art and Jewish Identity,” (on view at Saint Vincent College, early 2010).*

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## MICHAEL SIGNER (1945–2009)

*Peter Ochs*

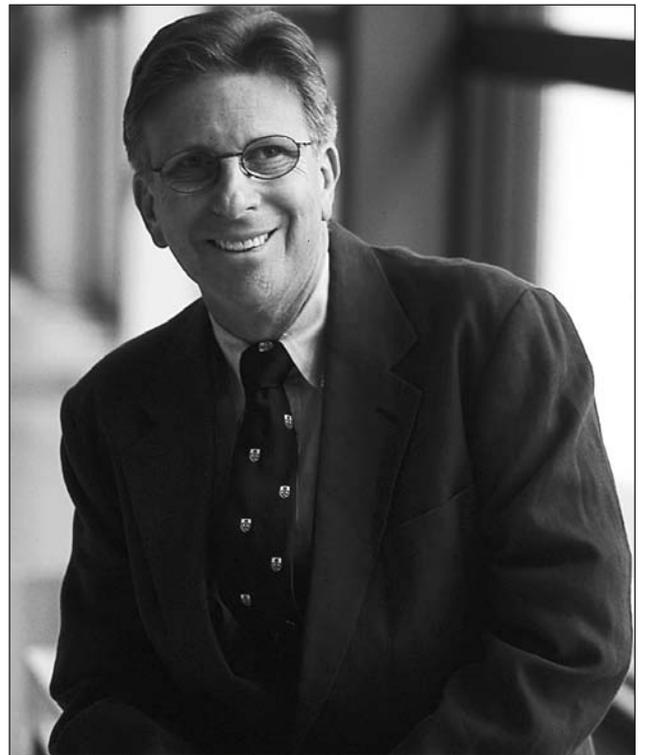
Professor and Rabbi Michael Signer, the Abrams Professor of Jewish Thought and Culture at the University of Notre Dame, passed away on January 29, 2009, at the age of 63, after a long battle with pancreatic cancer. He is survived by his wife, Betty, and two daughters, Aliza and Hanna.

Michael Signer earned his bachelor's degree in Hebrew literature from UCLA in 1966. He received a master's degree in rabbinic literature and Jewish history and was ordained a rabbi at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati in 1970. He subsequently earned a doctorate in medieval studies from the University of Toronto in 1978 and in divinity from Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion in 1996. He was a professor of Jewish history from 1974 to 1991 at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles. He taught at Notre Dame from 1992 until the end of his life.

Michael Signer was a leader in Jewish-Catholic dialogue in Israel, Europe, and North America. He was one of four authors of the widely publicized document, *Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity*, released in 2000 and subsequently signed by more than 220 rabbis and intellectual leaders from all branches of Judaism. Signer was the author or editor of six books, including *Humanity at the Limit: The Impact of the Holocaust Experience on Jews and Christians* (2000); *Memory and History in Judaism and*

*Christianity* (2001); *Jews and Christians in Twelfth-Century Europe* (2001); and *Coming Together for the Sake of God: Contributions to Jewish-Christian Dialogue from Post-Holocaust Germany* (2007). He was, in addition, the author of more than fifty academic articles.

Impressive as it is, this summary of Michael Signer's achievements only hints at the qualities known so well to his many friends, admirers, and students. Many of us remember Michael as a “philosopher of lovingkindness between the words.” Along with any number of my colleagues, I can say that I never met a finer reader than Michael. I say this primarily on the basis of many years of experience with Michael in the Society for Textual Reasoning, a gathering of Jewish text scholars and philosophers that he nourished with his text commentaries. But his unique talents were equally on display in the small group that generated *Dabru Emet* as well as in a three-year gathering of Abrahamic scholars at the Princeton Center for Theological Inquiry. It was a moving sight to observe a group of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish scholars leaning in toward Michael's chair so as not to miss a word of what he was unraveling from the day's medieval commentary and its text sources, parallels, and contrasts. He did not seem to notice how much we relied on his textual learning and wisdom: either that or his humility simply overshadowed whatever he noticed.



Like his mentors Rashi and Rashbam, Michael's reading added yet one more dimension to what lies uncovered between the words. Beyond the pastoral ingenuity of midrash, this is the deeper “plain sense” of the text within the literary corpus to which it belonged. For Michael, this is a meeting place of wisdom and textual science, and it is a place of great hope for those who learn to read not only in and between the words but also in and between strictly academic and strictly denominational or lived approaches to the text traditions.

I cannot think of Michael without thinking of love: the love between Betty and Michael; the love characterizing all the friendships Michael generated and shared in; his love of reading—in scripture and rabbinic texts and commentaries, of Victorines and medieval *pashtanim*—and the love that surrounded him as reader and scholar: love of God, love of humanity, love of word and Word,

love of study partner for the other, and with Michael that meant love among Jewish scholars and between Jewish and Christian scholars and, in the more recent years, among Jewish and Christian and Muslim scholars. When we leaned in to hear Michael's reading, we were also leaning in toward each other, not only as different individuals but also as members of different communities and traditions.

Michael treated the word "philosopher" as a title to which he aspired but was denied by dint of excelling in something else. But he was too modest to notice to

appreciate his own achievement. He was a "theological philosopher of the plain sense." His work was infused by a transformative philosophy of deeper plain-sense reading: a vision of the integrative and relational character of the wisdoms that are delivered through such reading. In rabbinic fashion, he did not burden his readers with formalized or abstract sketches of this philosophic vision (the kind of abstraction that often passes as "philosophy"); instead, he reinvested his vision within his text commentary and super-commentary, within his interpretive writing and teaching, and within the

fellowships and friendships and bonds of love he nurtured among so many people representing such a variety of confessions, beliefs, and disciplines.

Michael taught us to read the plain sense with the interpreted sense and the sense of this world with a sense of the next.

*Peter Ochs is the Edgar Bronfman Professor of Modern Judaic Studies at the University of Virginia. He is co-editor of Crisis, Call, and Leadership in the Abrahamic Traditions, dedicated to Michael Signer (Palgrave/Macmillan: October 2009).*

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The grant is intended to provide for the cost of obtaining scholarly material (e.g. publications), temporary help in research and production needs, membership in scholarly organizations, travel, computer, copying and communication charges and summer stipend for non-tenured academics.

Applications outlining the nature and scope of the proposed project including a budget should be submitted, in no more than two pages, by March 1, 2010 to Dr. Frank Mecklenburg, Leo Baeck Institute, 15 E. 16<sup>th</sup> St. New York 10011, NY. A *curriculum vitae*, names of three references, and supporting material (outline of proposed work, draft of chapters, previous publications) should be appended. e-mail submission to [fmecklenburg@lbi.cjh.org](mailto:fmecklenburg@lbi.cjh.org) is encouraged.

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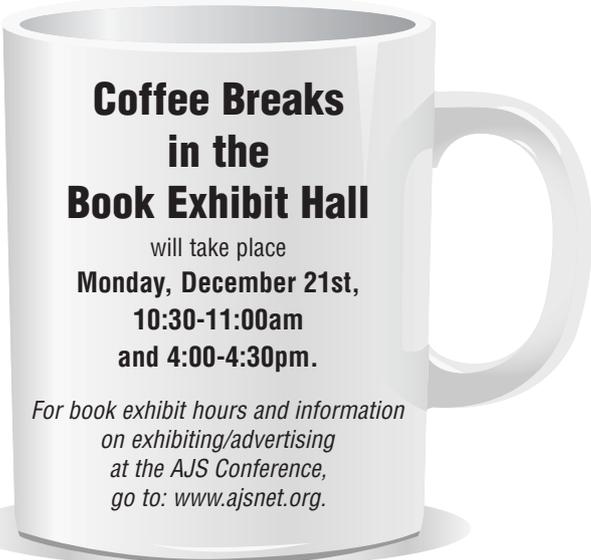
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- Book Exhibit featuring leading publishers of Judaica and related scholarship.
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- Information about cultural events, receptions, special gatherings updated weekly on the AJS website.
- Special reduced prices for the AJS Annual Gala Banquet, Sunday, December 20, 2009 at 6:45 p.m. (\$25 for regular and associate members and their guests; \$15 for student members).

For further information about sessions, meals, hotel reservations, visiting Los Angeles, and special conference events, please refer to the AJS website at [www.ajsnet.org](http://www.ajsnet.org) or contact the AJS office at [ajs@ajs.cjh.org](mailto:ajs@ajs.cjh.org) or 917.606.8249.

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Ben Schachter, Hekshers of the United States Placemat, 2009. Courtesy of the artist.

(Cover Image)  
The Jarmulowsky Bank, corner of Orchard and Canal Streets, New York City, 1912. Reprinted from "Building for S. Jarmulowsky," *Architects & Builders Magazine* XLIV (November 1912): 447.