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AJS Perspectives: *The Magazine of the Association for Jewish Studies*

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Front Cover: © Shelley Gazin/2010. All Rights Reserved. Excerpt from *Becoming Persian: Photographs & Text Threads Illuminating the Iranian-Jewish Community*; California Council for the Humanities Documentary Project. [Iranian-American demonstrators at Iranian election/political protest, Federal Building, Westwood, 2009.]

Back Cover: © Shelley Gazin/2010. All Rights Reserved. Excerpt from *Becoming Persian: Photographs & Text Threads Illuminating the Iranian-Jewish Community*; California Council for the Humanities Documentary Project. [Dariush Fakheri, president/founder of the International Judea Foundation a.k.a. Siamak Organization, and Roya Fakheri, educator and artist, attend political rally, Federal Building, Westwood, 2009.]

From the Editors

In this issue, we pair two places with long and important Jewish histories. The pairing seems almost natural—Iraq and Iran share a long border and a contentious relationship, and both places once served as centers of Jewish cultural and intellectual life. The fact that they no longer function as such raises the issue of memory and its companion, forgetting.

The themes of memory and forgetting are prominent throughout this issue. At the same time, the essays carry a political charge, particularly for Jewish Americans, so attuned to Iran's nuclear capacity and its denunciation of the Jewish state along with, although to a lesser extent, the exigencies of Iraq in what is promised to be the final year of the American occupation. Perhaps we even reproduce the political field by including an essay about Israeli policy positions on Iran by Brandon Friedman.

Ultimately, however, issues Jewish rather than political stand at the forefront of this edition. Sergio DellaPergola compares Iranian- and Iraqi-Jewish communities from a demographic perspective, and Richard Kalmin writes of how his research on the Persian influence on rabbinic culture led to book awards from AJS as well as the Iranian Ministry of Culture. We met Richard Kalmin at the Jordan Schnitzer book award ceremony in New York this summer, but it seems that his invitation to the Iranian awards ceremony—over which President Ahmadinejad presides—has been delayed.

With incredible precision, the essays of Marina Rustow and Daniel Tsadik reframe discussions about the formation and dissemination of rabbinic writings. Rustow, for example, shows how Jewish migrations from Sura and Pumbedita to Baghdad and then from Baghdad westward entailed the forgetting of rural traditions as well as the continuation of Babylonian practices.

From the President

Over the past few months, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* has published several articles about the erosion of tenure in American institutions of higher education, developments that have scared many members of the academic community. According to these articles, an ever-growing percentage of positions at colleges and universities are now held by adjunct faculty—men and women hired to teach one or two courses, usually at extraordinarily low pay, and who are not on the tenure track at all. Indeed, if present trends continue, the majority of academic positions will be held by adjuncts rather than tenured or tenure-track faculty in the not-too-distant future. Such a scenario is frightening indeed. It is frightening for students, because most of their teachers will likely have little if any loyalty to the institutions at which they teach, and they will understandably be exhausted from running from school to school trying to cobble together a living, perhaps not even aware of where they are on a given day. They will have little incentive to take the time to get to know students, mentor them, and write letters of recommendation on their behalf. The scenario is also frightening to the adjunct faculty themselves, who, while receiving exploitative wages must wonder how they can possibly make a living after spending so much time getting a PhD. Moreover, if they teach several courses at multiple universities, they certainly have no time to devote to the scholarship that is the essence of the academic enterprise and which might help them procure a tenure-track job. The scenario is also frightening to those of us who have tenure because the

In the modern period, Orit Bashkin analyzes the position of the Iraqi-Arab-Jew caught between the acts of remembering and forgetting. On the one hand, many people in Israel maintain a connection to their Arab pasts; on the other, the immigration necessitated a certain distance from Arab intellectual and political life. Aware of this very tension, Lital Levy presents the Iraqi-Jewish memoir as a vehicle of return to a Baghdad of the past. She goes on to ask to whom this past might be useful. Jenny Gheith tells of the unforeseeable obstacles encountered by the artist Michael Rakowitz as he attempted, in a complex work of art, to import Iraqi dates—a staple of culinary memories—to Brooklyn. Even as the first shipment of dates spoiled during detention in Jordan and Syria, a community grew up around the project.

Shelley Gazin's photographs and essays by Nasrin Rahimieh and Saba Tova Soomekh provide glimpses into the Iranian-Jewish community of Los Angeles. Gazin's photographs cause Rahimieh to recall her Armenian-Iranian school in prerevolutionary Iran and to realize how little she knew about her Jewish-Iranian classmates' community. Saba Tova Soomekh's ethnographic study of Iranian-Jewish women highlights the processes of remembering and forgetting implicit in the balance of an American-Jewish-Iranian identity.

As the range of articles shows, with Iraq & Iran we have found a topic of relevance to several historical periods and methodologies within Jewish studies. We hope that you enjoy it.

Matti Bunzl

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Rachel Havrelock

University of Illinois Chicago

erosion of tenure places academic freedom at great risk—and academic freedom is crucial for the modern university. Non-tenured faculty might be excellent teachers, but higher education without tenure means exploitation, lack of academic coherence, and the possibility of pressure to teach subjects in a way that abandons critical analysis.

Why am I so convinced that tenure is necessary for academic freedom? After all, even tenured faculty have to deal with political pressures, and many succumb to intellectual pressure to engage in interpretations that are trendy at a given moment. Some people who follow more traditional forms of scholarship feel that it is hard to get a job or get promoted unless one is engaged in what is currently “all the rage.” Informal pressure to conform, however, is not the same thing as a real breach of academic freedom. Tenure protects faculty from pressure to indoctrinate our students in a particular world view, and it protects academics from pressure to avoid research that might offend the political establishment or the donors to the university. It also allows people to pursue the kind of research that they love and teach the kind of courses they think worthy. Such freedom is not possible for exploited and exhausted adjunct professors, but it is absolutely necessary for the health of scholarship and the American university itself.

I realize that the tenure situation is not as bleak as the prophets of doom would have us believe. As a person with some knowledge of statistics, I know that the gross statistics of the *Chronicle* articles are misleading because they lump together universities and colleges along

with community colleges and the growing number of for-profit and online universities, both of which rely almost totally on adjunct faculty. A study of four-year colleges and universities alone would probably reveal that the percentage of tenured and tenure-track faculty is reasonably high, and that the current economic downturn means less money for those institutions to hire adjuncts. In any case, these institutions still give tenure, and the criteria for tenure remain excellent scholarship, teaching, and service, so the tenure system remains intact and healthy.

What impact does the current fear about the erosion of tenure have on Jewish studies? At the moment, I suspect it has had very little impact. After all, Jewish studies courses are rarely taught at the institutions that rely heavily on adjuncts, such as community colleges, which teach mostly basic introductory courses in the standard fields, or for-profit and online universities, which, according to their ads, focus largely on business management and computer technology. Jewish studies has found a home at elite colleges and universities and at major state universities, in short, at places that still rely on the tenure system. I am glad that such is the case. After all, the growth of Jewish studies in the American academy has been driven by donors, by Jewish philanthropists who have given generously to universities to fund Jewish studies programs. In the absence of tenure, one could imagine a

From the Executive Director

After a period of seven years, AJS is returning to Boston for its forty-second annual conference. Longtime members often speak wistfully of AJS's early meetings at the Copley Plaza, just across the street from where this year's meeting will be held. In 1996, when the AJS conference last convened at the Plaza, the conference had seventy-eight sessions; this year, the number has more than doubled, a reflection of the expansion of the field, the growth of the society, and the popularity of Boston as a venue. (More than one-third of AJS members are from the Northeast.) Indeed, this year AJS received the highest number of submissions in its history: 157 session submissions and 288 individual paper submissions, compared to 117 and 272 submissions, respectively, in 2009.

While this growth is certainly good news—especially in an economic climate where all we seem to hear about is contraction—it is not without its challenges. To significantly increase the number of papers accepted would transform the conference's culture, a culture that distinguishes the AJS meeting from the larger, disciplinary gatherings. "Record submissions" represent the vitality of the field, the health of the organization, and the value of the conference, but they also produce a good deal of hand-wringing among the AJS board and conference program committee, which have to balance two, somewhat contradictory goals: one, to offer a wide platform for new research and give members ample opportunity to share their scholarship, get feedback, and secure travel funding (often contingent on presenting a paper); and, two, to organize a conference that retains a certain intimacy, does not dilute audiences by too many simultaneous sessions, and only accepts the most outstanding proposals.

AJS sought a middle path in response to the unprecedented number of submissions this year: we added a new time slot (Tuesday, 3:45–5:45 pm) which will accommodate several additional sessions. We also expanded the poster session to include digital media presentations, as well as created a new, fifteenth-session time slot for digital and media-oriented panels. But AJS also increased the overall rejection rate from approximately 20 percent in 2009 to 30 percent. This is well

scenario in which a donor, unhappy with the critical scholarly views or the political positions of a professor whose salary is paid by the gift of that donor, might demand that the professor be fired. Most donors would probably never make such demands, but even the possibility of such interference in the academic world makes me shudder. Tenure protects us from even the possibility of such interference. Tenure, after all, is administered by the faculty, who, almost always, base their decisions on the quality of the scholarship, teaching, and service, and not on political or other inappropriate considerations. If tenure were to disintegrate at four-year colleges and universities, however, Jewish studies might suffer disproportionately.

I am an optimist, and so I think that tenure will not disappear. It will remain strong at colleges and universities, although probably not at the community colleges and the for-profit schools. The academic community should think of ways to protect faculty at those institutions from exploitation. We also need to convince the non-academic world, including state legislators, that the university is not a business, and the life of the mind does indeed need some protection. That protection is tenure.

Marsha Rozenblit
University of Maryland

within the range of rejection rates of other learned societies, several of which approach 50 and 60 percent for especially popular locations. Still, the greater number of rejection letters going out this year caused some consternation among scholars who have presented at the conference for years, as well as among those applying—and being rejected—for the first time.

The evaluation criteria for proposals include originality of research, methodology, contribution to the field, and clarity of argument. The twenty division chairs score abstracts according to these criteria, rank created and pre-formed sessions, and pass their acceptance/rejection recommendations on to the program committee. It is then the program committee's task to review all of the division chairs' recommendations and create a high-level and diverse conference program that will appeal to the wide-ranging interests of AJS members. This is not to say that all very strong proposals make it into the final schedule—some individual proposals regarded highly by both division chairs and the program committee are rejected simply because there is no appropriate place for them in a session. The rejection rate of individual proposals is in fact a good deal higher than that of pre-formed sessions. We recognize that some scholars are new to the field or not tapped into a network to build a panel. In these cases, we suggest these scholars submit a proposal according to one of the division chair's suggested themes, or else use the Sessions Seeking Participants page on the AJS website.

We've added several other new features to this year's meeting, including a Monday afternoon time slot for more informal, professionally oriented discussions and times to meet with the AJS division chairs and publication editors to discuss the state of the field and suggestions for the organization. As always, please feel free to e-mail your thoughts and comments any time of the year to the AJS office at ajs@ajs.cjh.org. I look forward to seeing you in December.

Rona Sheramy
Association for Jewish Studies

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2010–2011

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The Iraq & Iran Issue

Iran and Iraq: Demography beyond the Jewish Past

Sergio DellaPergola

Both Iraq and Iran hosted ancient and large Jewish populations. The large communities in the broad area encompassing both countries offered paramount contributions to the development of global Jewish civilization in various and different ways and for a while served as the Jewish spiritual and cultural capital center. Some of these influences spanning more than 2,500 years still remain among the pillars of contemporary Jewish religious, social, and historical identity. To some extent, the Jewish presence long preceded the definitive cultural consolidation of the host societies.

Starting from the end of the first millennium of the Christian era, however, the regional cultural hegemony within world Jewry was shifting westward. It shifted repeatedly again during the second millennium, leaving Iran and Iraq—together with many other communities—in a semiperipheral position vis-à-vis the new emerging centers of global Jewish peoplehood. The long tale of Jews in Iraq and Iran reached a stage of sudden decline during the second half of the twentieth century. Harsh societal circumstances, large-scale acceptance of the Zionist project and migration to Israel, and other opportunities offered elsewhere by the global political and economic system virtually ended a great civilizational cycle.

The more ancient presence of Jews in Iraq and Iran lies beyond the scope of this review, which focuses instead on the contemporary period. In general, information on population characteristics and trends is more easily available for Iraq than for Iran, and in several ways the former has often been considered the more culturally accomplished and influential. However, it is interesting to go back to Benjamin of Tudela's itinerary and memorial toward the end of the twelfth century to find that his estimates indicate a much larger Jewish population in Iran than in Iraq. Taking at face value his quite detailed reporting—which of course would require more critical analysis than allowed here—Iran then hosted 193,500 Jews, compared to 121,500 in Iraq. The latter number seems more grounded on direct observation or at

least on secondhand sources available to our traveler. And it is worth recalling that Benjamin's accounts tend to be reliable when cross-checked with solid, modern historiography.

**JEWISH POPULATION IN ASIA
BASED ON BENJAMIN OF TUDELA'S
ITINERARY, C. 1170**

Region	Number*
Asia, total	950,491
Iran	193,500
Iraq	121,500
Turkey (incl. European part)	4,250
Syria, Lebanon, Palestine	22,241
Arabian Peninsula	455,000
India	101,000
Central Asia	50,000
East Asia	3,000

*The list includes only those countries for which precise numbers are given.

Whatever the intrinsic value of these early statistical estimates, the important notion is that both Iran and Iraq were perceived to be among the most important and influential regional concentrations of Jews at that time, other than the much higher numbers—more or less credible—provided for the Arabian Peninsula. The latter would be, in Benjamin's account, the largest single regional concentration of Jews then existing in the world. Jews in Iran and in Iraq were spread both across several major and a large number of minor local communities. The area that can be roughly identified as contemporary Iran had a significantly larger Jewish population than that of Iraq. However, by the middle of the twentieth century, although the number of Jews in Iraq would be extremely close to Benjamin's estimates for the end of the twelfth, the numbers in Iran would be significantly lower—hinting perhaps at harsher circumstances for local Jews.

During the period between the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century, the population of most areas in the Middle East did not grow much because of the generally poor economic, social, and health conditions. Among Jews, slow population growth was

likely interspersed with significant declines in the ability or willingness to maintain a cultural and religious identity separate from that of the Muslim majority. It can be estimated that the number of Jews for the whole of Asia shrank from about one million to less than a quarter of a million at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Modest recoveries during the following two hundred years would put the overall continental estimate at 300,000 Jews in 1800 and 535,000 in 1900 (of which 50,000 would have been in Palestine and 100,000 in the Central Asian areas of the former Soviet Union). It is only in the twentieth century that the Jewish population would start to grow more rapidly, although somewhat impaired by incipient emigration.

In 1947/48, at the time of Israel's independence, reasonable Jewish population estimates would be 135,000 for Iraq and 90,000 for Iran. Subsequent years would witness rapid emigration, though at a very different pace for the two Jewish communities and consequently with different effects on the continuation of Jewish life in the two countries. The model for Iraq was the nearly total transfer to Israel within a short span of time—mainly through "Operation Flying Carpet." Between 1948 and 1953, 125,000 Iraqi Jews migrated to Israel, and forty-seven years later, by 2010, total migration had augmented by only a few thousand to 129,000. In the case of Iran, migration was much more gradual and also less exclusively focused on Israel in the longer term. Out of a grand total of more than 82,000 Jews who left Iran for Israel between 1948 and 2010, 27,000 moved in 1948–53, followed by successive waves peaking at 12,000 during the early 1960s, over 9,000 during the years of the Khomeini Islamic revolution, and over 5,000 during the late 1980s.

In 2008 there were 64,100 Jews born in Iraq and 47,100 born in Iran living in Israel; plus, respectively, 169,400 and 87,600 born in Israel whose father was born in one of the same countries. The overall estimates of 233,500 Iraqis and 134,700 Iranians ignore the third and further generations of the descendants of these immigrants, as well as those born in Israel, whose mother but not whose

father was born in the given country. The actual sizes of the respective enlarged communities are therefore significantly larger.

In the United States, according to the 2000–01 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), about 5,000 Jewish adults were born in Iraq and about 20,000 were born in Iran. Here, too, these figures omit second- and third-generation descendants. Following these extensive migrations and the resettlement of emigrants in Canada, Western European countries, and elsewhere, few Jews remained in either Iraq or Iran. Regarding Iraq, with the departure of the last few Jews following the American campaign there, virtually nobody was left in the community. In Iran the slower pace of emigration, in spite of highly visible anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli rhetoric and periodical political harassment, reflected partly the inherent logistical difficulties, partly the persistence of a moderately affluent middle class among the Jewish community. The Jewish population was realistically estimated at 10,000–12,000 in 2010, although significantly higher estimates also circulated in an attempt to transmit a positive image of “business as usual.”

The integration of Iraqi and Iranian Jews in Israel, where most of both original Jewish populations eventually landed, followed the patterns and predicaments of mass aliyah. During the first years after arrival, the Israeli melting pot (or, perhaps more appropriately, salad bowl) developed through rapid demographic adaptation and convergence but also through significant sacrifices in socioeconomic status among all participants in mass immigration. It is well documented

that Jews from Asia and Africa paid a heavier price in this process than Jews from Europe and America. Different origin groups also did not bring the same initial characteristics and tools, and their subsequent mobility processes also reflected these initial differentials among immigrants along with the opportunities that were being created in the new society. From this angle, at their arrival in Israel, Jews from Iraq were in many respects significantly more modernized than Jews from Iran. Life expectancy before migration to Israel was retrospectively estimated at 50–54 years in Iraq and 46–51 in Iran. Among those who married before 1960, age at marriage was one to two years older among brides and three to four years older among grooms in Iraq. Among women married abroad and surveyed in Israeli censuses, completed family size (at age 45–49) was 6.3 children for the Iraqis versus 7.3 for the Iranians in 1961; 5.5 versus 6.2, respectively, in 1972; and 5.1 children for both in 1983.

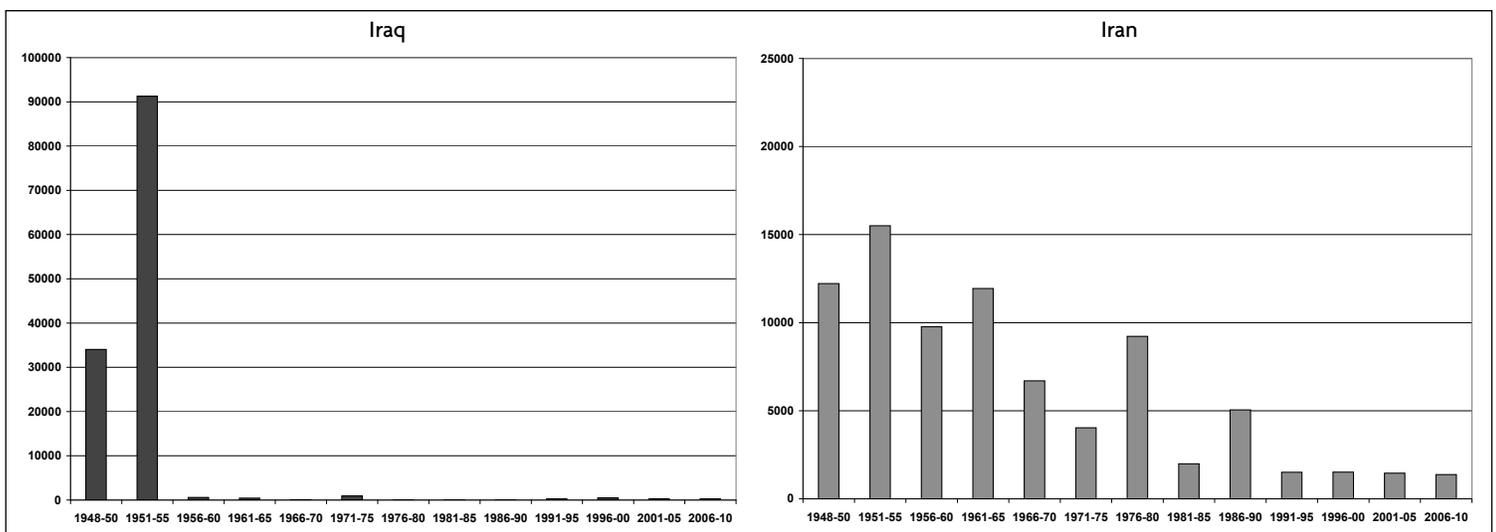
Similar patterns emerge from a comparison of socioeconomic characteristics of the immigrants a few years after they had settled in Israel. In 1961, 28 percent of men and 65 percent of women above 30 years of age born in Iraq had not attained any schooling, versus 34 percent of men and 73 percent of women born in Iran. At the opposite end of the educational ladder, 8 percent of men and 1 percent of women over 30 born in Iraq had thirteen or more years of education, versus of 2 percent men and 0.1 percent of women born in Iran. Regarding the occupational structure abroad, immigrants who arrived in Israel from Iraq in 1948–53 included 22 percent in managerial

and clerical professions, 30 percent in trade and sales, 3 percent in agriculture, and 45 percent in other blue-collar occupations. Among immigrants from Iran, 8 percent were in managerial and clerical professions, 31 percent in trade and sales, 13 percent in agriculture, and 53 percent in other blue-collar occupations. These differentials help explain the more rapid and visible entrance of Iraqis (as compared to the Iranians) into Israel’s system of economic, professional, military, and political elites.

An analysis of the 1995 Israeli census indicated some degree of regional proximity in the geographic spread of Jews from Iraq and Iran, reflecting the prevalent role of immigration during the first decade of Israeli statehood versus other much more veteran or much newer immigrant groups. However, the typological location of Iraqis was quite contiguous with Jews from Poland and Germany, their three denser locations being Ramat-Gan, the Kinneret natural region, and Petach Tikva, while Iranians were closer to Jews from Turkey, Greece, and Bulgaria, their three denser locations being Holon, Jerusalem, and Petach Tikva. Indeed by 1995, after many years of hardship, Iraqi and Iranian Jews had finally joined the mainstream of Israeli society.

Sergio DellaPergola is the Shlomo Argov Professor of Israel-Diaspora Relations at the Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He is the author of Jewish Population Policies: Demographic Trends and Options in Israel and in the Diaspora (Jerusalem, 2010).

IMMIGRATION TO ISRAEL FROM IRAQ AND IRAN, 1948–2010*



* The two diagrams are on different scales. Source: Israel, Central Bureau of Statistics.

AJS, Ahmadinejad, and Me

Richard Kalmin

The main aim of my book, *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine*, is to understand the diverse cultural forces impinging on the rabbis who produced the Talmud Yerushalmi and Bavli. In order to do this, I read the Yerushalmi on the background of Roman culture and the Bavli on that of Persia. For example, I argue that Palestinian rabbis were more integrated into Jewish society than were Babylonian rabbis, who tended to set themselves apart from other Jews. Babylonian rabbis rarely interacted with non-rabbis in informal settings: as guests for dinner at the non-rabbi's house, via casual contact in the streets and marketplaces, as invited guests at the same party and the like. In this respect, Jewish society in Babylonia had more in common with Persian than with Roman models, since Persian society discouraged movement and interaction between classes, in contrast to Rome, where upward (and downward) movement from one class to another was a relatively common phenomenon.

Babylonian rabbinic obsession with genealogy was a crucially important factor motivating the rabbis' detachment from other Jews, and characterizes them as typically Persian given the rigid hierarchical divisions between classes in Iranian society. The Babylonian rabbinic movement itself was rigidly hierarchical, with distinctions drawn not only between students and teachers but also between one teacher and another. There was no such thing as a collegial relationship between teachers of equal status, but rather between superior and subordinate teachers. Hierarchical relationships between rabbis in Babylonia tended to be static, so that once one's status vis-à-vis other rabbis had been determined, little could be done to change it. Relationships between Palestinian rabbis were significantly more flexible.

In addition, my book challenges the traditional scholarly view that the transition from Parthian to Sasanian Persian rule in the early third century CE was a watershed in Iranian history, arguing that the Jews, and perhaps even the ruling Iranians, did not consider this transition to be significant. Scholars often portray the Parthians as Hellenized interlopers and not really Persians, according to which the Sasanians represented a return to



Sasanian hammered and engraved silver plate depicting a king and queen seated on a throne, possibly at a wedding. Plate by Anonymous (Iranian), sixth–seventh century CE. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.

Achaemenid Persian orthodoxy. This issue is of crucial importance in modern Iranian scholarship, and upsetting the traditional scholarly paradigm has roughly the same impact as demonstrating that the transition from British to American rule in 1776 was of trivial importance to those who lived through it.

I also argue that Persian attitudes and practices with regard to idols and idol worship had a significant impact on Babylonian Jews, constituting another respect in which Jewish Babylonia was more Persian than Roman. To be specific, the Bavli attests to a distinction between Parthian and Sasanian Babylonia that confirms scholarly claims regarding the different policies of the Parthian and Sasanian dynasties with respect to idols. In contrast to the Parthians, who routinely worshipped idols, the Sasanians proscribed statues and raised reliefs used in cultic ceremonies. This distinction between the two dynasties corresponds to the picture supplied by the Babylonian Talmud, according to which only rabbis who lived during the Parthian period came in

contact with idols in a public religious setting.

My book also analyzes the critical importance of eastern provincial Roman culture on the rabbis of Babylonia, but the Persian context explains why the editors of *AJS Perspectives* asked me to contribute this essay. The Oxford University Press website (tinyurl.com/cd5x63) boldly proclaims that my book was named a Notable Selection by the Association for Jewish Studies Jordan Schnitzer Book Awards and “Best Book of the Year on Ancient Iran” by the Iranian Ministry of Culture. It is not often that Jews and Iranians agree on something these days, so perhaps this peculiar accord is a small sign that world peace is possible.

When Oxford informed me of the Iranian award, I was, to put it mildly, curious about what the Iranians found appealing about my book. We westerners have what is probably a skewed understanding of contemporary Iran, but we generally don't attribute to Iranian governmental institutions an interest in the Jewish experience even when it sheds light on significant aspects of Iranian history. I can't

claim to have completely solved the mystery, since several people who might have been able to pursue the story to its source inside Iran spoke of their fear of possible reprisals against their Iranian friends. My informants graciously gave me permission to quote their words, but asked me not to use their names.

What about my book appealed to the Iranians? One possibility is the case I made for the applicability of the Iranian cultural context for understanding the Babylonian Talmud. Iranian scholars have been known to like Indo-European linguists who emphasize the importance of Old Persian, which is often neglected in favor of Sanskrit and Hittite. In addition, the Ministry of Culture may have approved of my conclusion that the Sasanians did not persecute the Jews when they took over from the Parthians in the early third century. Perhaps the Ministry of Culture approved of my portrayal of the “authentic” Iranians as enlightened leaders who refrained from mistreating minorities in their empire. Perhaps they were impressed by the revolutionary discovery that the rabbis viewed the transition from Parthian to Sasanian rule with equanimity.

But these explanations presuppose that the Iranians actually read my book, a possibility I found difficult to believe. Those who

actually knew Iran firsthand, however, tended to be less perplexed. According to some, the Ministry is interested in dispassionate scholarship in addition to politics. According to this view, several members of the Ministry do not belong to the ruling regime, and obviously the independent-minded members were behind the selection of my book. Others contended that the Ministry wishes to convey the impression that they are interested in dispassionate scholarship and not just politics, but nothing in Iran happens without a political reason. The Iranologist who nominated my book for the award noted that it won the prize before the unrest following the contested elections of 2009, which caused a dramatic reduction in the already severely circumscribed area of freedom of expression within Iran.

The person whose judgment on the matter I most trust said that the Ministry is interested in promoting international scholarship on Iranian antiquity, encouraging international collaboration with Iranian scholars, and improving the Iranian image in the world. Most Iranians are not supporters of the present government, he observed, and they should not be made responsible for the madness of their leaders. Iran is confusing and chaotic, and is not at all the tightly controlled centralized totalitarian regime

so often portrayed in Western media. Many Iranian scholars now acknowledge Jewish history as part of mainstream Iranian culture, and it is therefore not as shocking as one might think that they esteemed a book about Jews in ancient Iran. In fact, a book by my informant was once nominated for the award, although he didn't win, probably because at the time he was an Israeli citizen.

President Ahmadinejad attends the ceremony and personally hands out the award, which leads some to view its acceptance as tantamount to recognition of the legitimacy of an ugly regime in exchange for honor and a substantial financial benefit. Oxford informed me of the award over a year ago, however, and I have yet to receive my letter of invitation to Iran. We can hope that the political situation in Iran will dramatically improve in the future, but it is with more than a touch of regret that I acknowledge that as time passes, it becomes increasingly unlikely that I will ever have to confront this difficult ethical predicament.

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Baghdad in the West: Migration and the Making of Medieval Jewish Traditions

Marina Rustow

An apocryphal piece of academic lore recounts the story of a graduate seminar at Columbia in which the late Yosef Yerushalmi asked his students to name the single most important event in Jewish history. “The destruction of the second Temple?” one hazards. “No!” Yerushalmi thunders; “you’re thinking like yeshiva *buchers*.” “The founding of the state of Israel?” “No!” he bellows; “you’re thinking like Zionists. Think like historians!” The answer he seeks: the imposition of the land tax after the Islamic conquests. An answer more pedestrian, even *boring*, his students think, cannot be imagined; they are perplexed, but no one dares object. He explains: the land tax brought Jews to cities, changing Jewish history forever.

How did what we now call the Babylonian Talmud, a collection of scholastic texts studied in small disciple circles in tiny farming towns on the Euphrates, become the canonical text central to Jewish law from Jerusalem to Paris, Copenhagen to San’a, Brooklyn to Los Angeles? To the extent that the answer lies in the medieval period (and not in movable type, offset printing, mass literacy, or Dial-a-Daf), it has everything to do with migration from the Iraqi countryside—and, a bit later, with mass migration from Iraq itself.

Few would argue with the idea that urbanization during the early Islamic period permanently altered the trajectory of Jewish history. True, the Babylonian Talmud contains more rulings on crafts, trade, and town life than its entirely rural Palestinian counterpart. But the Islamic conquests turned the occasional abandonment of farming into a veritable collective flight to the city—and not just for Jews.

While the fledgling Islamic government’s land tax (*kharāj*) was not entirely new—in

Iraq, it was modeled on Sasanian precedents—peasants did not merely render the old tax to new masters. The early Islamic state increased the rural tax burden, extended it over new kinds of produce, and devised more efficient ways of collecting it. Since villages had to pay the *kharāj* collectively, when people left for the city, they increased the liability of those

changing Jews’ economic prospects. Talmudic precedent had required debts on the estates of the deceased to be collected only from real estate, but declining land ownership among Jews had rendered the old ruling unworkable. In 786–87, the gaon of Sura and the exilarch ruled that those debts could now be collected on movable property instead. This momen-

tous change in Jewish law is corroborated by a broader pattern in rabbinic literature: though some gaonic responsa still addressed queries from peasants, the vast majority now dealt with questions from urban settings.

But for more than a century after Baghdad’s founding, the Babylonian yeshivot resisted the move to the capital on the Tigris, remaining at Sura and Pumbedita on the Euphrates. This may have been because paying court was perceived as the exilarch’s task. Or perhaps turmoil in



Silver medallion struck in Baghdad by the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Rādī in 937 CE, probably to commemorate the restoration of order following factional warfare; part of the inscription reads, “Praise be to God, who has removed sorrow from us” (Qur’ān 35:34). In the late ninth and tenth centuries, chaos in Baghdad and mass migration from Iraq brought Babylonian-Jewish traditions westward. British Museum, CM 1881-6-2-1. © Trustees of the British Museum.

they left behind and, in turn, increased pressure for those remaining in villages to leave, too. The ‘Abbasids (750–1258) mitigated the situation somewhat by introducing payment in kind (rather than cash) to the district surrounding Baghdad in order to provision the growing city; peasants could then avoid borrowing money at ruinous rates of interest to pay the state. But the burden of subsistence farming still spurred ever greater numbers of people to abandon agriculture for cities.

After 762, the main target of migration was the newly founded ‘Abbasid capital at Baghdad, which brought the center of the civilized world close to some of the world’s major Jewish settlements. The exilarch’s seat had been the Sasanid winter capital Maḥoza (or Medinata; in Arabic, al-Madā’in), a group of cities connected by pontoon bridges over the Tigris; for better access to the ‘Abbasid court, he now moved 32 kilometers north to Baghdad. A generation later, the rabbinic elite already understood that rural flight was

the capital kept the *geonim* from committing their fortunes to Baghdad: in 836, locked in conflict with his Turkish army regiment, the caliph al-Mu’taṣim moved his court 125 kilometers north to Sāmarrā’, where it stayed until 892. The yeshivot stayed put, at least for the moment, and the population of Sura and its surroundings remained primarily Jewish, at least according to the Muslim theologian Ibn Qūṭayba (828–89). Even those who had remained in the countryside were now better connected than ever with the center: Arab geographers report a regular mail route between Pumbedita and Baghdad, a distance of about 62 kilometers.

Pumbedita was the first to move to the capital. A responsum reports the date as 889–90, though it is easier to imagine the move having taken place after the ‘Abbasid court returned to Baghdad. Sura arrived in the capital a bit later, likely in the early tenth century. The last report of Sura as a Jewish city comes from a biographical account of Ibn

al-Qiftī (1172–1248) in which a court physician named Sinān ibn Thābit sought permission from the caliph al-Muqtadir (908–32) to treat those suffering from plague in Sura, “and they are Jews.”

The move to Baghdad changed the *geonim* and their work. Over the tenth century, the yeshivot metamorphosed into cosmopolitan and outward-looking institutions headed by polymath *geonim* educated outside their confines, such as Se’adya ben Yosef al-Fayyūmī (d. 942), Shemu’el ben Ḥofni (d. 1013), and Hayya bar Sherira (d. 1038). The difference, one might say, was comparable to that between maintaining a seminary in Breslau (or today’s Cincinnati?) and one in New York or Los Angeles.

As the Iraqi population urbanized and the ‘Abbasids came to rule one of the largest empires in history, Baghdad grew into the most important city in the Near East. With urban growth came vastly expanded geographic mobility. In the latter half of the ninth century, Baghdadi-Jewish traders speaking a staggering number of languages (Arabic, Persian, Greek, and various Slavic and romance dialects) reached western and eastern Europe, Constantinople, the Caspian Sea, India, and China. The routes they followed were standard for their time, with the notable exception of the overland route to China via the Khazar kingdom, which seems to have been their own invention. Gaonic responsa corroborate Jewish traffic in slaves, textiles, and spices.

The result of growing international commerce was wealth at home. Some traders amassed the capital to sell luxury goods to rulers and then served the court in other capacities or moved into banking. Several Jewish mercantile dynasties became ‘Abbasid courtiers and administrators while playing an ever greater role in communal politics and lending their support to rival factions of yeshivah leaders. The ‘Abbasid court even became enmeshed in Jewish factional warfare, as when a court banker (*jahbadh*) named Yosef b. Pinḥas (d. c. 920) backed a gaon of Pumbedita, Kohen Šedeq (926–35), against an exilarch named ‘Uqba, who had attempted to take over his *rashut* (right to collect taxes) in Khurasān. Together with his son-in-law Neṭira (d. 916), himself the descendant of an ‘Abbasid *jahbadh*, Yosef b. Pinḥas convinced the court in Baghdad to take his side, forcing ‘Uqba into exile in distant Kirmānshāh.

The population of Baghdad is likely to have exceeded one million by the tenth century, numbers the world hadn’t seen since ancient Rome and would not see again

until late eighteenth-century London. Eyewitnesses boasted of the huge number of markets. Booksellers (who both sold and copied books) numbered as many as one hundred, a ratio of outlets for fine literature per capita that rivals that of Seattle, currently America’s best-read city. In retrospect it is hard to explain how all those mouths could be fed and watered. And indeed, the city’s prosperity would not last long.

No sooner had the population and wealth of Baghdad peaked than political chaos and economic decline stunted its ascendancy. Large slabs of the ‘Abbasid realm fell away, most significantly, Ifriqiya (central North Africa, centered on Qayrawān) in 909, and the wealthy province of Egypt in 969, both conquered by the upstart Shi’i Fatimid caliphs, who then pressed eastward and took Palestine and Syria as well. Baghdad itself was in peril. With the ascent of the Fatimids, the civilized world shifted westward toward the hubs of the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean trades: Fustat and the Fatimid capital just north of it, Cairo. The geographer al-Maqdisī (d. c. 990) assessed the situation this way: “[Egypt’s] metropole has now become the greatest glory of the Muslims; Baghdad has been superseded until Judgment Day.” Anyone with a skill to ply—merchants, government bureaucrats, religious leaders; in short, anyone literate—read the writing on the wall and left the ‘Abbasid heartland for the Fatimid Mediterranean.

Flight from Iraq had a marked effect on the world of the yeshivot. Even that arch-propagandist on behalf of the continuity of rabbinic Judaism, Avraham ibn Dāwūd of Toledo (d. 1180), admitted that the period between 960 and 990 found the Babylonian *geonim* in deep crisis: “the income of the yeshivot,” he wrote, “which had come from Iberia, the Maghrib, Ifriqiya, Egypt, and the land of Israel, was discontinued.” The admission is significant given his otherwise outrageous claims on behalf of the superiority of Babylonian rabbinic tradition.

Grim though things looked for the academies’ income, westward migration actually helped the cause of gaonic continuity by spreading eastern Jews and their loyalty to the Babylonian center well beyond the confines of Iraq. The Jewish communities in Fustat, Qayrawān, Palermo, and numerous towns in Syria-Palestine were by now teeming with Iraqis, and their arrival made it easier for the Babylonian *geonim* to win supporters abroad.

Not that the *geonim* amassed and retained supporters without a struggle. No one could

take for granted that people of eastern origin would offer fealty to Baghdad. Most cities hosted three Jewish communities—Iraqi Rabbanite, Syro-Palestinian Rabbanite, and Qaraite—and Jews offered and withdrew their loyalties at will. In one memorable case c. 1030, a number of Palestinian Rabbanites threatened to defect to the Iraqi and Qaraite congregations merely because they disliked their rabbi’s high-handed attitude.

Gaonic letters also attest to the inherently political nature of the job. The presence in Mediterranean cities of long-distance traders with ties to Baghdad, including some of the great Iraqi and Iranian merchant houses, made it easier for the *geonim* to demand and receive donations and for their responsa to arrive in far-off places. The *geonim* took note. Luminaries such as Shemu’el ben Ḥofni and Hayya bar Sherira maintained lifelong alliances with traders who helped them raise funds in Egypt and Ifriqiya (among them two Qaraite families).

But westward migration also resulted in significant ruptures within Iraq and protracted conflict with the Palestinian-rite congregations, sometimes on their own turf. Sura was forced to close its doors for four decades (943–87), as Iraqi immigrants established their own congregations in parts of Palestine where Jews had always followed the Palestinian rite, including Banyas and possibly even Tiberias, the very seat of the Palestinian yeshiva until c. 960. In the early 1030s, an Iraqi faction attempted to establish formal jurisdiction over Iraqi-rite followers in Palestine—until then, the province of the gaon of Jerusalem—by petitioning the Fatimid caliph for recognition of their leader. The Jerusalem gaon Shelomo ben Yehudah al-Fāsi (d. 1051), a brilliant politician who outmaneuvered a succession of rivals during his quarter-century in office, blocked the attempt with a counter-petition to the Fatimid caliph, but he could not fight demography: his successor in the gaonate of Jerusalem, Dani’el ben ‘Azarya (d. 1062), was an Iraqi of exilarchal descent. Around 1040, both Babylonian yeshivot had closed down and would not reopen until the second half of the twelfth century; members of exilarchal families and gaonic contenders sought and found their fortunes elsewhere. Crisis in the east produced a burgeoning political life in the west.

Accounting for Babylonian rabbinic hegemony is then more complex than simply tracking the reception and transmission of the Babylonian Talmud and gaonic responsa.

I began to fathom the complexity of the problem during a conversation I had on a curbside in Paris with Judith Olszowy-Schlanger as we waited to pick up her children from school. The physical features of masoretic manuscript fragments, she said, could confirm that the earliest Tiberian masoretic texts from the late ninth and tenth centuries already show traces of Babylonian influence; she and others have found the same to be true of the earliest Qaraite works. Those findings underscore the significance of westward migration

from Iraq: even the very people fighting the Iraqis on behalf of Palestinian independence and hegemony—Qaraites included—had themselves already been shaped by the various Babylonian constructions of Judaism.

Polemicians such as Ibn Dawūd and Pirqoy ben Baboy would have us believe that the Babylonian tradition conquered the west because it was inherently superior to the others. But to believe them is to judge history by its outcome. The demographic factor suggests that it was neither the strength of

Jewish law nor the authority of the Babylonian *geonim* alone that led to the pervasive (if varied) influence of Iraqi traditions on Judaism, but a host of factors that also reshaped the wider Middle East and Mediterranean.

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Jews of Iran and Rabbinical Literature: Preliminary Notes

Daniel Tsadik

Estimates of the number of Jews in Iran, one of the oldest Jewish diasporas and today's largest Jewish community under Islam, range from 17,000 to 30,000 souls. This community usually does not receive much scholarly attention. To be sure, compared to some other Jewish diasporas in the Middle East, there is not much data on the Jews of Iran from past centuries, making it difficult to depict certain aspects of their life. Further, Iran seems to be perceived as anomalous with Persian, not Arabic, as its major language and Shi'ite, not "mainstream" or "Orthodox" Sunni Islam, as its majority religion from the sixteenth century onward. These facts, consequently, may have caused scholars to regard the Jews of Iran as too remote, isolated, and difficult to decipher.

Be this as it may, one may contend that the so-called remoteness of Iran's Jewry poses questions, some of which have broader significance. For instance, if it was indeed segregated, how did such a Jewish community persevere and preserve its Jewish identity? Were Iran's Jews indeed so distant and isolated? Were there relations between Iranian Jewry and other major centers of Jewish life? In other words, the Jewish community in Iran may serve as an important case study of the survival of Jewish life ostensibly distant from centers of Jewish wisdom.

There are various references to Iranian Jewry's low level of knowledge of mainstream rabbinical Judaism as well as the general sciences. In modern times, Rabbi 'Ovadiyah Yosef (b. 1920) has asserted that not all the religious judges of Iran are experts. The late professor Ezra Zion Melamed (d. 1994), of Iranian-Shirazi origins, stated that in Iran, Jews did not learn the Talmud, nor did they possess copies of it. The renowned rabbi Hayim Yosef David Azulay (HID"Á) (d. 1806) maintained that in Iran there were several generations of Talmudic sages, *amoraim*, as well as *sevoraim* and *geonim*. Yet he added, based on truthful sources (*magidev emet*), that the Jews of Iran in his day did not even know prayer. Some non-Jewish European observers in Safavid Iran (1501–1722/36) viewed the Jews of Iran as the most ignorant of all Jews; one of them reports that the Jews of Hurmuz in southern Iran had no knowledge of Judaism. Earlier, Samuel



Hakham Hayim Moreh of Tehran, on the front page of his *Yedey Eliyahu* (Tehran: Nehuray, TaRPaZ/1927).

al-Maghribi, a famous twelfth-century Jewish convert to Islam, argued in his anti-Jewish polemics that the Iranian Jews were the "most ignorant of all Jews." One should keep in mind that, after all, some of the leading figures of the early Qaraite movement, which challenged rabbinical and Talmudic authority, were from Iran: Benjamin al-Nihvandi (ninth century), Daniel al-Qumisi (ninth–tenth centuries) and the important Qaraite Tustari family (eleventh century) of merchants and politicians. Even before them, movements that challenged rabbinical authority were apparently connected to Iranian Jews, such as those that centered around Abu 'Isa al-Isfahani and his disciple, Yudghan (seventh or eighth century).

Additionally, rabbis of international renown are not known to have existed in Iran, and religious compositions of Iranian Jews were not studied or quoted outside the Persian world. This may indeed allow for Iranian Jewry's portrayal as detached from the perceived mainstream Jewish world. However,

some previously untapped evidence attests to the Jews' knowledge of and commitment to rabbinical Judaism. In this essay, I will demonstrate this knowledge based on some data from the sixteenth century onward. Certain Iranian cities were centers of Torah and learning. Kashan was a major center for religious and intellectual activity in the seventeenth century, as is evident from the fact that several Jewish thinkers and writers hailed from Kashan: the poet Sa'id Sarmad, who converted to Islam, Babai b. Lutf, author of the historical text *Kitabi-i Anusi* (Book of a Forced Convert), and probably Rabbi Yehudah b. El'azar, author of *Hovot Yehudah* (Duties of Judah), a book of Jewish thought. Isfahan was another nucleus of Jewish life, as can be seen from the Armenian author, Khwajah Safar, who noted in 1643 that the Jews of Isfahan are "very studious in learning, philosophers . . . perfect in the seven wisdoms. . . they all—men, women, boys, and girls—know the entire Bible by heart. They are very learned with a proclivity to research. . . Their craft is reading and learning."

Overall, there were members of the Jewish elite who knew Jewish subjects, such as the Hebrew Bible and its commentaries, Talmud, halakhah, thought, and mysticism. They were engaged with different genres—as the relatively vast number of Judeo-Persian manuscripts testifies—including *tafsirs* (translations/commentaries) on the Hebrew Bible, didactic literature, history, and thought. The most significant Jewish composition of Safavid times was *Hovot Yehudah* (Duties of Judah) by Rabbi Yehudah b. El'azar. The book was written in 1686 in Judeo-Persian and addresses various issues (*ma'sheh bereshit* and *ma'sheh merkavah*, the Torah, punishment and reward, messianic days, and resurrection), while espousing a rationalist line. He also writes about mathematics, astronomy, cosmology, medicine, music, logic, and rhetoric, among other issues. Rabbi Yehudah b. El'azar is also comfortable with non-Jewish sources, such as the New Testament, Qur'an, and the writings of Aristotle, Plato, Ibn Sina (Avecinna), al-Shahristani, Ibn Rushd (Averroes), al-Ghazali, Nasir al-Din Tusi, and others. Rabbi Yehudah b. El'azar had no qualms disputing some of his predecessors, including some of the greatest Jewish thinkers. Thus, for instance,

in opposition to Maimonides who proposed thirteen principles of Jewish faith, and in contrast to other thinkers who suggested other numbers, Rabbi Yehudah b. El'azar enumerates four principles of Jewish belief.

Iranian Jewry's knowledge is also reflected in incidental letters. A note by David b. Binyamin ha-Cohen of Khunsar in the year TaSaH (c. 1708) testifies to his mastery of different layers of the Hebrew language and its literature. He quotes or paraphrases from the Hebrew Bible, the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, and the Book of Zohar. Legal questions sent from Iran to highly acclaimed rabbinical authorities abroad—mostly to Baghdad or Jerusalem—testify to the Iranian Jews' familiarity with rabbinical Judaism in the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries. During the eighteenth century, inquiries were sent from Iran to Rabbi Sedaqah Husin of Baghdad, and in the nineteenth century there are some yet-untapped Iranian questions addressing rabbis in Ottoman Palestine, such as Rabbi Hayim David Hazan (d. 1869), or Rabbi Ya'aqov Shaul Elyashar (d. 1906), as well as Hakham Yosef Hayim (d. 1909) in Baghdad. These questions may indicate their Iranian senders' lack of knowledge and the fact that educated rabbis did not exist in Iran. Nevertheless, the very resort to foreign rabbis indicates that the Jews of Iran valued this type of knowledge; it reflects their desire to follow halakhah as understood outside Iran. Additionally, letters were written by Iranian Jews—indeed a narrow elite of scholars—and dispatched to their foreign coreligionists on various socio-economic, political, educational, and personal matters. Parts of these letters consist of a very high, multilayered, and sophisticated Hebrew style. Their Hebrew is exceptionally rich, with sentences and expressions drawing on various Jewish traditional sources, such as Hebrew Bible, Talmud, and the mystical literature.

At least some Iranian Jews were exposed to outside Jewish and non-Jewish wisdom. The religious divide between Shi'i Iran and its Sunni adjacent countries did not completely segregate the Jews of Iran, as illustrated by the fact that certain Jewish texts that were published in the Ottoman Empire arrived in Iran. In fact, not only did Jewish books arrive in Iran; but people did as well. Emissaries (*SHaDaRi'M*) of Jewish-Palestinian communities frequented Iran, seeking pecuniary support. Among other things, these emissaries would advise the indigenous communities on various matters as well as offer legal verdicts. The questions submitted to the foreign emissaries reflect Iranian Jews'

knowledge or lack of knowledge in certain Jewish fields (as illustrated by the questions to the emissary Rabbi Yehudah b. 'Amram Diwan in the early eighteenth century), but they always mirror the Jews' adherence to the pronouncements of these foreign emissary Jews. At times, these emissaries preached to their host communities. Based on the content of the emissaries' sermons, it seems that their Iranian-Jewish audiences were highly knowledgeable and sophisticated in Jewish matters.

Furthermore, Shi'ite texts that attack Jews or Judaism frequently quote from Jewish texts, attempting to demonstrate their fallacy. Some of the major Shi'ite polemicists had Jewish origins, such as Hajj Baba Qazvini Yazdi of the late eighteenth century in Yazd, or the former Jew Muhammad Ridai Jadid al-Islam of early nineteenth-century Tehran. Their anti-Jewish polemics reflect knowledge of Judaism. Retrieving the various sources utilized by these authors furnishes the following tentative list of sources to which they, and by extension their surrounding Jews, had access: the Hebrew Bible, its medieval commentaries, book of *Josephun*, *Nevuat*

ha-Yeled, medieval Jewish dictionary (*Sefer ha-Shorashim*), Talmud Bavli, and other texts. At times, some of the books referred to in these Shi'ite texts are known to have existed among the Jews of Iran only through this Shi'ite anti-Jewish usage of them. Even if compared to some other Jewries under Islam, not much of rabbinical/Talmudic literature has survived from Iran, this fact in itself does not necessarily mean that such literature never existed. An illustration of the knowledge of a rabbi in Iran in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is Hakham Hayim Moreh (d. 1942) of Tehran. Although rather simple in content and style, the works of Hakham Moreh nonetheless exemplify his breadth of knowledge of diverse fields of Jewish wisdom.

The sources of Jewish knowledge in Iran were diverse, and they included local traditions of learning; foreign *SHaDaRi'M* and itinerant rabbis; Iranian Jews' pilgrimages to Palestine; correspondence with rabbis in Palestine and Iraq; and ordination of rabbis in Iraq. These sources illustrate the Iranian Jews' connection to world Jewry. Still, it is unlikely that the entire community was as well-versed



Manqul al-Ridai [The Sayings Transmitted by Ridai], or *Iqamat al-Shuhud fi Radd al-Yahud* [Erecting the Evidence in Refuting the Jews] (n.p., 1292/1875–76), an early nineteenth-century Shi'ite polemic against Judaism, composed by a former Jew, Muhammad Ridai Jadid al-Islam.

in the above fields as the religious elite, the *mullahs/hakhamim/rabbis*. Furthermore, it would be difficult to speak of a certain level of knowledge of all of the Jews of Iran as a whole, as there were differences within cities, towns, and villages, as well as from one city to the next. Kashan and Isfahan of the seventeenth century and Yazd of the nineteenth century were centers of Jewish knowledge, whereas in the nineteenth century, Shiraz Jews—as testified by professor E. Z. Melamed—were not truly familiar with the Talmud. In small communities, such as towns and villages, the Jews probably did not know much beyond the bare basics of the Jewish religion.

Finally, the long time span from the sixteenth to the early twentieth century cannot be seen as a bloc. Whereas in the seventeenth century one may speak of highly sophisticated

learning in some Iranian locales, by the early twentieth century, the general level of knowledge seemed to have already declined. In the seventeenth century, Rabbi Yehudah b. Ela'zar's impressive *Hovot Yehudah* addressed the principles of Jewish faith in an innovative and highly sophisticated manner, whereas the early twentieth-century Hakham Moreh's *Derekh Hayim* addressed the same topic in a popular, easy-to-comprehend, and anything-but-innovative manner, which reflects the different communities and readers in the seventeenth century and the early twentieth century. From a climax of learning and knowledge in the seventeenth century, Iran's Jews gradually underwent a decline due to various causes: times of heavy persecution and forced conversions, governmental disposal of their writings, poverty, lack of organized communal

leadership, and to a limited extent, their living in Shi'ite Iran politically detached from adjacent Sunni countries with their centers of Jewish learning. Nevertheless, even as late as the 1920s, Iran's Jewry cannot be viewed as completely detached from rabbinical and Talmudic writings and world. Indeed, their contact with this world has helped them preserve their Jewish identity in the face of challenges and changing circumstances.

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Iraqi Arab-Jewish Identities: First Body Singular

Orit Bashkin

In the years 1921–51, the Iraqi-Jewish community thrived. This religious group, numbering around 120,000 and residing in urban centers for the most part, figured prominently in Iraq's culture and economy. Desiring to cement their status as full-fledged Iraqi citizens, the community's leading thinkers evoked the concept of “the Arab-Jew” in various locations and contexts. Whether by the communists of the League for Combating Zionism or the Jewish nationalists claiming to identify with their Palestinian (as opposed to their Jewish) brethren, the term was frequently used to negotiate the meanings of Jewish national identity in Iraq. The Iraqi educational system, which expanded tremendously during this period and emphasized Arab culture and Arab history as part of its curriculum, had fostered the notion that Iraqi Jews were part of an Arab-Iraqi nation. In this short essay, I raise a few questions relating to the different significations of the concept “the Arab-Jew” in Iraq. To do so, I quote briefly from Shimon Ballas's fascinating autobiography *Be-Guf Rishon* [First Body Singular] (Tel Aviv, 2009). Ballas (b. 1930) joined the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) at the age of 16. In 1951, with the growing persecution of both communists and Jews in Iraq, Ballas immigrated to Israel, where he has explored the Arab-Jewish experience in both Iraq and Israel in works of fiction and nonfiction.

To unpack the problematics of Arab-Jewish identity in Iraq, we need to turn to the terms “Arab” and “Jew.” The Arabic language is typified by dyglosia, namely, by a separation between a classical written language on the one hand, and a variety of colloquial dialects (Iraqi, Egyptian, Algerian, and so on) on the other. In Iraq, a number of Arabic dialects were spoken, including a Baghdadi-Jewish one. Given these linguistic realities, an Arab-Jew could signify a Jew who was able to read and write in Arabic; an educated Jew who was able to understand the Qur'an and appreciate classical and modern Arabic literature and contribute to Iraqi letters; or an illiterate Jew who only spoke a local Jewish-Arabic dialect. Being Jewish also meant various things to different people, as many Jews at the time became secularized. As they joined the ranks of the middle and upper classes, they continued to celebrate Jewish holidays and visit synagogues on the high holidays—yet their leisure practices, the

literature they read, and the social circles in which they moved were increasingly Iraqi and Arab. Other Jews, especially the lower-middle classes and the urban poor, were less exposed to Western education, and remained more religious. How, then, are we to conceptualize their Jewish-Arab identity in a way that takes into account the various meanings of being both Jewish and Arab? Moreover, how are we to determine when one begins to be, or becomes, an Arab-Jew in Iraq: Does it begin when one is born? When one begins schooling? When one begins writing in Arabic? Should we talk of a process of Arabization?

For Ballas, being an Arab Jew was an experience that was mediated first and foremost by Iraq's Arabic print culture. His reading of the works of Egyptian intellectuals, especially Taha Husayn and Samala Musa, the hours he spent reading various Arabic novels and cultural magazines, and his writing of articles for an Egyptian newspaper all helped shape Ballas's worldview as an Arab intellectual. At the same time, this Arab and Iraqi identity was also framed in a Western context: in addition to his French education (as a bilingual product of the *Alliance* school), many of the writers whom Ballas favored belonged to an Arab elite that firmly believed in the power of science, reason, and critical inquiry. This Arab cultural imprint, moreover, remained with Ballas even after he no longer resided in Baghdad. After having lived in Israel for some time and having not read or written in Arabic for almost two years, Ballas happened to look at a book by Taha Husayn just before falling asleep:

After I turned off the light, I was flooded by a wave of Arabic words, phrases, and poetic verses, like a sudden break of a dam, which kept sleep away from me until the light of morning. It was Arabic's revenge on me, I used to tell myself, a punishment I rightly deserved for turning my back on the affectionate, beloved mother tongue.

The tensions between the different components of Arab-Jewish identity do not end at this point. Zionist Iraqis expressed in their Hebrew autobiographies their love of Arab music, cinema, drama, and literature. For their part, Iraqi-Jewish intellectuals who joined the ICP felt that they were part of an Iraqi nation and its Arab culture (despite the

party's critique of Pan-Arabism), and cast their communism as a choice of Iraqi patriotism. Furthermore, in such circles the evocation of religious difference was considered an act of sectarianism, to which secular Iraqi intellectuals (nationalists and communists alike) were vehemently opposed. However, the persecution of Jews within Iraq, and especially the support for Nazi Germany voiced by certain Pan-Arab nationalists, pushed Iraqi Jews towards communism. Often, joining the ICP marked an Iraqi, as opposed to an Arab, choice. Being an Iraqi communist meant seeing the Kurds and the Turkmen, the Shi'is, the Sunnis, and the Christians as comrades in a shared struggle. Thus, although historians speak of Arab-Jewish identity, at times people who do not identify themselves today as Arab-Jews were very much a part of Arab culture, while Iraqi-Jewish communists, although loyal to the party's internationalist, antireligious ideals, joined its ranks because of their Jewish identity.

Ballas's joining of the ICP was motivated by the ICP's nonsectarian vision. He recalls how his bourgeois family objected to his becoming a member of the party of “these barefooted people,” and how he himself came to feel solidarity with, and value the opinions of, Iraqis of various classes through his party activities. Ballas describes his participation in a wave of urban riots in Baghdad in 1948:

These were the days . . . when I marched arm in arm with demonstrators whom I have not known before, and when I loudly called to topple the government of national betrayal, to release political prisoners, and to have free elections...

They [the communists] courageously fought publications that incited against the Jews in the rightwing press. . . . In demonstrations along al-Rashid Street the demonstrators called: “We are the brothers of the Jews; we are the enemies of imperialism and Zionism!” I remember this rare sight, how as the demonstration approached the commercial and banking area, and, as this slogan was chanted by the demonstrators, merchants and bankers, all Jews, came out to the balconies and clapped their hands enthusiastically.

Arab-Iraqi-Jewish identity thus grew out of both national Iraqi and Jewish concerns. On

the one hand, Ballas critiqued what most young Iraqi radicals criticized at the time: the state's comprador, pro-British elite, and its antidemocratic nature, typified by its violations of human and welfare rights. His marching in the anonymous crowd facilitated the feeling that his concerns were also the concerns of the nation. On the other hand, the communist, pro-Jewish position made him proud of his political affiliations, and, moreover, elicited the enthusiastic responses to the ICP on the part of Jewish merchants and bankers, who would not normally support a communist agenda.

Another question related to Arab-Jewish identity is: When does one cease to be an Arab-Iraqi Jew? Some Jewish-Iraqi intellectuals argue that the 1941 anti-Jewish riots, known as the *Farhud*—in which nearly two hundred Jews were killed in the aftermath of a pro-German coup—changed their national visions and caused them to turn their backs on their Arab-Iraqi identity. Others argue that when they immigrated to Israel, they ceased to be Arab-Jews. In the years 1948–67, the realities of the Arab-Israeli conflict rendered Jewish-Arab identity an oxymoron, and hence many Iraqi Jews adopted a Hebrew culture after discarding their Arab cultural heritage. Nonetheless, not all intellectuals went this route: Iraqi-Jewish communists, who joined the Israeli Communist Party, labored to maintain their Arab-Jewish identity. They formed cultural bonds with Palestinian writers, published in Arabic, and organized a literary club dedicated to Arab-Jewish coexistence. In their novels and short stories, they commemorated Arab-Jewish identity in both Iraq and Israel. The works of Shimon Ballas, and his activities within the party, are prime examples of the continuation of the Arab-Jewish project. Writing about his time in the Israeli Communist Party, Ballas, although highly critical of the party's leadership, recalls fondly his first encounter with the Palestinian novelist Emile Habibi; his contributions to the party's literary journal, *al-Jadid*; his meetings with Iraqi-Jewish communists whom he had not known in Iraq; and cultural activities in Arabic organized by Iraqi Jews in Israel in collaboration with other Palestinians.

Jewish intellectuals in Iraq produced a number of literary works in Arabic, and Ba'thi historiography has acknowledged the seminal role played by Jews in the formation of Iraqi literature and culture. While many of the texts by Iraqi Jews owe their survival to Israeli archives (most notably the archive in the Museum for the History of Babylonian Jewry in Or-Yehuda) and have been anthologized

in new editions thanks to the efforts of Iraqi Jews, the newspapers and journals in which these works first appeared and in which they were reviewed and critiqued were based outside of Israel, mostly in Iraq. This created the paradoxical situation in which Iraqi works written by Jews were often inaccessible to Iraqi and Arab researchers, while the ways in which these works were received and consumed could only be reconstructed by Iraqis and other Arab scholars. Tragically, with the ongoing destruction of the Iraqi archives and national libraries since 2004, many of these collections have been lost. Another outcome is that very sympathetic depictions of Arab-Jewish life, expressed in the works of Iraqi Jews such as Ballas, are unavailable to Arab audiences. Many of Ballas's texts, especially his historical novels about Arab-Jewish intellectuals and activists and his evocation of Arabic literary texts within his Hebrew novels would be much appreciated

by contemporary Arabs, but presently have only a Hebrew-speaking audience (or English readers of the works in translation).

The reconstruction of the Baghdadi, Arab, Iraqi, and Jewish experience, which informed Arab-Jewish identities, can therefore be only partial. It can be, and is, carried out by historians, sociologists, and literary scholars who consider the connections between texts, their meanings, and the conditions of their production. It is also carried out by second-generation Mizrahi Jews, and other Israelis sympathetic to the Arab-Jewish agenda. Most importantly, Ballas reminds us that within Israel, people still carry the memories of their Arab pasts.

Orit Bashkin is assistant professor of modern Middle Eastern history at the University of Chicago. She is the author of The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq (Stanford University Press, 2009).

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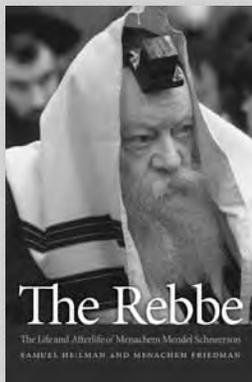
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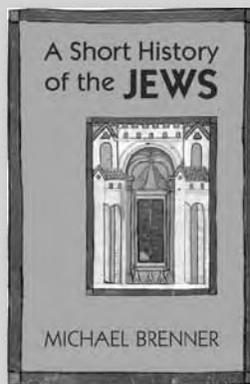
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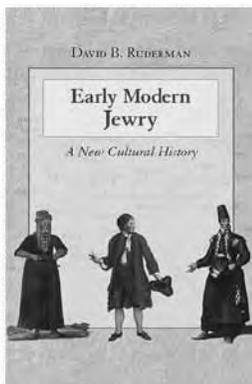
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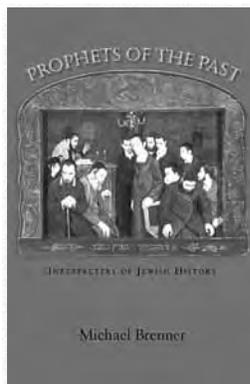
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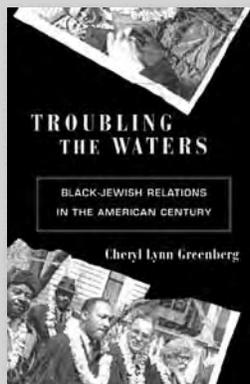
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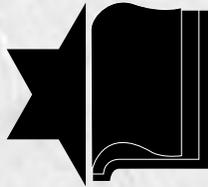
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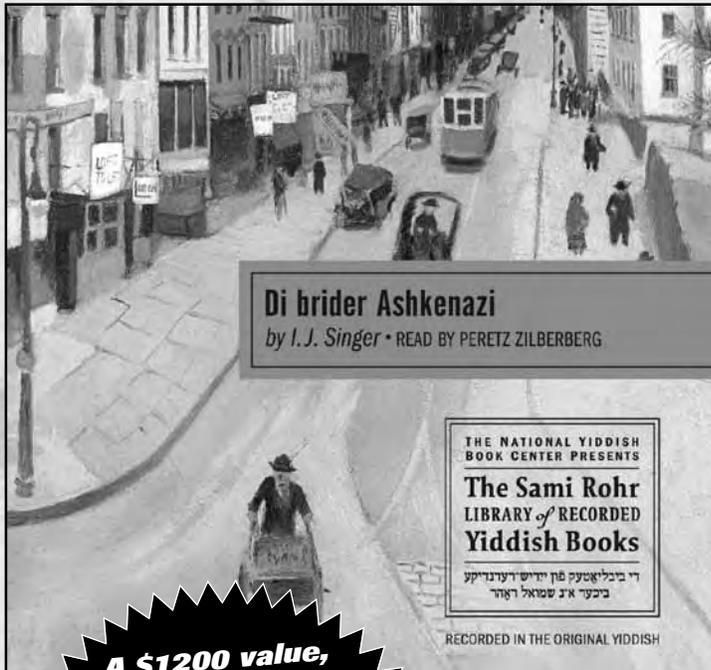
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A Republic of Letters without a Republic?

Lital Levy



Rashid Street, Baghdad, Iraq, 1932. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-matpc-13252.

The Jewish connection to Baghdad is remarkable in its duration and intensity. Ever since the city's founding in the eighth century, Jews have resided in Baghdad continually. At certain points in the early- to mid-twentieth century, Jews formed the largest single ethnic sector within the city's multiethnic population. As the major center of Middle Eastern Jewish cultural modernity in the twentieth century, Baghdad enjoyed a wealth of Jewish schools, clubs, cultural institutions, and a local Jewish press. This rich history came to an abrupt end in the years immediately following 1948, when the Arab defeat and loss of Palestine led to an anti-Jewish backlash, orchestrated in part through the government and media.

From 1950–1951, some 120,000 Jews—approximately 90 percent of the total Iraqi-Jewish community (of whom the majority were Baghdadis)—left for Israel and the West in what Israel called Operation Ezra and Nehemiah and what the emigrants called the *tasqit* (shorthand for *tasqit al-jinsiyya*, the forfeiture

of Iraqi citizenship required for exit). Iraq's few thousand remaining Jews would gradually follow, most fleeing the country after the Ba'th-sponsored repression of 1969–71, leaving only some twenty or thirty Jews in the capital to witness the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. Whereas in 1950 there were some sixty synagogues in the city, by 1960 that number had been reduced to seven; the last functioning synagogue, in Betawwiyin (once a largely Jewish neighborhood), has been closed since the 2003 war due to security considerations.

Nissim Rejwan begins his memoir *The Last Jews in Baghdad* (2004) with the following lines:

It has often been said that New York is a Jewish city. I think one can safely say the same about Baghdad of the first half of the twentieth century. At the time of writing, barely twenty Jews, most of them elderly, live in my hometown. The one monument these Jews have left is a

synagogue where, as their ancestors did from time immemorial, they keep praying for “the welfare of the city,” as Jews in the Babylonian diaspora were bidden to do by the Prophet Jeremiah some three millennia ago. For those who, like myself, were born, grew up, and lived in Baghdad in the years preceding the mass exodus of Jews from Iraq in 1950–1951, this state of affairs is extremely hard to imagine.

The last two decades, however, have seen an unprecedented “return” of Jews to Baghdad in the form of novels, poems, documentary films, and memoirs. For these voyages of memory, Baghdadi-Jewish authors have utilized Arabic, Hebrew, French, and English, often reflecting the French and English influences many of the writers imbibed as students in Baghdad's elite Jewish schools.

The memoir has proved an especially popular route of return. Memoirs of life in Baghdad have been written by Naim Kattan (French, 1975; English, 1980; reprinted 2005);

Anwar Shaul (Arabic, 1980); Yizhak Bar Moshe (Arabic, 1988); Esther Mercado (English, 1994; Hebrew, 1995); David 'Ivri (Hebrew, 2002); Sabiha Abdavid (English, 2003); Salim Fattal (Hebrew, 2003); Nissim Rejwan (English, 2004); Sasson Somekh (Hebrew, 2004; English, 2007); Badri Fattal (Hebrew, 2005); Esperance Cohen (Hebrew, 2008); Violette Shamash (English, 2008); and most recently, Shimon Ballas (Hebrew, 2009). It is striking that this list of memoirs (which is not exhaustive) contains a relatively high proportion of writings by women. Aside from the memoirs, related books in English include a 2009 collection of interviews with Iraqi Jews, edited by Morad, Shasha, and Shasha; Ariel Sabar's 2008 award-winning memoir of his father's life in Kurdish Iraq; a 2006 cross-genre fiction and memoir by Marina Benjamin; and a 2000 autobiographical novel by Mona Yahya, an Anglophone Iraqi-Jewish writer in Germany (also the only work focusing on Jewish life in Baghdad in the post-*tasqit* period). These books are complemented by documentary films on the Iraqi-Jewish past, the best known of which, *Forget Baghdad* (2002), was directed not by an Iraqi Jew, but by an Iraqi-born Swiss director of Shi'i ancestry. Documentary films on the Iraqi-Jewish experience have been made also by the Israel-born director Duki Dror and the Iraqi-born Canadian director Joe Balass, both of Baghdadi-Jewish background.

Given that the authors of the memoirs all left Baghdad as adolescents or young adults, their experience of the city is directly tied to their coming of age. Collectively, these narratives of childhood and adolescence create a lingua franca of shared experiences and places: sleeping on the roof on hot summer nights (Sami Mikhael dubs Baghdad "the city of rooftops"); Suq el-Hannuni, the noisy and bustling Jewish market; Rashid Street (then elegant, now decrepit), with its sidewalk colonnade of white columns; Egyptian musicals playing to adoring crowds in new cinemas; swimming in the Tigris (several male writers mention swimming from shore to shore as a Baghdadi rite of passage); picnics enjoyed on the river islands that emerged in the hot summer months. For budding writers such as Somekh, Rejwan, and Ballas, the experience of the city is also a discovery of its intellectual life, and so the excitement of the Baghdadi literary arena of the 1930s and 1940s colors their narratives. Above all, these works depict both the life cycle and the human subordination to nature epitomized by the then-mighty Tigris, whose central presence and whose seasonal rhythms

defined the life of the city. Yet a subterranean current also runs through these Baghdadi-Jewish writings: that of an intense ambivalence on the part of the narrators (of memoirs and novels alike) toward the home from which they were essentially exiled. Jewish writings on Baghdad express a profound sense of identification interlaced with alienation—a kind of psychic split that culminates in the experience of witnessing the disintegration of Jewish life in the city in 1950–51 as the Jewish community departed en masse for Israel and the West.

In the aftermath of the 2003 war and intense sectarian violence of 2006–07, and continuing through the contested 2010 elections, Iraqi society appears to be disintegrating, breaking up into homogenous sectarian enclaves. In retrospect, the departure of the Jews from Iraq seems eerily prescient of the end of a multiethnic, cosmopolitan Iraq. All the while, Jewish writings on pre-1950s Baghdad continue to appear. Few of them mention present-day Iraq. But whether or not they acknowledge it, these works are intrinsically connected to present-day Iraq. To begin, their publication was facilitated largely by the post-1991 (and especially post-2003) surge of interest in Iraqi history and society, which created a writer's market, especially for history and memoir. One telling illustration is the reprinting of Naim Qattan's *Farewell, Babylon*,

which was out of print for decades and then reissued in 2005 with a new introduction. The publication of memoirs can also be attributed in part to the current high demand for this genre. As for the books published in Israel, the post-1993 sociocultural shifts in Israel created space for a new kind of discourse on the Arab-Jewish past, one markedly less indebted to the Zionist metanarrative and more open to other histories and forms of affiliation.

The two Gulf Wars marked turning points in Iraq's history, and the latter definitively marked the "end of an era." The 2003 U.S. invasion also seems to have catalyzed the Jewish textual "return" to the Iraq of yore, for several reasons. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the Ba'th party inspired short-lived but fervent hopes of return visits by Iraqi Jews after a half century of exile—hopes that were quickly dashed by the rise of the insurgency. For Iraqi Jews, the war's bloody aftermath marked the final impossibility of return. The remaining Jews who came of age in Baghdad and remember it in detail will most likely pass away before it is possible for Israelis (or safe for other Jews) to visit Iraq. This realization imparts a sense of double urgency to the act of memoir writing: first, because it is only in texts that they can "return" and second, because this return must take place before it is too late.



Rashid Street, Baghdad, Iraq, 2008. Photo by Wikimedia Commons user Zztriple2000.

It should be noted that the view of Iraq's past celebrated in these memoirs happens to dovetail with the neoliberal vision for Iraq's future advocated by the architects of the 2003 war. Regardless of one's position on the war and its aftermath, however, the fact of the matter is that in the halcyon days of Jewish life in Baghdad, the city was a thoroughly multiethnic and pluralistic space, and that it is becoming increasingly less so. The memoirs' obvious nostalgia for a cosmopolitan, multiethnic Baghdad is perhaps implicitly, if not explicitly, contrasted by a recognition of Iraq's current harsh and tragic realities. Yet the authors seem to see their experiences as relevant only to Iraq-of-the-past, without consideration of what their memories might imply, if anything, for the country's present and future. The very condition of these texts' enunciation—that is, the surge in popular interest in Iraq, its history, and society—is also the context with which they neglect to engage. In this way, the Iraqi-Jewish experience becomes curiously self-contained, as though it is the cultural patrimony of the Iraqi-Jewish diaspora, to the exclusion of other Iraqi peoples.

One might understandably protest: But is it relevant? If most Iraqi Jews parted ways with their homeland about sixty years ago, why should one expect them to maintain any sort of connection with a nation that has been hurtling along a vastly different cultural and political trajectory, one that seems to be divorced from the Jewish past? There might also be the temptation to contrast this situation with other historic contexts marked by rupture; to ask, for instance, what memoiristic writings of German Jews about Weimar Berlin might have to do with contemporary Germany. And furthermore, what about the flip side of this equation: Who in Iraq today remembers the Jews and their presence in Baghdad? What kind of interest do non-Jewish-Iraqi writers hold in the lost Iraqi-Jewish past? How, if at all, have Iraqis (both Jewish and non-Jewish) imagined Jews in the Iraqi present or recent past?

'Ali Bader, a young Iraqi writer (of Shi'i background) now living in exile in Brussels, has employed Jewish characters or made use of the Iraqi-Jewish past in at least two of his novels, *Papa Sartre* (Arabic, 2001; English trans., 2009), a satire on Iraqi philosophers in the 1950s and 1960s, and *Haris al-Tibgh* (The Tobacco Keeper, 2008) which narrates the life of a Jewish musician who was killed under mysterious circumstances in 2006. Another Iraqi expatriate, Khalid Kishtainy, has also frequently invoked the Iraqi-Jewish past. Sami Michael, the leading Iraqi-born,

Hebrew-language writer, drew extensively upon the pre-1950 Iraqi-Jewish past in his earlier novels; but his 2008 novel *Aida*, set in Ba'athist Iraq, focuses on a Jewish television writer in 1990s Baghdad. As Sasson Somekh notes, both Bader's and Michael's characters are historical impossibilities. Yet the authorial creation of fictional Jews living in contemporary Iraq indicates a desire to envision Jews as part of the Iraqi present and future. As for memoirs, they are written as records of the past intended for future generations. To be sure, the Iraqi-Jewish memoirs, rich and nuanced as they are, offer a valuable refutation of dominant narratives and simplistic claims concerning Jewish life in Arab countries. But in twenty years, to whom will the experiences of Iraqi Jews, bound up as they are with that more cosmopolitan period of Iraqi history, be most relevant? I wager that the answer may not be the descendants of the Iraqi-Jewish émigrés themselves, but rather a generation of Iraqis that, emerging from the rubble of totalitarianism, dictatorship, war, and occupation, must take stock of and make sense of the history of modern Iraq and all the communities who have been part of it.

The ambiguous relationship of the Iraqi-Jewish past to the Iraqi national future is best illustrated by the bizarre story of the Iraqi Jewish Archive, which has received considerable publicity. In May 2003, U.S. troops seeking weapons of mass destruction waded into the basement of the former secret police (*Mukhabarat*) headquarters, which was flooded with sewage water. They found not weapons, but a cache of books, photographs, and documents—many of them printed in Hebrew. These included, inter alia, a 1568 prayer book, a damaged Torah scroll, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century books on Jewish law and commentaries, and fifty copies of a Hebrew-Arabic children's primer. The soldiers immediately realized they had stumbled across a treasure whose survival now hung in a very soggy balance. Inquiries revealed that these were private materials pilfered over many years from the Jewish community.

None other than Ahmad Chalabi, along with his friend Harold Krueger, a Jewish-American businessman, provided funds to drain the basement. The materials were dried in the sun, leading to mold, a preservationist's nightmare. They were subsequently packed into twenty-seven trunks, then loaded into a freezer truck to prevent further damage. Conservationists determined that the materials needed to be freeze-dried prior to restoration; with the agreement of the Iraqis, the trunks

were transported to a Texas facility for freezing. From there, they were shipped to the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland, where they were photographed and lightly cleaned.

The archive was supposed to be returned to Iraq within a few years. However, extensive preservation work is still required, the archive has not been digitized, and the necessary funds are lacking. In the meantime, the heads of the Babylonian Jewry Heritage Center in Israel have claimed the archive for their museum, arguing that its contents were stolen from the Jewish community, whose members and descendants are now mostly in Israel, and who would be denied access to the archive were it returned to Iraq. However, the documents were removed from Iraq under an agreement that stipulated their future repatriation, and Iraqi officials have made clear that they view the archive as an important part of Iraq's cultural patrimony. In January 2010, Saad Eskander, the director of the Iraq National Library and Archives, told the Associated Press that the archives are needed to "show it to our people that Baghdad was always multiethnic," and to help them come to grips with their complex history.

Both the archive's convoluted path from Baghdad to Texas to Washington D.C. and its contested final destination raise questions of a political nature. First, why was such special attention given to these Jewish materials while important documents and books belonging to the Iraq National Library and Archives, which sustained catastrophic and irreparable damage, were neglected? And second, to whom do these documents now belong—if not legally, then morally? Beyond their most immediate political relevance, though, both questions also touch upon the relationship of the Iraqi-Jewish past to the Iraqi national present: a question that, to my knowledge, has not been addressed in a public forum, but which deserves consideration and debate. If and when Iraq achieves security, political stability, and genuine independence from the U.S., questions of the past—and the need to reckon with a new national narrative—will undoubtedly occupy a prominent place in its civil society, and Baghdad's Jewish legacy will inevitably play a role therein.

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A Fruit That Asks Questions: Michael Rakowitz's Shipment of Iraqi Dates

Jenny Gheith



Michael Rakowitz, *Return* (Brooklyn), October–December, 2006. Davisons & Co. import/export company, 529 Atlantic Avenue Brooklyn, NY. Courtesy of the artist and Lombard-Freid Projects.

Michael Rakowitz (American, b. 1973) is an artist of Iraqi-Jewish descent whose work questions social and political systems through projects that have included inflatable homeless shelters crafted out of plastic bags and research into the ties between fictional fantasy and modern warfare, for example Saddam Hussein's regime and *Star Wars*. While shopping at Sahadi's, a Middle Eastern grocery store in Brooklyn, Rakowitz purchased a can of date syrup, a product that would lead to a cultural artwork with global implications. In the artwork, this staple of Iraqi-Jewish traditions would elucidate American and Iraqi trade restrictions, the current plight of Iraqis and U.S. soldiers abroad, and unite strangers behind a shipment of fruit.

When the owner of the store Charlie Sahadi, a friend of Rakowitz's, mentioned, "Your mother's going to love this. It's from Baghdad," a piece of this previously unknown trade network unfolded. Sahadi explained that while the label on the container read: "Product of Lebanon," the syrup is actually pressed in Iraq, sent to Syria for packaging, and finally

onto Lebanon where it is exported. This convoluted system surprised Rakowitz, because sanctions that were put in place in 1990 were lifted in May of 2003; however, imports into the United States from Iraq are subjected to "intensive search" and examined by the United States Department of Agriculture and the Food and Drug Administration prior to release.

A longtime symbol of good things to come in the Muslim and Jewish faiths, dates have an extensive social and economic history in Iraq. Besides being an important cultural signifier, in the 1970s dates were Iraq's largest export after oil. They are also tied directly to the fruit's production in the United States: when the California industry began in the early 1900s, Iraqi seeds were planted. In Iraq, however, dates have been a casualty of recent conflicts. Orchards were dramatically affected in the 1980s by the Iran-Iraq War, and in recent years the trees have suffered from a fungus caused by depleted uranium from bombshells.

In order to explore this issue further, Rakowitz decided to import one ton of

Khestawi dates from the Iraqi city of Al Hilla, formerly Babel, and sell them at a storefront on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, the heart of New York's Arab community. Continuing a project that he initiated in 2004 entitled *Return*, Rakowitz reinstated Davisons & Co., his Iraqi-Jewish grandfather's import-export business that existed first in Baghdad and later in New York City when his family fled Iraq in 1946. With funding from Creative Time, a nonprofit organization that commissions and produces public art projects, *Return* was scheduled to open on October 1, 2006 and close two months later. Perfectly timed with the harvest that would begin at the end of September, Rakowitz submitted the official order on September 7th through Sahadi's Specialty and Fine Foods and the Baghdad-based Al Farez Co. Before the store opened, Rakowitz received his first order from a man in Detroit who read his advertisement in an Arab-American newspaper in Dearborn, Michigan—the home of the largest Iraqi population in the U.S. As a way of keeping his customers and the general public updated, Rakowitz wrote a daily blog on his website and signed people up for a listserv. Knowing that the shipment would produce charges beyond the initial price, Rakowitz would sell the dates at a cost that would reflect the fees incurred through the process.

Dates were the centerpiece of *Return* and were visible throughout the store—as California varieties that originated in Iraqi seeds, items on the shelves such as ma'amoul cookies, and in their own historical timeline researched by Rakowitz. But it was *Iraqi* dates that were at issue, a fact that was prominently announced by a sign in the window: "We Sell Iraqi Dates." Hoping to create a space for people to engage with larger issues that surrounded his proposal, the artist explained, "if the dates were available and were relatively easy to import, there would be no reason to build a project around their purchase. Ultimately, the cultural invisibility in the U.S. of all things Iraqi outside the context of war (i.e., there are no Iraqi restaurants in New York City) served as a point of departure for this work."

Soon after the store "opened for business," a small community formed in anticipation of



Michael Rakowitz, *Return* (Brooklyn), October–December, 2006. Davisons & Co. import/export company, 529 Atlantic Avenue Brooklyn, NY. Courtesy of the artist and Lombard-Freid Projects.

the first shipment of Iraqi dates. It was scheduled to arrive in mid-October, but it never did. The dates were denied passage at the Jordanian border after sitting for days alongside Iraqis fleeing the intensifying situation. The shipment was then driven to Syria and finally spoiled after additional delays at the Damascus airport. A few weeks earlier, Rakowitz's contact at Al Farez in Baghdad had himself fled to Amman, Jordan with his family. This was an important realization for the artist as his contact was now an exile trying to transport dates overseas to other members of the Iraqi diaspora. Rakowitz explained, "The dates suddenly became a surrogate, traveling the same path as Iraqi refugees. . . . So, suddenly, a business that was meant to illuminate something very specific on the U.S. side of the transaction was illustrating a story that most people in the States were not hearing, and the store became a place where that crisis and its affiliated narrative were being disseminated—hardly the exchange a customer would expect."

A second plan for a shipment of dates finally was successful. It involved the airlift of a handful of boxes out of Baghdad and their shipment via DHL first to an airport in Egypt and then on to New York. This time, the dates remained unscathed; but the route was once again circuitous, including a delay of twenty-one days due to U.S. Customs, Homeland Security, USFDA, and USDA. Quarantined and designated for intensive search, the shipment was picked up by Rakowitz on December 5. With reporters waiting, Rakowitz brought the dates to his store in boxes designed by Al Farez Co. that declared their identity and history

through images that included the lion of Babylon and the Ishtar gate. To the best of Rakowitz's knowledge, these were the first Iraqi products clearly labeled as such that had been legally imported into the United States in almost thirty years.

In the end Rakowitz received ten boxes of dates including four varieties: Azraq, Ashrase, Ibraheme, and Kheyara. The final cost to his customers was \$8 a quarter pound. Reporters from *The New York Times*, CBS, and NPR's *Weekend America* covered *Return*; *CBS Evening News* and Comedy Central's *Colbert Report* expressed interest. The dates were purchased

by a wide range of customers with varying motivations: among them was a Muslim attending Ramadan prayers at a local mosque, an American who wanted to send the dates to a friend stationed in Baghdad who had never eaten Iraqi food, a woman who was interested in importing honey from Kurdistan, and an Iraqi exile who had not eaten a date from his homeland in forty-six years. In the eleven weeks that Davisons & Co. was open in Brooklyn there were many changes in Iraq: Saddam Hussein was sentenced to death, and Donald Rumsfeld resigned as Secretary of Defense. The project had impacted Americans and Iraqis on both sides, providing a new understanding of cultural trade and relations. After the project commenced Rakowitz reflected, "Getting these Iraqi dates was so much about authenticity. Creating a suture, or prosthetic, that could be created for those who can never go back, or for those who will never go but have this irrevocable relationship to Iraq now, just as Americans." *Return* proved that international communities can form and unite over something as seemingly small as a piece of fruit.

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Michael Rakowitz, *Return* (Brooklyn), October–December, 2006. Davisons & Co. import/export company, 529 Atlantic Avenue Brooklyn, NY. Courtesy of the artist and Lombard-Freid Projects.

JAPS: Jewish American Persian Women and Their Hybrid Identity in America

Saba Tova Soomekh

A large house in Beverly Hills has turned into a nightclub, celebrating a graduation, an anniversary, a birthday, or no specific event at all. There is a large bar serving alcoholic drinks. There is a sushi chef at one corner making all the popular rolls and sashimi while on the other side beef and chicken kabobs are being grilled and served with numerous rice dishes. The DJ is spinning hip-hop and Persian, Arabic, and Latin music, while young Iranians are dancing and flirting on the dance floor. The majority of guests in attendance are Iranian Jews, with a couple of token “white” people. All the guests have grown up with each other in the same community, and if they have not, then they know each other from the numerous parties similar to this. The girls are all dressed in the latest fashions. They size each other up; they are looking at each other’s clothes and accessories and watching who is dancing seductively, who is drunk, and who is secretly dating. Married women come to these parties with their husbands in order to dress up, have fun, and get away from the kids. For single women this is the place to flirt, dance, and socialize in hopes of finding a husband.

A large community of Iranian Jews has been living in Los Angeles for more than twenty-five years and while the community has maintained its insularity, the children of Iranian-Jewish immigrants were born or have grown up in Los Angeles. Thus, unlike their parents, a majority of the children only know life in America. Most only know Iran through the romanticized stories of their parents and elder family members. They do not live in the same physical space or the same sociocultural landscape of their parents’ youth, and few of them are able to read and write Persian. Yet, Iranian-Jewish culture is a major aspect of their lives. Given these sometimes competing cultural forces, first-generation Iranian Jews have learned how to balance multiple identities—those of an American, a Jew, and an Iranian.

Ethnic Incorporation

Ethnic incorporation into American social life has been historically defined by two modes of thinking. One mode believes that

assimilation is inevitable and cultures will eventually be absorbed into mainstream white society, with ethnic identities eventually fading into a “twilight of ethnicity.” The other mode believes that regardless of the level of acculturation or socioeconomic attainment, ethnic groups will resist blending into the majority and instead experience persistently high social distances in intergroup relations and discrimination. Young Iranian-Jewish women have not completely assimilated into American society nor have they socially distanced themselves from it; instead, they have formed a hybrid identity that has allowed them to pick and choose aspects of American society while still maintaining their Iranian-Jewish identity. In many instances, they have reclaimed Iranian-Jewish cultural beliefs and added their own Western interpretations.

In this article, I will look at how American culture shapes young Iranian-Jewish women as they negotiate their identity and construct their own cultural world. From 2004 to 2006 I interviewed forty Iranian-Jewish women between the ages of 18 and 35. These women were born in either Iran or America and were raised and currently live in Los Angeles. As a member of the Iranian-Jewish community in Los Angeles, I asked women I knew from the community and also depended on other women to introduce me to my interviewees. I would meet these ladies either in my home, their home, or at coffee shops and cafés. The interviews would last anywhere from one to two hours, in which time I would casually ask them a series of questions. These women are in the process of a cultural syncretism and mixing that produces a hybrid identity which allows them to live in plural worlds revolving around their Iranian-Jewish culture, their American landscape, and their gender. Whether or not they realize it, they are appropriating a more egalitarian lifestyle while still respecting and paying homage to their parents and culture.

Najeeb

The common academic perception of female sexuality in America seems to emphasize personal and social independence, sexual experimentation, and sexual maturity. However, this is not the case for first-generation

Iranian-Jewish women who are raised by immigrant parents and a community that does not encourage social independence and sexual experimentation. Iranian-Jewish women are raised to be *najeeb*. The Persian word *najeeb* is translated as pure, sweet, and virginal. This word is used specifically for women when discussing virginity, or lack of sexual experience. A woman in the Iranian-Jewish community is supposed to be a virgin when she gets married. In addition, she is not supposed to have boyfriends and is only allowed to date with the intent of marriage. This word also connotes virginal qualities—those of a woman who is docile, domestic, sweet, and unknowing of the world. The young women I interviewed all said their parents raised them to be *najeeb*.

Many of the young women said sexuality was never discussed in their homes, it was simply assumed that Iranian-Jewish girls must be *najeeb*. While many of my interviewees’ mothers never openly discussed the values and beliefs about sexuality with their daughters, all the young women knew what was considered proper behavior through comments their mothers had made. Most of my interviewees are not virgins, even the ones whose mothers specifically discussed sexual matters with them. Many of my interviewees felt that maintaining their virginity was an outdated belief and, because many young women are getting married at a later age, that remaining a virgin was not only unnecessary but nearly impossible.

The main reason why mothers told their daughters they must be *najeeb* is fear of their daughters getting a bad reputation in the Iranian-Jewish community. Rebecca, a 19-year-old student, said that her mother discussed the proper way for her to act. “She told me that I have to be modest because people are watching you in the Persian community and other people’s opinions matter a lot. It matters what they think; you are always in the public eye.” In an insular community where everyone knows the details of one another’s business and personal lives, it becomes important for parents to make sure their daughters act appropriately and follow the rules and standards of the community. Parents want to ensure that their daughters do not get a bad

reputation, because it can ruin their chances of marriage and tarnish the family name.

Iranian-Jewish Values

The concept of an unmarried woman being *najeeb* is so important for Iranian Jews that traits that are valued in American culture such as independence are seen as a threat to her *najeebness*. Typically, American parents teach their children to be self-reliant, and the children grow up and move out, establishing households of their own. In contrast, the traditional Iranian-Jewish family is characterized by role prescriptions, family obligations, hierarchal relations, intense emotional expressiveness, and collectivist values. These values contrast sharply with the emphasis on individualism, self-sufficiency, egalitarianism, and self-development in mainstream American culture. Immigrant children tend to quickly adopt American values and standards, which can create great schisms and challenges to parental control and authority.

One trait many of the interviewees appropriated from American culture is the desire for more independence. However, the prevailing belief in the Iranian-Jewish community holds that if a woman shows any sign of independence from her family, such as wanting to move away to college or live on her own before marriage, it is assumed that she is not *najeeb*, and she is immediately stigmatized.

While the idea of a young woman living on her own is new for many immigrant communities, in America after World War II, it became increasingly common for adult children to move out of their parents' home before marriage. The trend continued throughout the 1960s and 1970s. By the 1980s, this new life course pattern had become normative for young adults. This new pattern changed the relationships between parents and children, since premarital residential independence reduces parental influence over the daily lives of their children. Whether it is the fear of waning influence on their daughter's life, a fear of community gossip about their daughter's *najeebness*, or a fear that the community will assume there is something wrong with the family that has caused their daughter to move away from them, parents do not encourage or allow their daughters to live on their own before marriage. This has made many of my interviewees feel that the rules placed on them are too confining, only further fueling their desire to move away and live on their own.

Generational Conflicts

There is a clear disagreement between the two generations about the significance of the community, one's reputation, and the influence of parents. Iranian-Jewish mothers were heavily dependent on their reputation and family name in order to marry a husband from a reputable family. Their parents had more of a say in their children's lives than the younger generation. Thus, if a man's mother did not approve of a potential wife, he most likely did not marry her. Many first-generation girls refused to allow others to dictate their lives; they believed that if a man is so heavily influenced by his mother and "does not have a mind of his own or a backbone to fight back," then he is not worth being with.

The larger issue is how much influence first-generation Iranian-Jewish women want their parents, specifically their mothers, to have in their lives. This is one of the most difficult and sensitive issues within the community. The traditional Iranian-Jewish

family, like most Middle Eastern families, is extremely tight knit and parents have ultimate control over the lives of their children, especially their daughters. This is a community where one does not move out of their parents' home until married and whom a woman marries is heavily dependent on her parents' approval. However, these parents are raising their children in America, a country that encourages independence. This has caused strife within the family unit.

Many first-generation women challenge the amount of influence their parents have on their lives. As one of my interviewees, a 22-year-old college student, explained: "I just want to tell my mother to butt out of my life and to live her own life and not fixate on mine so much." Within the Iranian culture it is strictly taboo and considered extremely disrespectful for children to tell parents to mind their own business and to not interfere in their lives. In an insular community where everyone's life is everyone's business,

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it is assumed that the opinion, rules, and regulations of one's parents should not only be appropriated, but also appreciated.

The mothers of these young women told me that one of the hardest aspects of raising children in America is the lack of respect and reverence for parents; they fear their children have been influenced by that mentality. Their own parents had complete control over their lives, and they never disrespected, refuted, or questioned any of their rules and opinions. As parents themselves, they now feel they have less control and influence over their own children, who have been influenced by American culture, and they find this new relationship to be not only threatening but also sad.

Reclaiming the Meaning of *Najeeb*

While most of my interviewees have an issue with the traditional meaning of behind the word *najeeb*, there is a group of women who has reclaimed this word and assigned a new and more culturally appropriate meaning to

it. Neda, a 34-year-old realtor, explained what it means to be *najeeb*. She believes this word “does not have to connote a woman who is a virgin and timid, but instead, a woman who is *najeeb* has self-respect. It doesn't necessarily mean that she denies herself life experiences and doesn't date or have intimate relationships with men, but instead, it means that she respects herself as a woman; she knows where to draw the line and how to demand that men respect her. In our mothers' generation, an unmarried woman was either *najeeb* or a slut. They didn't understand that you could be intimate with someone and still maintain your self-respect. That is what a *najeeb* woman is to me. It is a new definition that fits into the culture that we are living in. I want to take all the negative association out of this word and use it to empower women as opposed to demoting them.”

Some of the more religiously observant interviewees define *najeeb* within a religious context and believe it should not only be used for women, but the new definition

should also describe a man's character. One interviewee said that “both men and women should be humble and respectful to themselves, their bodies, and to each other. It shouldn't just be the woman who is humble, selfless, and respectful of her body, but he should be too. I think there should be more equality between men and women in our community and a guy should be *najeeb* along with his wife.” There is no Persian translation for the word *feminist*, but what these young women are doing is reinterpreting the concept of *najeeb* in order to fit into a more modern and American concept of womanhood, while maintaining the Iranian-Jewish standard of self-respect and moral integrity.

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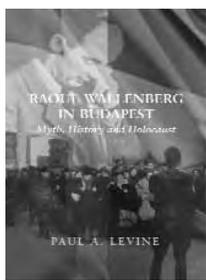
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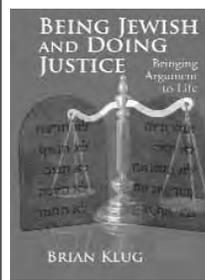
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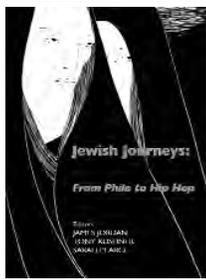


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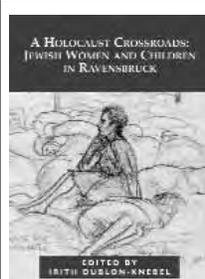


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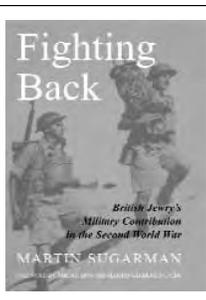
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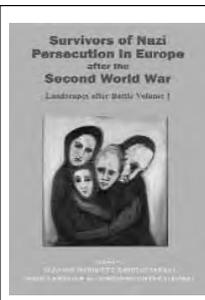
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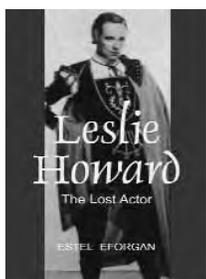
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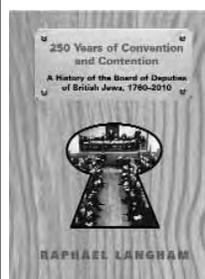
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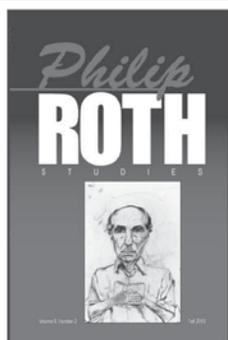
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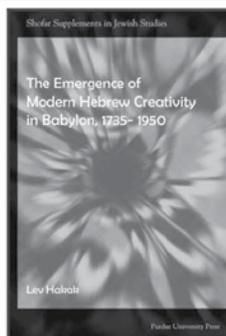


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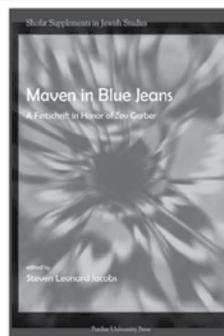
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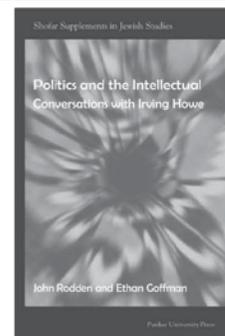
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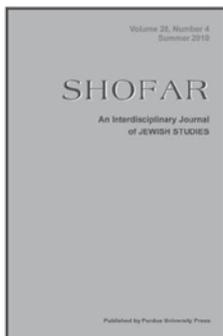
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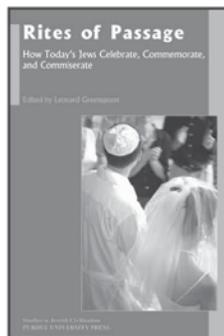
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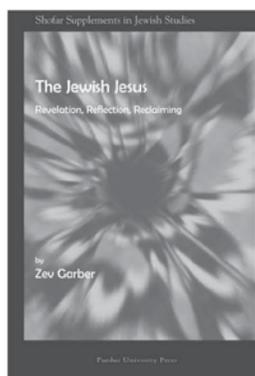


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Engagement, Diplomacy, and Iran's Nuclear Program

Brandon Friedman

Iran's nuclear program is a grave concern to Israel, but also to the Arab Middle East and the international community, including the United States, the European Union, Russia, and China.

Iran's Arab neighbors are concerned that a nuclear Iran will use its status as a nuclear power to establish regional hegemony and continue to interfere in their domestic politics. The international community fears that a nuclear Iran would prompt a regional arms race and lead to nuclear proliferation throughout the Gulf region. Even China, which has pursued a more moderate line with respect to Iran's nuclear program, has acknowledged that nuclear proliferation in the Gulf region poses a threat to its energy security.

Israel's security concerns regarding a potential nuclear Iran are more immediate and nuanced than is often articulated in the popular media. Iran currently provides cash, arms, military training, and other forms of critical support to Hezbollah in southern Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, whom Israel has fought in serious military engagements in 2006 (Lebanon) and late 2008 (Gaza). The threat of Iran transferring nuclear materials or technology to Hezbollah, Hamas, or other militant groups on Israel's borders is a serious security concern for Israel.

Further, since 2005, Iran's current president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has used inflammatory political rhetoric to repeatedly delegitimize and threaten Israel's existence. It would seem that President Ahmadinejad and the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, in the spirit of Ayatollah Khomeini's ideology, believe that a just solution for the Palestinians is the elimination of the Jewish State of Israel. This is the view of many officials in the Islamic Republic who believe that Zionism is part of Western imperialist designs against Islam, which are supported by an unjust, American-led international system.

On October 26, 2005, in Tehran, Ahmadinejad gave a speech at a student conference in which he called for the elimination of Israel for the first time (literally: "this Jerusalem occupying regime must vanish from the pages of time"). This language was not new in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Indeed, Hossein Shariatmadari, the editor of the Iranian daily newspaper *Kayhan* and

advisor to the Supreme Leader, stated, "The honorable President has said nothing new about Israel that would justify all this political commotion . . . We declare explicitly that we will not be satisfied with anything less than the complete obliteration of the Zionist regime from the political map of the world."

It is argued that Ahmadinejad uses such foreign policy bombast instrumentally to (1) solidify domestic political support from his base of hard-line religious figures; (2) outmaneuver domestic political opponents by publicly dictating the tone and direction of Iran's foreign policy; (3) create a leadership role for Iran in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which provides Iran with regional prestige and geopolitical leverage vis-à-vis negotiations with the West; and (4) generate popularity for the Islamic Republic among the populations of the Arab states whose leaders are supported by the West, therefore creating domestic pressure on Arab leaders to act more aggressively on the Palestinian-Israeli issue. These arguments, despite their pragmatic rationale, fuel Israeli concerns that Iran would use its nuclear leverage to further undermine Israeli security in pursuit of its own regional gains.

Perhaps the most apocalyptic scenario for Israel was articulated in December 2001, when former Iranian president Rafsanjani, while leading a Friday prayer service in Tehran, threatened Israel with nuclear destruction and said "if one day, the Islamic world is also equipped with weapons like those that Israel possesses now, then the imperialists' strategy will reach a standstill because the use of even one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything. However, it will only harm the Islamic world. It is not irrational to contemplate such an eventuality." Rafsanjani's ambiguous remarks alluded to the regime's perception that Israel is the West's imperial bridgehead in the region, which could be eliminated by using a nuclear weapon against it. Iran's undisclosed uranium enrichment facility at Natanz was exposed in 2002, and since then, Iran's steady march toward nuclear capability has been thoroughly documented but not deterred by the United Nations (U.N.) and the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) diplomatic initiatives.

In 1978, Joseph Nye who chaired the U.S. National Security Council Group on

Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons argued that a "confrontation versus cooperation" dichotomy mischaracterizes the nuclear proliferation challenge as adversarial, when, "in fact, nonproliferation policy is much more like a large construction project than an adversary contest." He went on to claim that it may "never follow the precise blueprints of its architects, which will always need a degree of improvisation and adjustment. But it is to be judged by whether it is in fact advancing toward the kind of result laid out as its long-term goal." There has been little progress since March 2009 despite the international community's repeated attempts to engage Iran and find a compromise to the diplomatic impasse.

The most serious glimmer of progress emerged during talks that took place in Geneva and Vienna in October 2009. It appeared that Iran had accepted a deal outlined during meetings with representatives of the IAEA and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council: U.S., France, Great Britain, Russia, and China—plus Germany) to ship most (approximately 80 percent) or 2,600 pounds of its 3.5 percent low-enriched uranium to Russia, where it would be enriched to approximately 20 percent and shipped back to Iran in the form of metal rods to be used to manufacture medical isotopes. This process of enriching Iran's low-enriched uranium in Russia was to take approximately one year during which the international community would have the time to work with Iran to craft a more permanent arrangement to safeguard and monitor Iran's nuclear fuel. It would also provide the international community with the peace of mind that in the interim, Iran would not be secretly enriching its uranium for other purposes. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was also reported to have backed this deal, despite Israel's opposition, in principle, to Iran's domestic uranium enrichment activities. Iranian president Ahmadinejad also indicated his support for this deal during a late October speech he delivered in Mashad. He said, "We welcome exchange of fuel, technical cooperation and construction of power plants and reactors. We are ready for cooperation." However, in the two months following the preliminary agreements outlined in Geneva and Vienna in October 2009, Iran reneged

on the deal and instead requested revised and more explicitly favorable terms, calling into question its intentions and good faith.

Diplomacy must achieve a result, or advance toward a clear, well-defined long-term goal. If there is no time-delineated forward progress then diplomacy is failing and this too should not be ignored. Henry Kissinger, in his book *A World Restored*, described the circumstances that characterize a situation in which diplomacy may not be an effective way to resolve a dispute: "In the absence of an agreement on what constitutes a reasonable demand, diplomatic conferences are occupied with sterile repetitions of basic positions and accusations of bad faith, or allegations of unreasonableness and subversion." It may be fair to say that the P5+1's Geneva and Vienna negotiations with Iran in late 2009 fell apart precisely due to the absence of an agreement on what constituted a reasonable demand.

Since the failed October 2009 deal, the international community has been unable to engage or induce Iran in serious diplomacy and has instead focused on implementing coercive measures such as sanctions to prod Iran into a compromise. Iran's domestic political opposition, known as the Green Movement, has further complicated the West's diplomatic calculus, generating a debate regarding the best way to sanction the Iranian regime without affecting the evolution of Iran's domestic political opposition. Meanwhile, there appear to be serious differences regarding the severity of sanctions Russia and China are prepared to go along with and the type of stiff financial and economic sanctions that the U.S. and European Union believe are necessary to change Iran's behavior. Russia and China appear skeptical that *any* level of sanctions is likely to alter Iran's nuclear progress.

One of the virtues of the international community's sustained attempt at engagement and vigorous diplomacy during the past twelve months is that it seems to have debunked the idea that Iran is interested in serious and sustained engagement with the international community. In addition, the failed attempts at engagement call into question whether diplomacy alone is the most effective means for achieving a settlement with Iran on its nuclear program.

The range of policy choices discussed by analysts and scholars regarding Iran's nuclear program typically encompasses four primary options: (1) engagement; (2) sanctions; (3) deterrence; and (4) military strikes.

The Obama administration began with

a strong attempt at engagement and inducement, but since October 2009 and the collapse of the Vienna agreement it has shifted toward a program of narrowly targeted sanctions directed at the regime and the *Sepah-e Pasdaran* (Iran's Revolutionary Guards), while at the same time publicly declaring that it has not precluded a return to engagement.

In Israel, deterrence is considered a highly unattractive policy option. Israel believes that in addition to the uncertainty regarding whether Iran can or can not be deterred, is the equally troubling concern that Iran would transfer nuclear technology to radical groups on Israel's borders that Israel believes unequivocally cannot be deterred. Further, deterrence would not eliminate legitimate concerns that Iran would use its nuclear capability as a coercive weapon against its regional neighbors, particularly the moderate Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

In Israel, the public policy debate regarding Iran is somewhat narrower than in U.S. and Europe. The Netanyahu coalition has expressed its doubt that engagement and inducement would prevent Iran from

obtaining a nuclear capability. In Israel the debate has typically been between sanctions and a military operation. Most recently, there has been strong advocacy for harsh sanctions that would cripple the Iranian economy. Israel's current preference for crippling sanctions should be taken as a sign of Israeli consensus that Iran's nuclear program is an international challenge, and not Israel's alone.

In the academy, Israeli scholars have expressed a wide range of opinions on what to do about Iran and its nuclear program. In July 2008, Ben Gurion University's Benny Morris, writing in *The New York Times* declared that "Israel will almost surely attack Iran's nuclear sites in the next four to seven months," and seemed to conclude that an Israeli military strike is inevitable and necessary. At the other end of the spectrum, Hebrew University's Martin Van Creveld, writing in the *The Forward* in September 2007, seemed to suggest that the world can live with a nuclear Iran. The fact is that the majority of Israeli scholars fall somewhere in between Morris and Van Creveld.

Professor David Menashri, the director of the Center for Iranian Studies (CIS) at

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Tel Aviv University, has consistently argued that Iran's nuclear program is a global concern that requires an international—rather than Israeli—resolution. Menashri initiated a public opinion survey in May 2009 that indicated that Israelis across the political spectrum perceive a nuclear Iran as a threat and do not buy the argument that Iran is developing its nuclear program strictly for civilian energy needs. Nevertheless, nearly half of the Israelis surveyed (49 percent) indicated that Israel should allow the U.S. a chance to find a diplomatic solution to Iran's nuclear program.

Nuclear proliferation experts Ephraim Asculai and Emily Landau of the Institute of National Security Studies (INSS) have been critical of the Obama administration's lack of a clear Iran policy, and have advocated for more forceful pressure through harsh sanctions as the best way to pressure Iran. In a May–June 2010 article published in the *Military Review*, a journal of the U.S. Army, American-based Israeli scholar Amitai Etzioni proposed military strikes on Iran's *non-nuclear* military installations as a coercive method to limit collateral damage but increase pressure on the regime in Iran to compromise on its nuclear program. Ze'ev

Maghen, a scholar of Iran at Bar-Ilan University, debunked the common claim that Iran's leaders are influenced by apocalyptic beliefs. In an article published *Middle East Journal* in the Spring of 2008, Maghen noted:

The fact that (as we have tried to show) genuine chiliastic messianism or mahdism has never been a potent force within Shi'ism, and therefore is not today, and will probably at no time in the future be, a genuine factor in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic, does not mean, in the eyes of this author, that international pressure on Iran to halt its dangerous nuclear program should be ceased; it means that it should be increased. Were the members of the Iranian leadership truly convinced that the Eschaton was around the corner, no amount of economic sanctions or even threats of military action would be effective. Since, as we have argued, that leadership is not in the least bit convinced of this, such measures—if pursued with resolution, wisdom, and consistency (unlike the current state of affairs)—are likely to produce significant results.

It remains to be seen how the current nuclear impasse with Iran will be dealt with by the international community, but it is perhaps something of an understatement to say that Israel views the issue as an urgent, time-sensitive strategic priority. As long as the international community's strategic goal remains to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, then any disharmony between Israel and the international community will most likely involve the timing and urgency of any future tactical initiatives. In the meantime, while the international community appears to be bogged down by trying to find a diplomatic consensus on the right coercive strategy, Iran's nuclear enrichment efforts continue.

Brandon Friedman is research fellow at the Center for Iranian Studies, Tel Aviv University. He is the co-author (with Dr. Uzi Rabi) of "The Geopolitical Dimension of Sunni-Shi'i Sectarianism in the Middle East," in International Intervention in Local Conflicts: Crisis Management and Conflict Resolution Since the Cold War, edited by Uzi Rabi (I.B. Tauris, forthcoming in 2010).

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Online Resources for Talmud Research, Study, and Teaching

Heidi Lerner

Introduction

Online resources for research, analysis, and teaching of the Talmud are well-represented on the Web. Digital collections and data-banks of Talmudic texts and manuscripts are becoming increasingly available. An array of websites and social networking applications offer introductory material, insights, and linguistic and educational tools to assist in the study of the Talmud at all levels. New computing tools such as optical character recognition, three-dimensional computer graphics, text encoding, text and data mining, and image recognition enable scholars to look at the Talmud in interdisciplinary and innovative ways, individually and collaboratively. This article aims to guide scholars, faculty, and students to some of the best sites currently available. Not all of these sites are academic or critical in their conception or sponsorship, but they can be useful for their content and interface, and readers should visit them for more information.

Full Text

Full texts of the Tanakh, Mishnah, Tosefta, Babylonian Talmud, Talmud Yerushalmi, and the Mishneh Torah of Rambam can be found in text format at the Ma'agar Sifrut ha-Kodesh (<http://kodesh.snunit.k12.il/>) and Mechon Mamre (www.mechon-mamre.org/b1/1o.htm). The National Library of Israel (formerly JNUL) Digitized Book Repository contains scanned parts or complete editions of some of the earliest editions of the Talmud (http://aleph500.huji.ac.il/nnl/dig/books_rab.html).

While the above-noted sites offer the full text of the Talmud as either JPEG graphics or in text format, a complete Talmud Bavli that has been scanned and undergone optical character recognition (OCR) has been mounted at the Hebrewbooks.org site with permission from Moznaim Publishing (<http://hebrewbooks.org/shas>). This online edition offers full-search capabilities, and it is also possible to copy and paste any part of a page into a Word document or other tool for educational and teaching purposes. In addition to the six orders of the Mishnah, the site also includes the full text of the Gemara, Rashi, and Tosafot, a Daf Yomi calendar, and an index of commentators.

Additional full-text resources freely available on the Web include:

- The Soncino Babylonian Talmud in English translation is available online in its entirety as a PDF and about 63 percent in HTML format (www.halakhah.com).
- The Primary Textual Witnesses to Tannaitic Literature (www.biu.ac.il/JS/tannaim) is part of a large Bar-Ilan project. The site includes full transcriptions of all extant manuscripts of the Tosefta, Mekhilta, and work is being done on the Sifra.
- Tosefta Online (www.toseftaonline.org/seforim.html) offers a host of online resources about the Tosefta, including several manuscripts, the full text of the first printed edition, an English translation of the text, and an interesting blog. A similar site exists for the Talmud Yerushalmi (www.yerushalmionline.org).

In 1991, Bar-Ilan University launched the Responsa Project in a CD format. In 2007 it was uploaded to the Internet on a platform provided by C.D.I. Systems (www.responsa.co.il/home.en-US.aspx). Among its trove of rabbinic texts are the Babylonian and the Jerusalem Talmuds with commentaries, Midrashim, the Zohar, and a collection of more than eighty-thousand responsa. Access to the majority of the materials at the site is via subscription.

Manuscripts

The National Library of Israel's Online Treasury of Talmudic Manuscripts (http://jnul.huji.ac.il/dl/mss/index_eng.html) brings together Talmudic manuscripts held only by other institutions. The manuscripts are indexed by standard citation.

The first printed edition of the Yerushalmi was published by Daniel Bomberg in Venice (1523–24). The only extant manuscript that was used by him for his edition is housed at the University of Leiden and was recently digitized in its entirety (https://disc.leidenuniv.nl/webclient/DeliveryManager?custom_att_2=simple_viewer&pid=1771217).

The Cairo Genizah includes a large number of Talmudic fragments. A noted characteristic of the Cairo Genizah is that fragments of the same work are very often scattered geographically in different libraries and collections. A number of libraries are digitizing their collections of Genizah fragments. The

Taylor-Schechter Research Unit of the Cambridge University Library, which houses the largest single collection of Cairo Genizah fragments, has recently received a grant to digitize all their fragments (www.lib.cam.ac.uk/Taylor-Schechter/GOLD/).

The Friedberg Genizah Project (www.genizah.org) is spearheading an effort to create a single unified database of Genizah fragments which, while geographically dispersed, are becoming unified under one virtual roof. It is now possible to compare online Talmudic fragments from the same manuscript that were housed in two different libraries and view them side by side on a single screen.

Websites and Tools

For novices, a good place to learn how a standard printed Talmud page is constructed is the hypertext Page from the Babylonian Talmud (<http://people.ucalgary.ca/~elsegal/TalmudPage.html>). This site functions as a commentary on the constituent parts that commonly comprise a typical page. Linked to the page image are overviews of the Tosafot and other commentaries, glosses, the Gemara, and Ner Mitzvah. Princeton University Library has issued another basic resource: Chapters of the Talmud (<http://library.princeton.edu/departments/tsd/katmandu/hebrew/peraktoc.html>) is a site in Hebrew that helps users locate the tractate of a particular chapter of the Talmud, if they only have the title.

Oral Roberts University has created The Babylonian Talmud Research Guide (www.oru.edu/university/library/guides/talmud.html#chart). This resource includes an abbreviations guide and instructions on how to locate a topic in the Talmud.

The Halacha Brura and Birur Halacha Institute offer the Index to Commentaries on Aggadot of the Talmud (www.halachabrura.org/a-index.htm). This site indexes the commentaries of the aggadic material of the Talmud found in 130 books of the Rishonim and Acharonim. Users can browse the site by Talmud tractate.

A Proposed Guide for Citing Rabbinic Texts has been mounted on the Web (www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/24/24-1/24-1-pp083-090_JETS.pdf).

The website Database of Midrashic Units in the Mishnah (<http://mishnah.llc.manchester.ac.uk/home.aspx>) contains all the passages in the Mishnah that contain midrashic elements (interpretations of scripture). Users can search by tractate, biblical reference, code, rabbi, and formal features.

Dictionaries

Marcus Jastrow's *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (London, 1903) is available online in PDF at HebrewBooks.org (<http://hebrewbooks.org/38236>) and in a searchable format at the Tyndale Archive of Biblical Studies (www.tyndalearchive.com/tabs/jastrow/).

Hebrew Union College has mounted The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon which allows the user to search the Lexicon in both Aramaic and English (<http://cal1.cn.huc.edu/>).

Blogs

Several blogs related to Talmudic issues traverse the academic and public landscapes. These can offer scholars the quickest and best ways to keep up with the latest developments in Talmudic research. They bring together and mix, often in quirky ways, musings on scholarly dilemmas, reviews, research news, and conference announcements and informal reports. They include the Talmud Blog (<http://academictalmud.blogspot.com/>), Menachem Mendel (<http://menachemmendel.net/blog/>), Hagahot (<http://manuscriptboy.blogspot.com/>), and On the Main Line (<http://onthemainline.blogspot.com/>).

Daf Yomi

"Daf yomi" is the daily study of a passage of Talmud that can be completed in seven years. This project is well suited to the global electronic environment offered by the Web, and

many study aids are available for learners. Kollel Iyun Hadaf presents a number of free Hebrew and English resources on its website Dafyomi Advancement Forum (www.dafyomi.co.il). E-Daf.com (www.e-daf.com) and DafYomi.org (www.dafyomi.org) offer JPEG images of the Vilna Shas so that users can follow along as they listen to various shiurim. Other daf yomi audio lessons can be found at MyShiur.net (www.myshiur.net).

New Directions

In the past thirty years, the library community and other providers of digital content have created a substantial repository of Talmudic and rabbinic texts. New technologies and interdisciplinary collaborations are emerging, encouraging scholars to take advantage of these resources to develop new methods of scholarly research and teaching of the Talmud.

An early prototype of an interactive book was produced by David Small at the MIT Media lab in the first part of the new millennium. In the Talmud Project (www.davidsmall.com/portfolio/talmud-project/), the typographer created a program using three-dimensional, movable type to simultaneously display the Talmud and related commentaries on the same screen. Several dials allow the reader to trace ideas from one text to another, examine translations, and find text in the larger context of the full corpus.

In the early part of this decade, a group of Jewish studies faculty and computer scientists at the Collaborative Research Centre at the University of Cologne developed a prototype of a technology-enhanced learning environment for a Talmudic tractate (<http://dbis.rwth-aachen.de/15new/staff/klamma/download/Hollender-Klamma.pdf>).

An exciting area for digital humanists is computer-based text mining and text

analysis. This is a technology that enables scholars to discover and analyze patterns in the texts. Computer scientists at Bar-Ilan University have developed CHAT: a System for Stylistic Classification of Hebrew-Aramaic Texts to tackle a number of scholarly issues related to a corpus of Hebrew-Aramaic texts (<http://u.cs.biu.ac.il/~akivan/papers/otc-hebrew.pdf>). Using this technology, the authors hope to be able to verify authorship of specific corpora, determine the chronology of various documents, and determine from which different versions of the same text might a particular text fragment be taken.

There is increasing interest in the field of face recognition in image and videos. Up until now, the methods for identifying and reuniting "matches" from within the Cairo Genizah have been manual. "Matches" are leaves or fragments from a particular manuscript that have been identified as emanating from the same codex or document and, in the case of the Cairo Genizah, have been dispersed among many different institutions and private collections around the world. Utilizing face recognition technology, a team of computer scientists at Tel Aviv University in partnership with staff from the Friedberg Genizah Project have developed a computer-assisted method of automating the system of locating matches from the Cairo Genizah so that they can be properly described and documented (www.cs.tau.ac.il/~nachumd/papers/ICCV.pdf).

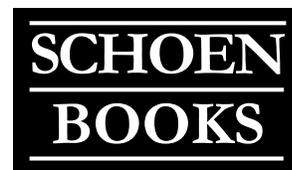
As we look to the future, traditional methods of Talmud study will continue to be enhanced and even challenged by the emerging digital environment.

Heidi Lerner is the Hebraica/Judaica cataloguer at Stanford University Libraries. See www.ajsnet.org for this article and others by Heidi Lerner, with links to all resources discussed.



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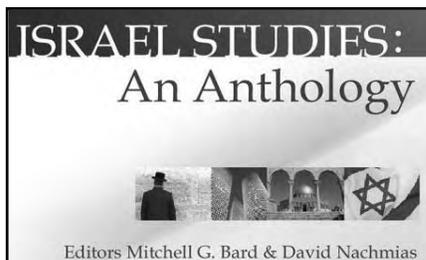
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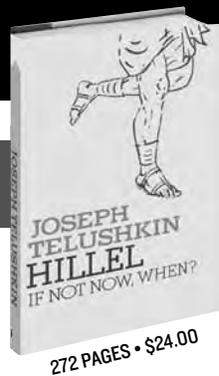


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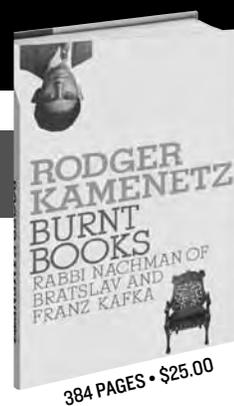


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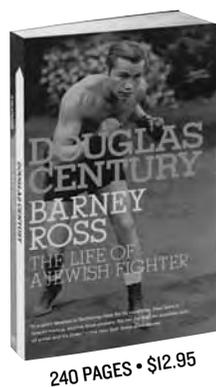
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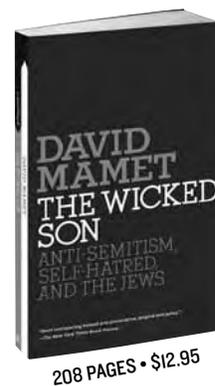
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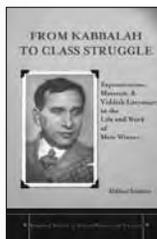
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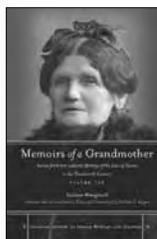
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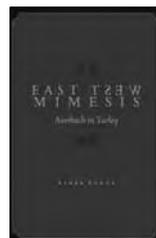
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Answer: A Limmud conference, of course.

In December 2009, I had the privilege to attend, along with approximately 2,499 other people, the twenty-fifth anniversary of Limmud UK, a five-day residential event at the sprawling rural campus of the University of Warwick. This Limmud, like others around the world, was an overwhelming and dizzying smorgasbord of classes, presentations, workshops, polemical debates, Torah study, films, concerts, plays, art exhibitions, and some serious schmoozing over copious amounts of beer into the late hours of every evening. In short, it was an unparalleled



Photo by Mitchell Griver.

intellectual and social feast, and for this ethnographer of contemporary Jewish life, pure heaven. If you read no further in this article, here is the gist: I strongly encourage every AJS member to consider participating in Limmud as a fantastic opportunity for both professional and personal growth. It will challenge your notions of learning, probably improve your teaching, and widen your social/professional networks exponentially.

For the uninitiated, Limmud began in 1980 after a group of British-Jewish educators attended a conference of the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education (CAJE), a New York-based, nonprofit organization that closed its doors about two years ago during the global financial collapse. After attending CAJE, the British participants decided to create a similar conference model, though slightly tweaked. Limmud, from its inception, has always been volunteer-driven and open to anyone interested in Jewish learning. The first Limmud UK conference took place a year later as a one-day conference with about eighty-five participants. The conference was such a success that it soon expanded, and over the years has grown into the flagship residential retreat, a summer festival that emphasizes learning and music, plus day-long regional Limmud programs over the course of the year. This year's Limmud UK offered more than nine hundred sessions, and the 380-page program weighed over one pound.

Although I had been to two Limmud Colorado conferences prior to Limmud UK, I didn't realize just how radical and exciting it could be to attend a conference where the diversity of Jews (politically, religiously, culturally, demographically) is simply astonishing. Two cases in point: I first arrived at midnight, bleary eyed after a long flight from San Francisco and a two-and-a-half-hour bus ride. As I stumbled into the main building, I ran into an acquaintance who volunteers with Limmud LA. Two minutes later, I was greeted by a long-lost friend from Chicago, who now lives in Scotland, and is a diehard volunteer for Limmud UK. Ten minutes later, in the loud, packed, and buzzing bar upstairs, I saw no less than three colleagues from Israel and several friends from New York. At dinner the next night, I sat next to a lovely older German man,



Photo by Mitchell Griver.

who I later discovered is a leading historian of medical ethics, particularly during the period of National Socialism. Seated on my other side was a feisty, Israeli-British, thirty-something "professional Jew," who identifies as "polymorphously post-denominational," and moonlights as a drag king in wickedly funny and subversive cabaret shows. Across the table: the director of the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem. The four of us couldn't stop talking and laughing, despite the range in our ages, identities, backgrounds, and practices.

The above anecdotes reveal a tiny glimpse of how Limmud harnesses the power of both global and local networks of Jews and involves the widespread circulation of Jewish people, ideas, texts, histories, financial resources, and culture. To date, the Limmud model has expanded to forty-four different cities throughout the world, including South Africa, Argentina, Israel, Sweden, Ukraine, and several U.S. and Canadian cities (see www.limmudinternational.org for the complete listing). The typical roster of presenters reflects the volunteer teams' connections to the global Jewish community of educators, intellectuals, musicians, activists, artists, and ordinary teachers/learners in Jewish communities. In fact, many people who fit into several of those categories travel the "Limmud circuit" around the world. One person I know has been to Limmud NY, Colorado, UK, Sweden, and will soon attend Limmud South Africa. At the same time, Limmud is always local, reflecting regional sensibilities and concerns. At this Limmud, for example, I noticed that there was an unusually large number of sessions devoted to widely diverse perspectives, ideas, and feelings about Zionism, Israel, and notions of Jewish

peoplehood and identity, perhaps reflecting England's closer proximity to Israel and the anxieties of British Jews about anti-Semitism.

Limmud is a manifestation of the emerging "Jewish innovation ecosystem," a post-modern, decentralized, and democratic form of Jewish identity, expression, and community building championed by the organization Jumpstart, "a thinkubator for sustainable Jewish innovation." Limmud could also be viewed as a Jewish test case for the repudiation of Robert Putnam's thesis in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2001), in which he describes and analyzes the collective costs of decreased civic engagement, the decline of social capital, and the shrinking of participation in the public sphere. Despite Jewish demographic surveys that fret about rates of intermarriage and the perception of a decline in engagement in Jewish communal life, the success of Limmud and the thousands of people who participate globally each year offer a qualitatively different lens to look at questions of how people "do Jewish." In fact, Limmud is a fascinating case study of how many Jews are building temporary, intentional Jewish communities that rely largely on the enlistment, exchange, and accumulation of social capital, globally and locally. Limmud requires and involves face-to-face interaction and is profoundly relationship-intensive and network-driven. Limmud participants are also motivated by desire, rather than a sense of duty or obligation.

The philosophy and ideology of Limmud revolves around notions of democracy, Jewish pluralism, personal choice, and diversity of identity and expression: about what to learn,

how to learn, with whom, when, and where. I observed that hierarchy and formality regarding teaching and learning were eschewed. The sessions I attended were marked by casual informality, spirited debates, and discussions, as well as a willingness to dive into complex and difficult texts. A democratic philosophy of participation and engagement infuses most Limmud publications, websites, program booklets, and mission statements:

Limmud aims to enable each participant to go one step further on their own Jewish journey. Everyone is a student and everyone can be a teacher. Events feature all educational styles including lectures, workshops, text-study sessions, film, meditation, discussions, exhibits and performances to ensure that there is always "something for everyone."

Indeed, the content of a typical Limmud event is as diverse as its participants.

This philosophy of democratic and nonhierarchical learning offers both an opportunity and a challenge for Jewish studies academics. Indeed, one democratizing aspect of a Limmud conference is the conspicuous absence of titles, credentials, and academic institutions on participant nametags, which only identify the person and the city in which they reside. The fact that anyone can present at Limmud *profoundly* democratizes the notion of who is allowed to teach and learn. Anyone with an idea can propose a session, and indeed, the line-up ranged from the scholarly, esoteric, and intellectually demanding to workshops that bordered on

the risqué, goofy, and creative. Presenters included renowned scholars, psychotherapists, lawyers, doctors, nonprofit professionals, rabbis, poets, philanthropists, and more.

Some scholars might view this as threatening the elite status of academic knowledge production and Jewish studies as an academic vocation. Personally, I found it thrilling. Limmud is potentially liberating for academics who like to move through multiple social and intellectual worlds. Limmud offers a wonderful venue for scholars who work as public intellectuals, who seek a platform for their ideas in the wider world beyond academia, and who want to influence a greater number of people beyond our small, scholarly community. For example, I was able to present my scholarly work, participate in a book talk about queer perspectives on the Torah, perform in a Jewish ritual theater piece, and sit on a skillfully moderated panel about the place of Israel in international Jewish life. Where else can you do so many things in such a short span of time? Finally, Limmud is a great opportunity to have substantive, thoughtful, and enriching conversations with people from all walks of life, who are hungry to learn and are open to different ideas. If I haven't convinced you yet, let me be blunt: you should go.

Caryn Aviv is the Posen Senior Instructor in Secular Jewish Society and Civilization at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She is co-author of New Jews: The End of the Jewish Diaspora (with David Shneer; New York University Press, 2005).

A Serious Man Jason Kalman

I spend a lot of time writing about Job. Actually, I spend a lot of time writing about people who write about Job. A. O. Scott's *New York Times* review provided further encouragement to see Joel and Ethan Coen's cinematic version: "Did you hear the one about the guy who lived in the land of Uz, who was perfect and upright and feared God? His name was Job. In the new movie version, 'A Serious Man,' some details have been changed." (October 2, 2009). Some details?

The Coens' modern Job, Larry Gopnik, is a midwestern physics professor who is informed by his wife that she is leaving him for one of his friends. His unemployed brother lives on

his couch (and gets into legal trouble), his bar mitzvah-aged son smokes pot and steals money from his older sister who has been stealing it from her father to pay for a nose job. Meanwhile Larry is up for tenure. Everything looks good except that a student is both trying to bribe him to change a failing grade and threatening to sue him for accusing him of bribery, and the tenure committee has received anonymous letters discouraging his promotion. Fortunately, as the doctor tells Larry when first we meet him, he is in good health.

Larry is befuddled by his situation and a friend encourages him to see his rabbi. Committed to classical theodicy, he's tried to be a

good person, so why is *Hashem* causing him to suffer? Larry's synagogue has three rabbis (apparently representing the primary American denominations). The junior member of the clergy offers Larry platitudes about changing perspective. Dissatisfied, Larry meets his regular rabbi who tells him a story about another congregant who came to him for counsel. He offers no good reason for telling the story and no explanation for Larry's predicament. The third rabbi, played as an old sage, is too busy thinking to meet with Larry.

Things begin to turn around when Larry's wife's suitor dies in a car crash (although Larry gets caught for the cost of



Film still from *A Serious Man*. Courtesy of Focus Features. Photo by Wilson Webb.

the funeral). His son, though stoned, successfully completes his bar mitzvah Torah reading. At the ceremony Larry and his wife begin to reconcile. Soon afterwards a senior colleague informs him that his tenure is near certain. And then, just as quickly, things fall apart. Larry receives an expensive bill for legal fees accrued helping his brother. To pay the bill Larry changes the graduate student's grade and keeps the bribe money. Almost immediately his doctor calls urging him to come to the office. The X-rays taken at his last appointment, when he was assured of his good health, need to be discussed.

Both Larry and Job seek to understand why God apparently punishes them, but the book's readers and the movie's audience do not ask the same questions. The reader knows why Job suffers. The prologue is explicit about God's role and the reader must ask about His unjust behavior, not Job's merit. By contrast, if God is punishing Larry or even has a role to play, the Coen brothers are not telling. They have created an ambiguous situation for the audience to try to decipher. The audience does not know precisely why Larry suffers and neither does he.

For all the uncertainty in the film, the Coens are certain about one thing: the reason the apparently righteous suffer cannot be definitively explained. Larry teaches his physics class "The Uncertainty Principle." "It proves," in Larry's words, "we can't ever really know what's going on." Despite this fact, though, our actions must still be moral. The third rabbi may have refused to meet with Larry, but he offers his son Danny an important insight which may provide a key to explaining the film.

While meeting with Danny following his bar mitzvah ceremony the rabbi speaks only a few words. Completely unexpectedly he (mis)quotes Jefferson Airplane's "Somebody to Love": "When the truth is found to be lies . . . And all the hope within you dies . . ." He follows this with the big question: "Then what?" No answer is immediately forthcoming from either party. The rabbi then returns the transistor radio confiscated from Danny at Hebrew school and sends him on his way with "Be a good boy." And here we find the answer to the question.

Larry, like Job, believed in the tradition that taught that the righteous would be rewarded and the wicked punished. Both discovered that this tradition, if not wrong, could not account for their respective circumstances. Conservative rabbi and Biblicalist Robert Gordis describes Job's situation as follows:

Job is aware of the contention that morality depends upon faith in divine justice. Denying the latter, how can he maintain the former? Job is driven to a desperate expedient, which is to prove one of the great liberating ideas of religion; he cuts the nexus between virtue and reward. Honest men will tremble at his undeserved suffering, but will not on that account be deterred from righteousness.

Jewish post-Holocaust interpreters of Job across the denominations, including, among others, Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Irving Greenberg, Solomon Freehof, and Elie Wiesel, offered a similar response for those who suffer like Job. Whether the calamities are deserved as a divine punishment, are the acts of a

capricious deity, or are simply the result of the unfolding universe, the only appropriate response is to "be good." Larry got it wrong. As a result of the mounting misfortunes, Larry breaks when the bill from his brother's attorney arrives. Whether the doctor's subsequent call about his X-ray should be understood as a punishment for his choice is inconsequential. Being a "good boy" is about doing what is right without concern for reward or punishment. Larry's belief system may have become confused but he knew his choices concerning the bribe were wrong even before he made them. But the movie does not leave the viewer entirely hopeless. Danny, not Larry, received the rabbinic insight and has the rest of his life to become a good boy and a serious man.

The Coens are not the first to give Job comic turn. Woody Allen's name has appeared in numerous reviews of *A Serious Man* for his concern with theodicy and suffering. Job takes center stage in his 1974 essay in *The New Republic* "The Scrolls" and references to him slip into a number of Allen's films. In contrast to the Coen brothers, Allen's response to suffering is closer to the Jefferson Airplane lyric. For Allen, finding someone to love is the answer to the rabbi's "Then what?" In the movie *Manhattan* Allen and his (very) young lover played by Mariel Hemingway are riding in a horse drawn carriage through Central Park. She says to him: "You know you're crazy about me." He replies, "I am. You're . . . You're God's answer to Job. You would have ended all argument between them. He'd have said 'I do a lot of terrible things but I can also make one of these.' And Job would've said 'OK, you win.'" Allen's response to suffering brings no moral imperative (and, at least according to his character Boris in *Love and Death*, only leads to more suffering). As he noted concerning his affair with his partner's adopted daughter, "The heart wants what it wants." Amidst his suffering Larry tried to find "love" with his seductive, married neighbor, but all it brought him were horrific nightmares. Despite his errors, he still wants to be good. The imperative still stands: "Be a good boy"; it's all a serious man can do.

Jason Kalman is assistant professor of classical Hebrew literature and interpretation at the Cincinnati School of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and a research fellow at the University of the Free State, South Africa. He is co-author of Canada's Big Biblical Bargain: How McGill University Bought the Dead Sea Scrolls (with Jaqueline S. Du Toit; McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010).

The Questionnaire

What development in Jewish studies over the last twenty years has most excited you?

RESPONSES

Daniel Boyarin

Hermann P. and Sophia Taubman Professor of Talmudic Culture, University of California at Berkeley

What's Changed

For me the biggest change in Jewish studies (for which, read in this context, rabbinic studies) in the last twenty years is the growing number of young scholars who have both full and deep knowledge of the classical rabbinic texts and a profoundly intellectual, comparative, methodological, and theoretical perspective on their study and research. I hasten to say that I am not defining Jewish studies as Talmudic studies but only saying that for me this is where the prime excitement has been and continues to be. For many years after the trauma of the Nazi genocide, classical rabbinic research turned inwards; many of us were very well trained and equipped with the tools of Talmudic philology and a kind of scholarly version of traditional Rabbinic scholarship (which I do not look down upon in any way), but certain important gains of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* were lost with the loss of the institutional and cultural contexts within which it had thrived. In recent years a trickle of rabbinic scholars sought to open their work up to larger cultural and scholarly contexts but we have always been playing a kind of catch-up. Now we are seeing graduate students who are able to read the Maharam Schiff and Homi Bhabha (not to mention Greek and Syriac, Latin and Pahlavi). This is, to me, a very exciting development. Long live *Wissenschaft!*

Todd M. Endelman

William Haber Professor of Modern Jewish History, University of Michigan

The chronologies we impose shape the histories we write. With this in mind, I want to stretch the two decades I was asked to consider to four decades and to discuss a shift in the institutional framework of Jewish studies in the United States since the early 1970s—its geographical dispersion.

When I entered graduate school in 1971, the field of Jewish studies was dominated by a handful of institutions on the East Coast, in general, and in Boston and New York, in particular. While Brandeis, Harvard, the Jewish Theological Seminary, and Columbia did not enjoy a literal monopoly, their clout was far-reaching. Few universities outside the Boston–New York axis had the same depth of teaching and research resources in Judaica (Berkeley and UCLA on the West Coast were not in the same league). Their PhD students, whose numbers were small, found teaching positions with relative ease, in part, it was believed, because of the pervasive influence of their advisors. The “old boy” system of hiring in the academy as a whole was still alive, although weaker than it had been a decade before.

Emblematic of the East Coast orientation of the field was the seemingly permanent hold that Boston enjoyed as the site of the annual meeting of the Association for Jewish Studies. In its early years, AJS met in the Harvard Faculty Club in Cambridge. The atmosphere was clubby, masculine, and insular. Not much fresh air, either metaphorically or literally, circulated in the small second-floor meeting rooms where sessions were held. My memory is that there was little in the area of modern Jewish history on the program, which was dominated by pre-modern, classical Judaica. The annual meeting soon outgrew the Harvard Faculty Club but it remained at a hotel in Boston's Back Bay for many years to come. The decision to move its venue every year recognized—belatedly—the changes that had occurred with the growth and dispersion of the field.

Today the unchallenged preeminence of the Boston and New York institutions is a thing of the past. Centers of excellence have emerged on the West Coast and in the Midwest and South. Who could have imagined forty years ago that Stanford University, whose reputation for hostility to Jews was then legendary, would emerge as a dynamic site for undergraduate and graduate teaching in Jewish history, literature, and religion? At the same time, some institutions have lost their clout in areas in which they once shone. Harvard's preeminence in Jewish history, for

example, faded when Yosef Yerushalmi moved to Columbia in 1980 and Harvard failed to replace him with a historian with similar training and breadth. Intellectual preeminence and institutional influence are now scattered and dispersed across North America, as is the authority to guide and shape the field. Notions of what counts in Jewish studies and what kinds of research merit attention and support compete in a market that is freer and more lively than it was forty years ago.

Peter Eli Gordon

Professor, Department of History, Harvard University

The Transformation of Jewish Studies: Polemics and Prospects

Jewish studies has long stood in a somewhat troubled relation to other academic disciplines. As an institutional formation, it is organized around a topic rather than a method. And, insofar as it designates a thematic domain (beliefs and literatures and histories that involve Jews or Judaism), it has tended to reinforce the notion that Jewish themes reveal some overlapping consensus or family resemblances, animating the thought that such themes belong to the very same religious, cultural, or historico-political phenomenon. At its best, this notion has furnished a serviceable framework for a thriving and diverse field of scholarship, and it has played a considerable role in promoting creative thinking across the disciplines, breaking with the administrative dogma that the disciplines are the natural way to carve up human reality. But at times, the notion of belonging has also helped to reinforce the normative idea that there exists something like a separate and self-identical canon of Jewish ideas or values, or a separate group whose history is best understood under the aegis of “continuity.” This idea, I fear, is an ideology that passes for a description. To be sure, I am not the best person to address current patterns in the field of Jewish studies since I have only observed them from the outside. But I would say that one of the most helpful developments of the past twenty years or so (though I'm unsure

on the temporality of the development) is that the study of Jewish themes has embraced what one might call the constitutive paradox of collective identity: While we recognize that collective identification has an important role to play in our understanding of who we are as human beings, many of us are increasingly suspicious of claims to naturalize such identifications or to assert that they enjoy a transcendental prestige as marking out essential and transhistorical characteristics of a given collective. To be sure, we may live those identifications *as if* they were eternal. But it is the charge of the academic to regard with suspicion many of the ideologies that underwrite the way we live. All of us have colleagues who persist in writing works in a celebratory mode—extolling Jewish cultural accomplishments or political power, or a distinctive Jewish literary tradition, or a permanent set of Jewish normative insights. But it seems to me that intellectual integrity lies in questioning those appeals to collective affirmation. Insofar as Jewish studies now thrives by embracing that mode of self-reflexive criticism, this is indeed a promising development.

Ed Greenstein

Gwendolyn and Joseph Straus Distinguished Scholar, Bar-Ilan University

There Is What to Celebrate and What to Be Concerned About

The poet of Job, as I understand him, revels in language that can mean one thing and its opposite. The verb “excite” refers to arousal. In most forms, it conveys a positive sense of enthusiasm and pleasure. In other forms, it suggests agitation of a not necessarily positive kind. I have been genuinely gratified to witness the expansion of Jewish studies both numerically and qualitatively. Expertise has taken many forms, and I am glad that methodological sophistication and experimentation are high among them. The questions scholars pose have grown in complexity and diversity, and the answers have turned more and more contingent, which is to my way of thinking, more honest. More and more of us have become increasingly sensitive to issues of gender, racism, and classism. More and more of us have understood that only God can be said to take a neutral perspective, and fewer and fewer of us presume to be God. Two things agitate me in a negative way. While nose-to-the-grindstone philology should be a means and not an end in itself, it has always seemed to me to be a *sine qua non*

of reading. I see too little investment in philological training. Second, demographic and cultural changes, and even more the uncertain economy, have led to a severe decline in the number of academic positions available to well-trained candidates, especially in Israel. Extraordinary efforts are needed in order to preserve academic excellence in Jewish studies by finding funding for excellent people.

Galit Hasan-Rokem

Max and Margarethe Grunwald Professor of Folklore, Hebrew University

In the last twenty years, Jewish studies has experienced if not a total “ethnographic turn,” then at least a serious leaning towards the ethnographic aspects of Jewish culture. This includes both historical and contemporary studies. Among the areas that have consequently come into focus are the home, the family, and everyday life, in contrast to the earlier emphasis on the public sphere, institutional activities, and holidays. Feminist theory and practice have significantly illuminated the areas of women’s lives and subjective experience that had either been silenced or simply forgotten, and have—as in the study of culture in general—enabled and stimulated research into various forms of “otherness.” As a consequence of the ethnographic as well as the feminist turns, interest in materiality and the human body, including sexuality in its richness and variations, has gained momentum.

Methodologically, these developments have led to the application of research methods developed in the study of contemporary Jewish cultures to scholarship on Jewish lives, cultures, and texts of the past. The weakening of apologetic tendencies has enabled deeper research into the coproduction of culture *between* ethnic entities rather than *within* them, thus producing important research about how Jewish culture enriched other cultures, but also how much of Jewish culture is a result of dialogic relations with its concrete *habitus* or *Lebenswelt*. In general the concept of “influence” (“Jewish influence on European culture,” “Muslim influence on Jewish rituals,” etc.) has been fruitfully reconceptualized as a variety of more refined cultural processes and mechanisms. Most of all, this period has produced theories of Jewish culture that do not focus on Judaism as such but rather on the multiplicity and variation of Jewish cultures, creativities, suffering, learning, and lives.

Susannah Heschel

Eli Black Professor of Jewish Studies, Dartmouth College

The measure of the quality of an academic field is whether it raises interesting questions, but these days Jewish studies programs are more often measured by the size of our enrollments and the enthusiasm we generate among students and donors. Initially, Jewish studies emerged in Europe as a field with an intellectual agenda with overt political connotations. Not only supporting Jewish emancipation and providing Jews a sense of identity through the story of Jewish history, the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* also sought to reconfigure the nature and trajectory of Western history. Ever since, the study of Jews has not simply added information, but called established categories into question, making Jewish studies a challenger of the established definitions of the Western canon. The polemical nature of counter-history, “the distortion of the adversary’s self-image, of his identity, through the deconstruction of his memory,” as Amos Funkenstein writes, has shifted in the past twenty years to an effort to articulate an affirmation of Jewish identity. Often influenced by Emanuel Levinas, but also by a renewed interest in ethics and theology, our students are increasingly searching for Jewish ideas that transcend historical context and offer ideas and morals that link Jews across the centuries. Political and social context seem of lesser importance as the factors that shaped ideas than an effort to encounter (religious) texts without historicist mediation, to allow the texts, as my students say, “to speak their insights to us.” This points to a striking shift in the field of Jewish studies: there is an individual and highly subjective dimension to what our students are seeking. Certainly, political issues and the flourishing of the Jewish people as a whole, particularly in relation to the State of Israel, remain very important, but the historicist methods of the past and the sense of collective historical identity that shape the topics of our field are not as compelling to the generation of my students. Instead, it is the individual and the cultivation of his or her personal and emotional commitments that light the spark of Jewish significance for them. Whether a rabbinic text reflects Hellenistic influence or demonstrates parallels with a Qur’anic text is of marginal interest to them. Philosophy, theology, ethics, and mining Jewish religious texts for a transcendent meaning with inspiration for the present defines my students’ quest and has transformed my classroom.

By contrast, my generation of Jewish studies scholars were animated in graduate school by the possibility of introducing new methods, and new kinds of questions to explore aspects of Jewish history and literature. When I was still a graduate student twenty years ago, I was thrilled by the remarkable interest in Jewish studies among academics not trained in the field—eg., Sander Gilman, who became president of the MLA, and Daniel Boyarin, who sparked a great deal of attention among scholars of Christian origins and also in literary circles. At the time, I felt with pride that I was entering a field that was among the most influential and prominent in contemporary intellectual life. Yet much to my disappointment, that interest seems to be waning. There continue to be sessions on Jewish topics at the MLA, but there was also a session this past year on “Does the English Department Have a Jewish Problem?” at which the consensus seemed to be a resounding “yes.” At other MLA sessions, papers on topics that would easily lend themselves to Jewish reference—eg., on George Eliot’s novel, *Daniel Deronda*—did not mention Jews.

I don’t think Jews have been eclipsed only by the multicultural agenda that has long excluded us from its discussions, but by an increasing Christianization of the academy. Where once trauma theory and discussions of Holocaust memory were central concerns in the humanities, today we hear about forgiveness and reconciliation, themes that are not only metonyms for Christianity, but which include Jewish views. The growing attention to the writings of Paul in the debates over universalism versus particularism in the work of contemporary theorists (Badiou, Agamben, Zizek, Vattimo, among others) further enshrine an (outdated) Christian theological perspective in which Christianity is universal, Judaism is particular—precisely the sort of problem that Mendelssohn addressed at the outset of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

Have we arrived at an impasse? Perhaps our students, animated by a desire to swim in Jewish texts rather than analyze them critically, are collaborating with those among our academic colleagues who have lost interest in what once seemed the most exciting intellectual adventure of the academy: Jewish studies. Hopefully, we can recover the rigor of critical thinking and demonstrate that the perspective gained from Jewish studies is crucial and invigorating for our colleagues and students alike.

Harriet Murav

Professor, Departments of Comparative Literature and Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

The development in Jewish studies over the last twenty years that has most excited me has been the formation of Russian Jewish and East European Jewish studies as a subdiscipline in its own right. This shift is evidenced in new scholarly publications, new book series, conferences, dissertations, and other academic work. The surge of interest in Jewish studies arose in tandem with political, social, economic, and cultural change in Russia and Eastern Europe. The era of perestroika and glasnost, the 1990s, and the subsequent decade have seen the production in Russia and the former Soviet republics of new works of Jewish culture, new theatrical and musical events, as well as the emergence of new institutions and new publications devoted to the study of Jewish life and expression in many forms. New Russian-Jewish journals, which aim at comprehensive coverage of religion, history, politics, and the arts have appeared. Departments and institutes of Jewish studies have been established in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev, Minsk, and Kharkov. The Russian State Humanities University (RGGU) instituted a program for the study of East European and Russian Judaica in 1991. In 2009 the Jewish Theological Seminary and RGGU jointly published a bilingual Yiddish and Russian volume of essays on Yiddish literature and culture in the Soviet Union. (Leonid Katsis, M. Kaspina, and David Fishman, eds., *Idish: Iazyk i kul'tura v sovetskom soiuze/Yidish: Shprakh un kultur in sovets-farband* (Moscow: Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi gumanitarnyi universitet, 2009)). The institute Petersburg Judaica at the European University in St. Petersburg, directed by Valerii Dymshits, conducts ethnographic research in the former Pale of Settlement, and its publications, exhibits, and webpages have shed much light on the continuity of Jewish life in Russia in the Soviet period and beyond. Plans are underway for a museum of Russian-Jewish history. Jewish-related sites in Russian on the Internet have proliferated, as well, with topics ranging from religious practice (toldot.ru), literary criticism, author’s pages, online Jewish encyclopedias in Russian, poetry, fiction, and polemical prose; in addition, most journals have a virtual existence. The websites originate in Russia, Ukraine, Germany, Israel, and the U.S., but their reach, of course, is global, contributing to what Zvi Gitelman calls the “global shtetl.”

Riv-Ellen Prell

Professor, Department of American Studies, University of Minnesota

I have been riveted by the intellectual revolution created by feminist scholarship in Jewish studies, a scholarship that has grown to include gender and sexuality over the past two decades. As an anthropologist interested in American-Jewish culture and modern Jewish history this scholarship expanded and reframed my understanding of what and who shaped practice and culture. I recall Marion Kaplan’s *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class* and Paula Hyman’s *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History* as key texts for me because they raised far-reaching questions about the ways in which modernity and acculturation were powerfully driven by women, family, and private life. As feminist historians were reframing social, economic, and political life, cultural studies scholars reframed studies of Jewish texts by focusing on the body and sexuality. I look back to the foundational work of Rachel Adler, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, and Daniel Boyarin on the body in rabbinic texts. The next generation of thinkers included both Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt whose work examined the ways that gender shaped texts, tradition, and the field of Jewish studies. The central questions of what it means to be a Jew, where Jewish life is practiced, how it is represented over time and space are most powerfully addressed through feminist scholarship. The meeting place of historical and cultural studies for me is the conversation created by feminist studies. Feminist and Jewish studies scholarship have met in productive ways in part because both fields challenged conventional boundaries of knowledge by integrating the study of culture and history through the experience of outsiders who threatened accepted norms. By acknowledging that reality is mediated by gender (and in the past twenty years an ever-growing set of identities), I discovered a radically different understanding of Jewish experience.

Kenneth Reinhard

Professor, Departments of English and Comparative Literatures, UCLA

My involvement in the academic field of Jewish studies only goes back ten or fifteen years, so I don’t have the historical perspective to really say if my experience is part of something truly new or something that may have long been part of the field. But as a more

or less “outsider” (my academic training is in literature and my field of research is critical theory), stepping into the Directorship of the UCLA Center for Jewish Studies, I was impressed by the welcome that I received from my new (and infinitely more learned) colleagues. Jewish studies seemed wonderfully open to the perspectives of people from other fields, and my interests in philosophy and psychoanalysis were welcomed, and my (probably often naïve) ideas taken seriously. Moreover, I was delighted to discover how much my new friends and colleagues in Jewish studies had to teach me—not only about Jewish philosophy, rabbinic interpretation, Biblical criticism, and myriad other “Jewish” topics—but about ways of reading and modes of thinking that had direct implications for my own work in “non-Jewish” European critical theory. Indeed, it became obvious to me that the line between the Jewish and the non-Jewish worlds was not always so clear, and their continuities and often parallel paths became increasingly evident and both conceptually and existentially urgent. I became convinced that many of the texts and ideas that were central to Jewish studies should be part of a much wider discussion: rather than being another “area studies” or “minority studies” program, representing the history and culture of a small (albeit disproportionately influential and remarkably diverse) ethnic group, Jewish studies needed to be considered as a key part of world history, hence of major importance to scholars (such as myself) whose primary work lies in other fields. During the four years of my tenure at the Center for Jewish Studies, I was especially interested in luring my colleagues from other fields into participating in our events, and, in a sense, generalizing Jewish studies, emphasizing the universalism that was imminent in its particularism. And my sense is that this is a trend or development that goes beyond my own experience: more and more, it seems to me, Jewish studies has opened itself to

new “non-Jewish” topics, and sees itself as contributing to a broad coalition of research in the history of civilizations and ideas. And increasingly, thinkers from other fields of cultural and religious history look to Jewish studies for the wealth of ideas and research it has to offer them, and the comparative histories (of oppression, diaspora, and genocide, of course, but also of cultural preservation, adaptation, and innovation) that it affords. We might call this development the opening of “Comparative Jewish Studies,” if we understand “comparison” in the broad sense it has in the field of Comparative Literature, which often involves neither “comparison” nor “literature” but more frequently an imperative to the interdisciplinary and the multidiscursive. This is the mode of Jewish studies that welcomes the stranger and the often messy but sometimes transformative and always unexpected encounter with the new that he or she brings to the table. And as important as the gifts that disciplinary strangers may offer Jewish studies are those that they may in turn bring back with them to their home disciplines. Both of these openings—of Jewish studies to the world, and of the world to Jewish studies—are among the most promising and provocative avenues of research today.

Sarah Abrevaya Stein

Maurice Amado Chair of Sephardic Studies, UCLA

Breaking Out

The dynamism of an academic field can be measured not by how strictly its boundaries are defined or defended, but by the frequency and ease with which they are trespassed. Over the last twenty years—a period in which three scholarly generations have labored simultaneously, at times in synchronicity, at times in dynamic tension—Jewish studies has benefited magnificently from the blurring

of “outside” and “inside.” Our scholarship has been enriched as we have begun to turn to sites, sources, languages, and realms of inquiry once viewed as extra-canonical; to publish in journals and book series that reach well beyond the field; to alter (and resist) assumptions about the personal, professional, and political background of Jewish studies professionals; to rethink the chronologies, typologies, geographies, and watershed moments that once framed our classes; to train students as regional or disciplinary or temporal generalists as well as specialists; as, in short, we have begun to broaden our intellectual and institutional communities. What is left, holding us together? Our shared determination to write about things Jewish; to wrestle with how this category (“Jewish”) matters, and when it reaches its epistemological limits. Happily, we are left building while simultaneously breaking out.

David M. Stern

Ruth Meltzer Professor of Classical Hebrew, University of Pennsylvania

Over the last twenty years, Jewish studies has undergone so complete a sea change in virtually all its fields that it’s hard for me to single out a single development from so many. The sea change itself has come from the final assimilation of Jewish studies within the American academy, the humanities in particular. Most of the changes Jewish studies has undergone reflect those in the humanities at large—the breakdown of traditional disciplinary walls, the imperializing spread of critical theory, the growth of “identity studies” of every stripe. There are negative and positive sides to all these developments, though I think the overall balance has been extremely constructive. In all these changes, rabbinics has, somewhat ironically, played the role of the avant-garde, beginning with midrash. The

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for providing the AJS with office space at the Center for Jewish History.

fifteen minutes of fame that midrash and its encounter with literary theory (and theorists) enjoyed some twenty years ago was certainly one of the more exciting developments in which I have personally participated. More recently, the development of a small group of Jewish studies scholars interested in the history of the Jewish book as a material object—a new subfield that truly crosses disciplinary borders with intellectual credibility and integrity—is what currently excites and engages me most; it will be interesting to see where this field is and how it changes other fields in Jewish studies twenty years from now.

Liliane Weissberg

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Would I have been asked this question twenty years ago? Probably not. For one, I was not a member of any Jewish studies organization at that time. Jewish studies seemed to me a field largely populated by men who were focusing on matters of religious studies, textual exegesis, Hebrew philology (and, to a lesser degree, Yiddish language), historical questions predominantly focusing on ancient or early modern Jewry, and very rarely, modern-day Israel. As a woman whose scholarship was impressed by the study of philosophy, literature, critical theory, and gender, I was not sure whether my academic work or I would be able to find a place in such an organization or field, and whether even the subjects of my research would be welcome. After all, I study mostly acculturating German Jews from the Enlightenment period, or early twentieth-century German philosophers who regarded themselves as “secular.”

In the past twenty years, the parameters of Jewish studies have changed and expanded, however, incorporating approaches already tried in other fields, and thereby inventing itself anew. Could one describe the work of Walter Benjamin or Max Horkheimer as Jewish philosophy? I have been asking this question in my own academic work, which tries to return Jewish culture and thought to German studies. Today, questions of this kind have finally been made part of the field of Jewish studies as well.

Have your own answer to this question? Email it to ajs@ajs.cjh.org with The Questionnaire in the subject line. The AJS will continue this discussion on its website.



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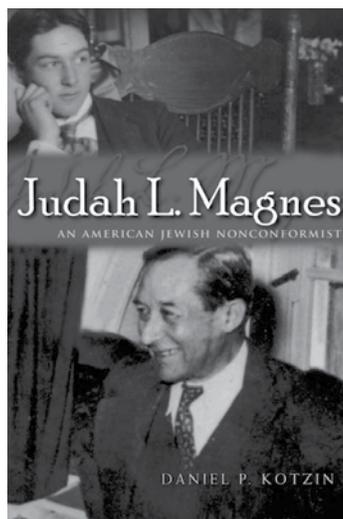
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