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VCU Menorah Review

For the Enrichment of Jewish Thought

Winter/Spring 2006 no. 64

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by Kristin M. Swenson

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A Poem by Richard E. Sherwin

I'm going home where
I thrive in obscurity
My obscurities
My private apocalypse
Unparalleled and unrhymed

By any time I
Could keep except the final
Who would attend to
A leaf at the heart of storms
So silent so violent

Any desire of
Mine is shredded splintered and
Missled to puncture
Your heart before you know it
Is justice *Gd* what mercy

Richard E. Sherwin is professor emeritus at BAR ILAN University in Israel and a contributing editor.

An Exceptional Collection

Classical Liberalism and the Jewish Tradition

by Edward Alexander.

New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

A Review Essay by Rafael Medoff

Edward Alexander is one of the very few scholars who is able, in a single volume, to analyze the writings of such disparate figures as John Stuart Mill, Edward Said and Irving Howe, and make a convincing case that they exemplify a common and compelling theme. Such is the unique astuteness of his mind and the depth of his learning that Alexander manages to bridge the centuries and issues separating those and other personalities, by viewing them through the prism of the uneasy relationship between liberalism and Judaism.

Much has been written by Professor Alexander and others about some liberals' unfriendliness towards Judaism, Jewish peoplehood, or the State of Israel. It will surprise some readers to discover, in the opening essay of this book, that aspects of this phenomenon were manifest as long ago as the mid-1800s, when Mill, author of the famous treatise *On Liberty*, displayed what Alexander calls a "Jewish blind spot" — championing liberties for all, but showing only slight interest in Jews' lack of civil rights. Alexander wonders aloud "whether the inadequacy of his treatment of Jews and Judaism was not a foreshadowing of the failures of his intellectual inheritors."

Alexander follows this theme through subsequent essays which focus on, among other topics, Karl Marx's hostility to Jews and Judaism; the tendency of some Israeli "post-Zionists" to reject Zionism and Jewish identity altogether; and the willingness of the leaders of the Modern Language Association to tolerate statements and actions by the then-president of the MLA, Edward Said, in support of violence.

Sarcastic wit and intriguing literary allusions abound in approximately equal measure in this stimulating volume. Alexander can be rough with

those at whom he takes aim — no rougher than they are with Israel or Judaism, he would say (with justification) — yet he succeeds in making every essay enjoyable reading even for those who will not agree with every word.

Several of the essays also offer rare and rewarding glimpses at the author's personal side. In "A Talmud for Americans," we learn something of his Jewish education as a child and young man. In essays on Howe and Isaac Bashevis Singer, we read of his friendship with those two extraordinary figures. In "Saying Kaddish," we join Alexander in a deeply moving elegy for his father.

Accomplished authors (and sometimes some who are not as accomplished as they imagine themselves to be) are often tempted to assemble collections of their previously published essays. It is, if nothing else, an easy way to add to one's trophy shelf. In many cases, however, one wishes the temptation had been resisted, for some "greatest hits" volumes are, to put it gently, considerably less than great.

Edward Alexander's *Classical Liberalism and the Jewish Tradition* is a remarkable exception, weaving together older essays as well as new ones in a way that makes every one of them seem fresh, interesting and relevant.

Dr. Medoff is director of the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies, which focuses on America's response to the Holocaust (<http://www.WymanInstitute.org>).

Author's Reflections

Living through Pain: Psalms and the Search for Wholeness **Waco, TX: Baylor University Press.**

by Kristin M. Swenson

I do not look like someone suffering from chronic pain. Naturally, people ask, "Why pain? Whatever made you interested in this topic?" Truth is, several things contributed to my interest in pursuing the project that became *Living through Pain: Psalms and the Search for Wholeness*. Pain is universal, yet peculiarly personal. Furthermore, pain underscores the intrinsic wholeness of a person as its effects blur the boundaries between physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and social. In the process, pain presses people to ask questions of meaning; to interpret, to try to make sense of, their suffering. Biblical texts are of special interest to me, and I am struck by the enduring power of the psalms. The psalms are universal, yet peculiarly personal; they speak out of the systemic effects of human experience, including pain, and they model the process of a search for meaning. Consequently, I set out to discover how the psalmists tell their pain, wrestle with it, seek meaning, and how/where they find relief. By listening to these ancient voices telling a timeless experience, I hope to offer something not only of biblical scholarship but also to people searching for health/wholeness — their own and/or those for whom they care.

The Bible interprets suffering in a variety of ways, yet the interpretation that comes first to mind for most people is that pain is the deserved punishment for wrongdoing. While this is indeed well represented within biblical texts, it is not the only way that an individual or group's pain is understood. Jeremiah's great suffering is due precisely to his love for the community and work as a prophet of integrity; Isaiah describes an unnamed individual or group whose undeserved suffering relieves others; Job's enduring pain is the product of a wager that the *satan* makes with God.

Within the collection of psalms we find a variety of interpretations

for pain. Although pain presses people to seek meaning, sometimes the answers can get in the way of healing. The psalmists express this search for meaning, and some suggest reasons/answers for their pain. However, those reasons and answers are not the final word. Each psalm moves and changes, frequently altering one proposed reason for pain in light of a different reason. Sometimes the psalmists set aside the quest for meaning, focusing instead on the greater community/world and the psalmist's place in it. The psalms, then, model the process of interpreting pain without proposing a final answer. Some suggest that while the search itself may be important to healing, finding meaning may not be.

The psalms also express the systemic quality of pain. Pain does not affect only a person's physical body but also his or her mind, spirit, and interpersonal relationships. To live fully while dealing with chronic pain requires candid recognition of pain's systemic effects. Such candor facilitates the process of integrating all aspects of a person into the whole of a life. That is, it aids the process of healing. The psalmists speak out of this whole person nature of pain in a manner that is sometimes disturbingly frank. Listening to the ways in which ancient people whose voices are immortalized with authority in the Bible speak out of pain may help people today candidly note and express the way in which pain affects them on all levels.

The psalms are authentically human. They are people's voices — spoken, sung, cried — out of the range of human experience. The healing which is the integration of a person in his or her very real present context does not follow a tidy step-by-step process. Neither do the psalms present a linear system or one-size-fits-all theology for understanding and dealing with pain. Rather, they model a process, the dynamic nature of pain and of healing. Listening to them, people in pain today and those who care for them may find a manner of expression that aids them in the process of healing. Pain tends to isolate. At the least, listening to these psalms may make a sufferer feel less alone.

I was surprised by several things in the course of reading the psalms

spoken out of pain. One is the role of the psalmist's community in informing his or her experience of pain. Other people influence the sufferer for good and for ill. Some psalms tell of a longing for company, as though simply the presence of others can mitigate one's pain. Some suggest that other people are actually the cause of the psalmist's pain. In these psalms we may find not only anger but also demand for God's vengeance. I take some time in the book to account for the place of such feelings and the role that these vitriolic expressions can play. Some psalms tell of how people exacerbate pain by blaming the sufferer for his or her condition. The logic goes: surely the one in pain has done something wrong or is simply faithless and deserves the pain he or she suffers. In some psalms it seems that the speaker finds some relief by virtue of finding that his or her experience of pain grants something of value to the greater community. That is, by wrestling with pain, the psalmist is uniquely situated to offer something of great value to the community. Finally, some psalms simply turn from complaint, weariness, and grief to focus on others. In that turning and change of focus, they brighten and lighten.

This dynamic quality was another thing that surprised me. The psalms turn, change, and move. While the psalmist may begin with expression of a particular condition, his or her understanding of that condition, feelings, and focus change throughout the psalm. Pain changes, just as we do. The dynamism within psalms strikes me as profoundly honest. Again, there are no answers, no expressions of having "arrived." Instead, the process is itself the end. The expressions of anger, grief, loneliness, hope, and awe in a world bigger than any person are themselves healing.

Healing is different from curing. To be cured is to return to a former state of being. Healing, on the other hand, happens in any and all acts of making whole — mind, body and spirit — fully integrated socially and in the present. It is possible to cure without healing, and to heal without curing. Pain changes a person. Healing acknowledges this reality and does not pretend that things can be just like they were before. Healing requires the courage to be honest about the real presence of a

condition that no one wants. Yet that honesty is critical to the integration of experience into a whole life. It is part of the process of living, not merely surviving.

With the title *Living through Pain*, I hope to communicate this possibility of being fully and wholly alive even in the context of enduring pain. Such vitality makes a place for expressions of anger, grief and even despair within the dynamic of experience. Narrative, telling one's experience, can help piece such feelings together in light of a person's intrinsic wholeness — body, mind, spirit — and in community with others. Narrative, aided by listening to other voices out of and through pain, can help move a person to the integration of self and experience that is itself healing. Further, "living" suggests active participation. In that way, it allows for the possibility that a person in great pain nevertheless can contribute to the greater community. In some cases, such a person's contributions may be of special value precisely because they emerge from a context of suffering.

The subtitle, *Psalms and the Search for Wholeness*, suggests that the psalms model a process, an ongoing search. Reading them does not magically transport a person beyond his or her pain. Neither do the psalms lay out a recipe or prescription for treating pain. Furthermore, they do not suggest that if a person prays hard enough, God will cure. Instead, they witness to different aspects of the experience of pain and tell thoughts and reactions to that experience. In the telling and the dynamism, they invite readers to search with them for an integration of self — body, mind, spirit, and community — into a whole, holy, healed.

I conclude the book with a metaphor that Rachel Naomi Remen uses to illustrate the wonderful possibilities for living through tough circumstances. Because an oyster's body is soft and delicate, it needs the protection of a hard shell. However, in order to live — in order to breathe, the oyster has to open its shell just a bit. Sometimes, a grain of sand gets inside and causes the oyster irritation and distress. Without changing its soft quality, the oyster responds by slowly and steady-

ly wrapping it in translucent layers, creating a pearl, beautiful and valuable, in the place of great pain. With *Living through Pain: Psalms and the Search for Wholeness*, I hope to show how the response of psalmists to their pain may enable readers and hearers to find ways to wrap their own experiences of pain into a life made richer not because of the pain itself but in the process of our response to it.

Kristin M. Swenson is a professor of religious studies at Virginia Commonwealth University and a contributing editor.

Hebrew Literature: Translated and Discussed

Reading Hebrew Literature: Critical Discussions of Six Modern Texts

edited by Alan Mintz.

**Hanover and London: University Press of New England,
Brandeis University Press.**

A Review Essay by Daniel Grossberg

Reading Hebrew Literature: Critical Discussions of Six Modern Texts makes apparent the range and quality of modern Hebrew literature as well as the range and quality of literary criticism of that literature. The design of the book itself contributes to this understanding. Poems and short stories in their original Hebrew and in English translation serve as the primary texts. Critical statements by three different scholars follow and illuminate each story or poem. The following outline of texts and literary commentators shows the inventive format of the book:

1. *The Red Heifer* by M.J. Berdyczewski (tr. William Cutter) William Cutter, Anne Golombe Hoffman, Avner Holtzman
2. *To the Sun* by Saul Tchernichovsky (tr. Robert Alter) Aminadav A. Dykman, Arnold J. Band, Robert Alter
3. *The Sense of Smell* by S.Y. Agnon (tr. Arthur Green) Naomi Sokoloff, David G. Roskies, Alan Mintz
4. *Man's House* by U.Z. Greenberg (tr. Harold Schimmel) Lewis Glinert, Dan Laor, Hannan Hever
5. *Bridal Veil* by Amalia Khana-Carmon (tr. Raya and Nimrod Jones) Nancy E. Berg, Gilead Morahg, Hannah Naveh
6. *Hovering at a Low Altitude* by Dahlia Ravikovitch (tr. Chana Bloch and Ariel Bloch) Barbara Mann, Nili R. Scharf Gold, Chana Kronfeld

A prose piece and a poetic work represent each of three major periods in the development of modern Hebrew literature: numbers 1 and 2 (above), the national Renaissance or Revival, (1881 – 1919); 3 and 4, the Modernist period (1920 – 1947); and 5 and 6, the State period (1948 to the present).

The value of *Reading Hebrew Literature* is multi-dimensional. The three critical statements on each work approach the text from varying perspectives and present several layers of meaning of the poems or stories. A volume with one essay on each work too often suggests that there is but one correct meaning. The set of three interpretive essays presented in this volume corrects the error that such a narrow grasp of art expresses in other books of literary analysis.

The three critical analyses of the six literary works here cast light on the range and variety of literary-critical approaches to literature, and Hebrew literature, in particular, as well. Traditional, historical, feminist, and postmodernist literary criticism are employed in the illumination of one or more of the eighteen literary pieces.

The choice of authors and texts was a wise one. There are too few works of Hebrew literature and literary criticism on Hebrew literature available in English. The authors chosen for this volume are among the most highly regarded writers in each period of modern Hebrew literature. The works of the artists chosen, however, are generally among their lesser-known stories and poems. This is not a negative comment. On the contrary, this anthology exposes readers' to more than the few well-known works that are more commonly available, thus, expanding the readers' familiarity with Hebrew literature. The volume makes a precious contribution toward remedying the dearth of Hebrew literature in English translation. The fine works chosen, the English translations of them, and the literary commentaries on them, moreover, foster a greater enthusiasm and appreciation of Hebrew literature.

Alan Mintz introduces the volume, perceptively tracing the development of modern Hebrew literature and featuring major influences on its form and content. Mintz discusses, for example, the spiritual climate for the Hebrew writers of the National Revival at the outset of the 20th century, "For this generation... writing in Hebrew was not part of an ideological program but rather an attempt at a desperate solution to the unbearable pain of religious and cultural orphanhood. The vast and reticulated resources of the religious tradition that had collapsed

upon them were utilized — often ironically and subversively — to explore the vicissitudes of experience in the world after faith. It was this existential exigency that drove writers to a level of imaginative complexity and invention that turned Hebrew into a serious modern literature.” Indeed, throughout modern Hebrew literature to the present, the subversion of traditional texts appears as a major recurring theme. No fewer than five of the six modern texts presented in *Reading Hebrew Literature* evidence this subversion theme. To illustrate, I cite some observations made by the commentators.

Avner Holtzman writes, “the poetics [of *The Red Heifer*] consists of bold, condensed inter-textual relations with the entire range of Jewish and non-Jewish cultural heritage... Therefore it will not be an exaggeration to claim that almost every sentence of the story is potentially explosive.”

Robert Alter, on *To the Sun* declares that Tchernichowsky’s “radical project was to use the language of the Hebrew Bible... not allusively, as did his predecessors and most of his contemporaries, but in innovative reconfiguration, in order to express an imaginative world that challenges the very ontological postulates of the Bible.”

David G. Roskies points to Agnon’s traditional Hebrew styles that raise contradictions and ambiguity. Roskies writes, “... *The Sense of Smell* combines disparate elements that are not easily reconciled. The story’s homiletic structure, storybook headings, archaic style and anecdotal plot, and its coincidental encounters, dream sequence, and moment of mystical reverie bespeak a world of all-too-perfect harmony. Yet the narrative is riddled with riddles. Is the writer/protagonist a pious raconteur or a misanthrope?”

The very title of U.Z. Greenberg’s poem, *Man’s House* recalls the biblical first man and creates an uncertainty of cosmic proportions. Lewis Glinert recognizes this ambiguity in his comment: “At the same time, we have to grapple with a disturbing poetic ambivalence as to the nature of the human condition and its remedy.” This ambivalence is

embodied in the title. Does it denote “Man’s Home” or “Adam’s Home?”

Nili R. Scharf Gold identifies the shepherd girl in *Hovering at a Low Altitude* with goats. “She may resemble the black goats in her care, so much a part of the landscape, almost invisible and just as vulnerable. Goats, *'izim*, recall for the Hebrew reader kid or goat, *gedi' izim* or *se'ir izim*, the quintessential sacrifice or victim” (Gen 37:31; Lev. 3:12; 5:6).

Scharf Gold suggests that Dahlia Ravikovitch introduces the young girl as a future sacrificial offering. The present volume engages readers and encourages them to seek continuities and nuances of meaning among the modern texts as well as among the literary/critical essays. I applaud the publication of *Reading Hebrew Literature* and I commend Alan Mintz for his editorial decisions. I further recognize the important position *Reading Hebrew Literature: Critical Discussions of Six Modern Texts* will fill in the study of modern Hebrew literature and criticism in universities and in private homes.

Daniel Grossberg is professor of Judaic Studies at the University of Albany and a contributing editor.

Jewish Humor and Jewish Faith

The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America

by Lawrence J. Epstein

New York: Public Affairs.

A Review Essay by Matthew B. Schwartz

American Jewish comedians carried on to the stage certain characteristics of Jewish life: the social conscience and self-criticism, the sense of precise wording and multiple meanings and levels of literary interpretation that came of generations of intense *Talmud* debate, an inflection that stemmed from Yiddish speech and from the Talmudic sing-song melody, the *bon mot* or *vitz* that characterized traditional study of the weekly *Torah* portion in pre-war Europe. The Hasidic masters well understood the value of humor and cherished the wit of a Hershele Ostropoler. It is told of R. Simcha Bunim of Pzyschche that he once saw a man far out in the waters of the Baltic flailing his arms in panic and in danger of drowning. Realizing that he could never reach the man in time to save him, the rebbe tried laughter, shouting out to the man, "Give my regards to the leviathan." The man began to laugh, regained his composure and was able to hold out until help arrived.

Even the great tradition of parables and stories that fill Jewish literature from the Bible through the *Talmud* and Midrash and the Medieval works may well play their role in modern Jewish-American comedy. One also notices that diaries of residents of the Warsaw Ghetto (Chaim Shapiro, Emanuel Ringelblum and Shimon Huberbund) all tell of witticisms and jokes that made the rounds even during the most dreadful times.

Yet there is a great tradition of comedy that stems from Classical Greece as well — the plays of Aristophanes and Menander's sitcoms of a century later. Satyr plays by the great tragedians were presented on the stage in Periclean Athens along with the hard tragedies of Orestes and Oedipus. Plautus, Terence and Martial were great comic writers in Rome.

From which tradition do the American-Jewish comedians draw their life force? Indeed, it is probably from both, although the very idea of a stage performance is fully Greek and fully un-Jewish. The *Talmud* several times warns its readers to stay away from *batei teatraot* and *batei kirkosaot* (theaters and arenas). Greek entertainment, especially theater, often expressed the world of myth, and ancient Jews never developed the idea of theater whether tragic or comic and used instead very different formats for expressing humor. There are two ancient stories — one Greek and one rabbinic that stand as foundation stories for the roots of what laughter and comedy may actually have meant in these two great literatures. Hesiod tells that Zeus sought revenge against Prometheus who had stolen fire from Mount Olympus and brought it secretly to mankind enabling them to live. Zeus sought revenge by giving men a wonderful gift, which they would love to their utter ruin. The very thought of this hostile scheme made Zeus laugh loudly, (“Works and Days,” l. 77) perhaps the first recorded laugh in Greek literature. The gift, of course, turned out to be a beautiful but deceitful woman — Pandora, with her famous box from which came all the world’s troubles.

The *Talmud* (Bava Metzia, 49) also tells a story of God laughing. The rabbis were debating whether or not a certain type of oven was ritually clean. R. Eliezer called on heavenly signs to support his opinion. “If I am right, then let this tree move 400 cubits,” and it did. Several further signs demanded by R. Eliezer were also fulfilled. Finally R. Joshua arose and declared that the “Torah is not in heaven,” i.e. the Law is no longer decided on the strength of heavenly manifestations. The power of legal decision is in the hands of human sages, not of God. We can readily imagine that any Greek who spoke to Zeus in that way would have been speedily destroyed by the god’s thunderbolt. In the *Talmud’s* story, however, God watched the debate, laughed and said, “My children have overcome me.” God’s smile is not an expression of hostility or vengefulness as was Zeus’s. It was an expression of joy and love that people were coming into their own even though, in a sense, it meant some sharing of His divine power.

Now as to Lawrence Epstein's book. *The Haunted Smile* is a history of the Jewish comedians of the United States from 1890 to the present, and it is a good read. People "of a certain age" will call to mind the evenings when they quit playing outside early so as not to miss Uncle Milty's hour or the quick wit of Groucho Marx on "You Bet Your Life." And if these same people have never gotten used to Seinfeld, they will learn something about him. There are Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce, and the long-lasting George Burns and a special chapter on comediennes. Although the book is not primarily anecdotal, there are some good jokes and stories and some cute tidbits of information. Most Jewish readers could probably guess what Time estimated in 1979 — that 80 percent of professional comedians in the U.S. were Jewish. The same readers will be interested to learn that George Jessel was once batboy for the New York Giants. Harpo Marx once offered \$50,000 to the parents of a very cute little girl to adopt her. The parents, of course, turned down the offer. The little girl, not yet famous, was Shirley Temple. Mr. Kubelsky, Jack Benny's father, was very perturbed to see his actor son playing the role of a Nazi in a movie. However, after it was explained to him that the movie was satirizing Nazis, he watched it 46 times.

Other sorts of information: when Milton Berle opened his famous TV show in 1948, his guests were Pearl Bailey and Senor Wences (remember him?), a popular ventriloquist. Sergeant Bilko, played by Phil Silvers, derived his name from major league first baseman Steve Bilko, with the name having also the connotation of bilking someone. Eddie Cantor's radio show was cancelled in 1939 after he publicly attacked Father Coughlin as "playing footsie with the Nazis." Cantor was out of work for a year until Jack Benny intervened with the advertisers to reinstate him. In 1948 during the Israeli War for Independence, Cantor held a meeting in his house to raise money. Benny sent in a blank check, which was ultimately filled in for \$25,000. The Marx brothers got their start in comedy rather serendipitously. At first a musical act, the brothers were performing in Nagadoches when the audience left the theater to watch a wild mule. When the audience returned, an

angry Groucho began to lambaste them. Thinking it was part of the act, the audience laughed uproariously.

Epstein raises the idea many times that comedy is not actually as funny deep down as it seems to be on the surface. The Jewish comedian, he says, is haunted by the Jewish past and by anti-Semitism — thus the “haunted smile.” Comedians deal too with their own personal anxiety-ridden lives. Epstein often uses words like anxiety, tension, struggle, anger or hostility to describe the thought world behind Jewish comedians. Laughter can express a sense of powerlessness or survivor’s guilt. The comedian may seek control over an alien audience. Freud is cited as connecting Jewish humor to a release of nervous energy, to an expression of sexual desire or to self-ridicule. A 1975 study by Samuel Janus found that comedians are frequently haunted by early lives characterized by suffering, isolation and feelings of deprivation. Humor gives a form of protest against their lives, their families, their pain. Janus administered I.Q. tests to a number of comedians and found the average score to be 138 with some soaring above 160. Also 80 percent had been through some form of psychotherapy. However, other studies have argued quite a different view — that comedians tended to have many responsibilities as children, and they learned to use humor to help handle younger siblings.

Yet, in all this, Epstein seems to have neglected the sort of Jewish humor that the Talmudic story expresses — not hostility but warmth and caring and the smile of God, which lavishes love and encouragement on human beings, or the rabbi of Pzyschche’s witticism, which likewise gives strength and support to a fellow human in crisis. Such humor is not prompted by anxiety or hostility. It is an expression of humanity and wisdom. Classical Jewish humor shares certain features with every other type of humor. But in its highest manifestations, it expresses faith and confidence in a loving God.

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

Reading Writing

History and Literature: New Readings of Jewish Texts in Honor of Arnold M. Band

edited by William Cutter and David C. Jacobson.

Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies Series 334.

A *Review Essay* by Peter J. Haas

It is always hard to write a review of a collection of essays. This is especially true if the essays are not part of a conference or thematic colloquium, but a collection of essays written in honor of an individual scholar. This difficulty is compounded if the scholar being so honored is, like Arnold J. Band, not only himself a model of interdisciplinarity, but has produced a vast host of scholars, each of whom has gone on to pursue his or her own field of interest. What results is less a set of essays addressing a single topic than a variety of writings of diverse sorts and foci. Nonetheless, this diversity does not seem out of place. Maybe that is because Arnold Band himself was a personage of such broad interests that none of the essays seems to be completely beyond the pale of his own work. The collection, however, is eclectic, ranging from detailed analysis of individual poems and works, to much more theoretical discussions.

Arnold Band's intellectual home was Hebrew literature. But he understood that Hebrew literature was not just and simply the produce of the Jewish nation narrowly considered. It was part of the larger literary output of the Jewish tradition in general, from rabbinic texts to Hassidic folktales to Yiddish literature and also part of world literature. It is for this reason that in his own career he pushed for the teaching of Yiddish on the UCLA campus, under the theory that one could simply not understand early modern Hebrew literature without knowing its Yiddish *Vorlage*. For this same reason, he spent time and energy founding the program in Comparative Literature. For Band, Hebrew literature had to be rooted both in its own past and in its cultural context. It is thus not surprising at all to find in the present volume a

variety of perspectives and writing that covers virtually the range of Jewish literary creativity from a variety of angles.

In many ways, the first section of the collection, entitled “Classical Jewish Texts and Modern Interpreters” gets to the heart of the matter. This section contains six essays dealing with the question of text and interpretation from Talmudic times to the mid-20th century critic of interpretation, Simon Rawidowicz. There is a common thread that runs through all the essays here, or rather through all of the texts that are discussed, namely the relation of the Hebrew literary tradition to contemporary appropriations of it. David Gordis, for example, approaches this problem through the topic of the redaction of the Talmudic text. On the one hand, according to Gordis, this is a collection of older materials. On the other, it is much more than that. While it attempts to collect and preserve, it does so with the clear interest of making its own point. The emotional cost of this kind of operation, at least in the modern world, is wonderfully teased out by Alan Mintz in his essay on Bialik’s reaction to the publication of *Sefer Ha’agadah*. This too was a work of retrieval and preservation. But it also in the process created its own frame of reference, and in so doing took its diverse midrashic pericopes out of their original context and laid them out for us in general categories, like pictures on display in the various rooms of a museum. This raises the deeper question of how one can preserve the past at all, especially the rabbinic Jewish past in a post-rabbinic world. Is a piece of midrash really understandable when taken out of its original literary and social context and put to use in a modern anthology? This is a question understood and answered from a number of perspectives, as is clear from the remaining essays in this section: Ezra Spicehandler’s discussion of Bialik’s *Scrolls of Fire*, Joseph Dan’s discussion of Nahman of Bratslav’s *The Seven Beggars*, David Ellenson’s dissection of Yehiel Jacob Weinberg’s *Seridei Esh* and David Myer’s discussion of Rawidowicz. In each case the author struggles with how one can take the older literature and make it relevant for the future, especially the new Hebrew future of the Haskalah, the Yishuv and the State of Israel. It is of course precisely this problematic that

animated Band in his own commitment to developing at UCLA a way of studying Hebrew literature that was diachronic (aware of its own past), synchronic (aware of its own context) and carried out in the idiom of the modern American university (aware of its present audience). While many of these essays make a specific reference to Arnold Band's own biography, they all, in their own way, address his intellectual agenda.

After this general methodological survey, the rest of the Festschrift devotes itself to specific topics that were dear to the heart of Arnold Band. The second section, consisting of eight contributions, focuses on the work of S.Y. Agnon. Agnon was of course of interest to Band because Agnon himself was also caught up in the task of bridging two worlds. His use of language and of place look backwards, but he is already writing for the embryonic new Jewish state. (By the way, it is almost eerie reading Dan Almagor's essay on Agnon's *From Foe to Friend* in which Almagor cites a reference from the 1920s by Zeev Jabotinsky in which Jabotinsky claims the Arabs can be changed from foe to friend only through the creation of an "iron wall" that will separate the peoples and that the foe can not break! Jabotinsky was talking metaphorically, of course, but it is still good to be reminded from time to time that the shape of the Middle East conflict has persisted curiously in its present form for nearly a century.)

The remainder of the Festschrift, and its bulk, is much more loosely organized, representing possibly more the range of people who agreed to participate than any underlying thematic concern emerging from Arnold Band's own work. Part III, for example, comprises nine submissions under the title "Diaspora." What unites the essays here, it seems to me, is that fact that each deals with some literary voice from the diaspora, whether medieval Ladino folktales (as in Tamar Alexander's study of *The Wealthy Senior Miguel*), German Jewish fiction (Michael Meyers's look at Heinrich Heine's *Prinzessin Sabbath*), or Modern American writings (such as Murray Baumgarten's look at Philip Roth). Included in this section is a brief but thought-provoking essay by William Cutter on Berdyczewski's qualified notion of the centrality of Hebrew. Also included in this section is a discussion of Bialik's poem

"Tsafririm" by Glenda Abramson. Part IV, "Zionism, Holocaust, and Israel" is a melange of 15 essays, covering, as the title of the section makes clear, a variety of topics. One gem in this section is a reminiscence of Agnon written in 1979 by Aharon Appelfeld ("The Kernel"). But a good deal of the material presented here deals with a variety of Israeli authors, including Abraham Sutzkever (who arrived in Eretz Yisrael on the infamous ship "Patria"), Dan Ben Amotz, Dan Pagis, Aharon Megged, A.B. Yehosua, Yehuda Amichai and Zeruya Shalev. Embedded in this section is an essay by Walter Ackerman entitled "What Learning is Most Worth?" addressing early statements on what the goals should be of Israeli public education. The Festschrift closes, of course, with a list of Arnold Band's publications and a brief biography of each of the contributors.

In the end, this collection is a remarkable tribute to Arnold Band. In its own eclecticism, the book mirrors in some profound way the intellectual career of its honoree. This has its good points and its bad. On the one hand, there is something here for everyone, regardless of period or expertise. On the other, the book in its entirety is not helpful for any one field. Nonetheless the quality of most of the essays, and the range covered, make this collection a worthwhile addition to any library that claims to keep abreast of developments in the field of Jewish Studies, and Jewish literature more specifically.

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The Uniqueness of American Judaism

American Judaism: A History

by Jonathan D. Sarna.

New Haven: Yale University Press.

A Review Essay by Melvin I. Urofsky

This is a book that is long overdue, and the funny thing is that I did not realize it until I began to read it. There are a number of histories of Jews in America, including the near encyclopedic work by Howard Morley Sachar, *History of the Jews in America* (1992), in which we can follow the triumphs and tribulations of Jews in the *goldena medina* from 1654 onwards. Of course, in these works one would always find some discussion of Judaism, although often it boiled down to a brief description of the difference between Sephardim and Ashkenazim, the rise of the Reform movement in the mid-19th century, and then the beginnings of the Conservative movement at the beginning of the 20th. If one looked closely, one might also find a passing reference to Mordecai Kaplan and Reconstructionism, or the surprising revival of Orthodoxy. But if one wanted to learn about Judaism the religion as it fared in the United States, as opposed to the Jewish people, all one had was the long out-dated work by Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism* (1957).

Sarna, the Braun Professor of American Jewish History at Brandeis University, is one of our pre-eminent scholars of Judaism and of the Jewish people in America. What makes him such a good scholar, however, is what else he knows. One can, perhaps, examine a particular doctrinal issue in a Talmudic manner without ever paying attention to the outside world. But to understand Jews and Judaism in this country one has to understand the major currents not only of American history but of religion in America. What Sarna understands is that while Judaism is unique, the pressures upon it for the last 350 years are not; they are the same pressures that confronted Catholicism and Lutheranism and every other religion. The openness of American society, the

freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment, the lack of an established church, the inability of any one Protestant sect to gain hegemony over the others, and above all, the secular nature of the country all made it impossible for any religion to turn inward and ignore the world outside. (Even the Amish, perhaps the most successful practitioners of insularity, had to go to the Supreme Court to exempt their children from compulsory schooling laws.)

Sarna begins with a story. Thirty years ago when he first became interested in American Jewish history, a distinguished rabbinical scholar growled at him: "American Jewish history! Ill tell you all that you need to know about American Jewish history: The Jews came to America, they abandoned their faith, they began to live like *goyim*, and after a generation or two they intermarried and disappeared. That is American Jewish history; all the rest is commentary. Don't waste your time. Go and study *Talmud*." Fortunately Sarna ignored this advice.

While it is true that from the beginning some Jews abandoned their faith and intermarried, in fact many did not, and in time those who clung to Judaism would be reinforced by the arrival of new Jews from the Old World. Each wave of immigration would bring new baggage with them, and this would then impact upon the established culture, leading to change. The arrival of Jews from the Germanic states in the mid-19th century helped fuel the rise of Reform. The millions who fled Eastern Europe between 1880 and 1920 led to the creation and growth of Conservatism. The refugees who came after the Holocaust laid the groundwork for the totally unexpected resurrection of a strong Orthodoxy. And all the time each generation had to deal not only with the demands of the faith, but with the demands of America.

As Sarna shows, they did this in much the same way as did other religions. The synagogue-congregation became the hybrid secular-religious entity common to Protestant churches, ruled not by any national chief rabbi but by local lay leaders. (Sarna has a good chapter on the effort to establish a chief rabbinate in the United States and its failure.) The role of women in the synagogue — an oxymoron in East-

ern Europe — became a staple of American Judaism, as the religion evolved into a unique combination of formal worship in the synagogue and familial rituals at home. While the ultra-orthodox, especially those who came after 1945, tried to avoid American society, most American Jews see themselves as Americans who believe in and practice Judaism. They are defined less by their religion than by their nationality, a trend that makes very good sense in a country that does not ask its citizens to list their religion in any official document.

Years ago I was part of a group of scholars working in American Jewish history who argued that in order to truly understand our history, we had to lay equal emphasis on both words — American and Jewish. Sarna's book is the triumph of that particular fight. His book will be read, and rightly so, not just by those interested in Judaism, but by those who want to know about religion in America. He interprets American Judaism broadly, and by casting his net so widely he informs us about things that we often ignore. Judaism in America does not take place in a *schul* or a temple; it takes place amidst social, economic, political and cultural events and developments.

These changes took place over many years, and in many different ways. It included the introduction of English into the ritual; mixed seating of men and women; the use of music in the liturgy, along with a choir and organ; the decision by the conservative movement to allow its members to drive to synagogue on the Sabbath; the changes in the American rabbinate and the evolution of the rabbi from a learned but remote figure into a more pastoral role; the rise of the sisterhood movement to reflect the growing importance of women in religious undertakings; the synagogue-center that attempted to meld religious and secular needs; and many others.

There is not enough room here to go into the very rich feast that Sarna lays out before us. I am in awe of his learning, because he draws from so many strands, so many traditions, and so many disciplines. Moreover, he writes well, at times elegantly. This book will be a pleasure for both scholars and laypersons to read. Does this Catholicism

deprive Judaism of its uniqueness? Not at all. Judaism, despite what some ultra-orthodox claim, is not just the *Torah* and the *Talmud*. It is the history of a people in many lands and in many times, each one unique. But America has always been unique in a special way, a land of freedom and opportunity like none other in the long history of the Jewish people. As Sarna so convincingly shows, this milieu changed not only the people but their religion as well.

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Noteworthy Books

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

Jews and the German State: The Political History of a Minority, 1848-1933 by Peter Pulzer. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press.

Lubavitchers as Citizens: A Paradox of Liberal Democracy by Jan Feldman. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud by Jeffrey L. Rubenstein. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

The Jewish Enlightenment by Shmuel Feiner. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Religion as a Public Good: Jews and Other Americans on Religion on the Public Square, edited by Alan Mittleman. Lanhan, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

Nazis and Good Neighbors: The United States Campaign Against the Germans of Latin America in World War II by Max Paul Friedman. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Making Jews Modern: The Yiddish and Ladino Press in the Russian And Ottoman Empires by Sarah Abrevaya Stein. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Right to Exist: A Moral Defense of Israel's Wars by Yaacov Lozowick New York: Doubleday.

Jews, Turks, and Other Strangers: The Roots of Prejudice in Modern Germany by Jerome S. Legge Jr. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Spinoza's Modernity: Mendelssohn, Lessing, and Heine by Willi Goetschel. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Poles, Jews, and the Politics of Nationality by Joshua D. Zimmerman. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Witnessing the Disaster: Essays on Representation and the Holocaust, edited by Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Spinoza's Book of Life: Freedom and Redemption in the Ethics by Steven B. Smith. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Harnessing the Holocaust: The Politics of Memory in France by Joan B. Wolf. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

Remains of the Jews: The Holy Land and Christian Empire in Late Antiquity by Andrew S. Jacobs. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

A Guide to the Zohar by Arthur Green. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press

The Zohar (Pritzker Edition), Volume Two, translated with commentary by Daniel C. Matt. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

Israeli Family and Community: Women's Time, edited by Hannah Naveh. Portland, OR: Vallentine-Mitchell.

Gender and Israeli Society: Women's Time, edited by Hannah Naveh. Portland, OR: Vallentine-Mitchell.

Yom-Tov Lipmann Heller: Portrait of a Seventeenth-Century Rabbi by Joseph Davis. Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization.

Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration, 1945-1979 by Jonathan Huener. Athens: Ohio University Press.

Women, Birth, and Death in Jewish Law and Practice by Rochelle L. Millen. Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press.

Reading Hebrew Literature: Critical Discussions of Six Modern

Texts, edited by Alan Mintz. Hanover, NJ: Brandeis University Press.

The Poetry of Asher Reich: Portrait of a Hebrew Poet by Yair Mazor. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Judaism in America by Marc Lee Raphael. New York: Columbia University Press.

The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942 by Christopher R. Browning. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Rembrandt's Jews by Steven M. Nadler. University of Chicago Press.

Lifesaving Letters: A Child's Flight from the Holocaust by Milena Roth. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Still Life with Bombers: Israel in the Age of Terrorism by David Horowitz. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

The Return of Anti-Semitism by Gabriel Schoenfeld. San Francisco: Encounter Books.

A People Who Live Apart: Jewish Identity and the Future of Israel by Elks van Diggele. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

Shiksa: The Gentile Woman in the Jewish World by Christine Benvenuto. New York: St. Martin's Press.

The Gush: Center of Modern Religious Zionism by David Morrison. New York: Gefen Publishing House.

Holocaust Voices: An Attitudinal Survey of Survivors by Alexander J. Groth. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books.

The Torah Revealed: Talmudic Masters Unveil the Secrets of the Bible by Avraham Yaakov Finkel. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Small Acts of Kindness: Striving for Derech Eretz in Everyday Life by Shalom Freedman. New York: Urim Publications.

Remember to Dream: A History of Jewish Radicalism by Robert Wolfe. New York: Jewish Radical Education Project.

Making God's Word Work: A Guide to the Mishnah by Jacob Neusner. New York: Continuum.

The Temple Mount: Where Is the Holy of Holies? By Asher Selig Kaufman. Jerusalem: Har Yeraeh Press.

The Jew as Outsider: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives by Jack Nusan Porter. West Newton, MA: The Spencer Press.

