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# VCU MENORAH REVIEW

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## For the Enrichment of Jewish Thought

### Tales to Engage

*Rabbinic Stories*, translated and introduced by Jeffrey L. Rubenstein. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press

A Review Essay  
By Earle J. Coleman

Jeffrey L. Rubenstein introduces didactic stories that have the power to enlist the heart, mind and will, thereby demonstrating that no learning surpasses that in which all of these faculties participate. Beginning with the miracle story of Hanukkah, from the Talmud, and concluding with the top of sin and repentance in the stories of Elisha ben Abuya, Rubenstein clarifies texts that are possessed of a brevity and subtlety which sometimes render them challenging. He observes that the point of these stories was not to convey authentic history; rather, they were intended to convey ethical lessons for future generations. In terms of genre, it is preferable to think of rabbinic stories as revelatory fiction. Aristotle would, however, remind one that poetry is more philosophical than history, because the latter is limited to what particular events have happened, but poetry is more speculative, considers universals, and addresses what might occur. As with unsigned paintings, the genesis of rabbinic stories is obscure, for they derive from schools rather than individual authors. There is, however, little ambiguity about the message of a typical anecdote: the thought and actions of the rabbi who animates the story, illumine how others should live their lives. After all, such rabbis are sages and who knows better how to live his life than a sage?

As in the Confucian tradition, rabbinic morality involved emulation of an ideal figure; again, as in Confucianism, the exemplary person presented a capsule "sermon," rather than a lengthy exposition. Regrettably, in recent times, the notion that we should model our actions on ideal moral agents—an idea which was also supported by Aristotle—all too often gives way to var-

ious versions of relativism. Filial piety is a cardinal virtue in Confucianism as it is in rabbinic thought. Confucians point out that no other humans can be more important than one's mother and father, since they are the source of his being. A person may have five spouses, but she can only have two parents. In Judaism, respect for one's parents naturally follows from the commandment to honor one's father and mother. In one rabbinic story, a man loses a large sum of money, because to gain it he would have to disturb his sleeping father. Rabbinic thought stipulates, however, that honoring one's master is loftier than honoring one's father, for one's father brought him into this world, but the master lead him into the world to come (Mishnah Bava Metsia 2.11). By contrast, Confucians are emphatically this-worldly. When Confucius was asked about the life to come, he told his disciples not to be concerned about it, adding that if one leads a good life in the here and now, the afterlife will take care of itself.

Rabbi presented the golden rule as follows: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the entire Torah." Interestingly enough, Confucius also formulated the rule negatively: "Do not do to others what you would not like yourself." He was later criticized by Christians who regarded his version as inferior; i.e., as less direct than "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you." Of course, the negative and positive formulations are logically

identical. Moreover, the writings of Confucius contain both. Finally, the import of ritual is affirmed in both traditions. Confucius greatly respected the treasure of ritual, as when a youth bows before his master. If the youth fails to bow, he is being disrespectful and the relationship between the two is weakened. Apart from its moral significance, a ritual is also a work of art, since it is a means by which one expresses his emotions. Indeed, a ritual is often the vehicle by which one conveys her most profound emotions. Thus the bowing ritual is not a trifle any more than the rituals of Judaism are dispensable. Of course, a ritual may disappear, change or be suspended by another ritual, but rituals themselves are indispensable because they perform the essential task of allowing humans to commune and to communicate their emotions in an aesthetic way. At weddings, it was customary to present a cock and a hen before the bride and groom in order to promote reproduction. Once when a Roman troop took the birds, the Jews attacked the Romans ferociously, demonstrating that to violate a ritual is a serious offense against a culture.

Addressing the problem of evil, Rubenstein states a common rabbinic response: in this life, good humans suffer because even they have sinned occasionally, and bad humans flourish because even they have performed a few meritorious deeds. But in the future life, the good receive only rewards and the bad receive only suffering. According to Rubenstein, Nahum of Gamzu may have regarded suffering as a means by which to atone for one's sins. But as popular and recurring as this theodicy has been, it can hardly account for the suffering of innocent children. And when Rabbi Yohanan declares that God delivers suffering only to those who can endure it, one wonders about those who, undergoing great anguish, take their own lives. The pain of rabbinic martyrs is sometimes explained with reference to their rewards in the next world or with the claim that God wanted to spare them from some impending and great agony in this life. Theologians and philosophers, who find no theodicy to be plausible, will appreciate the face that, in Talmud

### IN THIS ISSUE

- *Reflections by the Author:*  
*Rochelle L. Millen*
- *The Study of The Holocaust And Its Discontents*
- *Jews Courageous*
- *Thinking Heart of A Concentration Camp:*  
*The Spiritual Journey of A Young Woman in Holland Under Nazi Occupation*
- *Great Russian-Jewish Historians*
- *Noteworthy Books*

Bavli Berachot, three rabbis want nothing to do with suffering, despite the manifold benefits that some theologians associate with it.

The practice of dialectics in the rabbinic tradition was of central but not supreme importance. In the academies, the art of disputation flourished, but skill in debate was invalidated when a sage made the moral mistake of offending or insulting his opponent. In short, one had to temper the presentation of logic with the ethical values of sensitivity and fellow-feeling. Accordingly, Rubenstein recognizes Rabban Gamaliel for his habit of humiliating other sages. In argumentation, not only does one risk hurting someone's feelings, but one may also fall into sophistry. The following illustrates such fallacious reasoning: "A lame man and a blind man ate the figs they were supposed to guard. They defended themselves individually: 'I have no eyes to see,' said the blind man. 'I have no legs to walk,' said the lame man. But a sage argued that they could have combined their efforts. The moral is that body and soul, as united, will be judged together."

Talmudic storytellers raise a fascinating question when they ask of the merit acquired by the study of Torah can be nullified by sin. In the case of the sinner, Elisha ben Abuya, ultimately his former pupils, to whom he had taught Torah, intervened and supported a negative answer. And although God rejected Elisha, his pupil Rabbi Meir convinced God to allow Elisha admission to the world to come. When a rabbi declared that no mercy should be shown toward Elisha, his daughters told the rabbi not to pay attention to his deeds but to his Torah. Rabbis wrestle with another philosophical matter when they assert that although everything is foreseen, humans have free will. Here the point is that doing good deeds and following the commandments (mitzvot) can alter one's fate. Therefore, moral acts benefit the doer as well as the receiver. Of course, this response to the problem of free will is based on faith, since there is no argument but only the assertion that if one lives righteously, he can shape his destiny. As with any philosophical issue, there are different replies to the question: Can God forgive even the worst sinner? A negative response might suggest that God is limited in his mercy. A positive response implies that the vilest sinner who repents in the last second of life will earn the same reward as someone who has had a life-long commitment to righteous living. Obviously, the latter moral agent needs no consolation if she believes that virtues is its own reward.

The diversity of topics and tones in Rubenstein's selections can be demonstrated through several examples. Rabbinic stories sometimes deliver humor, and especially wit: "To escape from an encounter with the Romans is to be like the Egyptian stork that removed a bone from a lion's throat and lived to tell about it."

Sometimes a rabbinic narrative is as startling as it is informative. For example, in the oft-quoted story, The Oven of Akhnai, one reads that just as the majority is authoritative over the minority, the sages are authoritative over God. To justify their claim they appeal to the Torah that God has entrusted to them. God responds with laughter and declares: "My children have defeated me." The importance of the practical is evident in a story about a rabbi who values wood over wine and oil, for to bake a loaf of bread takes "60 loads of wood." Commenting on a lesser-known aspect of the rabbinic tradition, Rubenstein explains that in the intimate atmosphere of the academy, separations between colleagues or students and their masters were as upsetting as failures of marriages or within families. Occasionally, he includes material that bears on relations between Judaism and Christianity. For example, one anecdote relates the extreme view that it was better to die than turn to a Christian for medical aid. Another story recounts the deed of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, who lived in a cave for 13 years, suggesting the optimistic point that light appears even in the darkest places. Perhaps the most valuable feature of the stories is what, through our own interpretations and evaluations, they may teach us about our own religious views.

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## The Study of The Holocaust And its Discontents

*The Politics of Hate: Anti-Semitism, History and the Holocaust in Modern Europe.*  
By John Weiss. Chicago:  
Ivan R. Dee

A Review Essay  
by Peter J. Haas

The perennial question of how the Holocaust could happen in the middle of twentieth century Europe remains both pressing and unanswered. There have been, to be sure, no shortage of attempted answers, focusing on everything from the traditional Judeophobia of the Church, to the racism of Social Darwinism, to the emotional traumas of World War I to economic pressures of the Depression to individual psychoses. All of these avenues of approach have their utility, and all seem to answer at least part, but only part, of the

question. It is certainly fair to say, however, that today, sixty years after the death camps hit their stride, we really do not yet have a satisfactory answer as to why the Holocaust occurred. At best we have intriguing and insightful studies that illuminate certain aspects of the myriad events that made up the Holocaust. But a final understanding still eludes us, and may in fact never be established. Yet as we gain further remove from the Holocaust and as scholarship in the area has matured, we do learn more and more about the various forces – political, economic, psychological and intellectual -- that lay behind the Shoah. Holocaust studies have already taught us a lot, even if one of the lessons is that there is still much more to be learned.

It was with these thoughts in mind that I approached the book at hand. When I first saw the title of John Weiss's book, *The Politics of Hate: Anti-Semitism, History and the Holocaust in Modern Europe*, I assumed that what was in front of me was a book that was going to analyze the politics of race and hatred that fueled the formation of the Holocaust as state policy. I thought I might learn something about how racial, religious or social hatred was used by twentieth (and twenty-first?) century politicians to achieve certain ends. I hoped that insights garnered by this study might make us more aware of when and where future genocides might be taking shape. In the end, however, Weiss's book disappoints on all these fronts. It offers no new analysis and affords us no new insight. It simply tells us, albeit in a compact and fluent way, what we already know, namely that the Holocaust was the result of centuries of Judeophobia which in the nineteenth century became the ideology of anti-Semitism and that this ideology became part of the political discourse in most of the countries of Europe in the decades leading up to World War II. While this is not trivial, it surely is ground that has been already trod by many scholars.

The book is broken down into 11 chapters. The first chapter is a general overview of the origins of European anti-Semitism. While well-written, as I said, the chapter contains no fresh research or new knowledge. It simply rehearses the centuries of Jew- and Judaism- hatred that were part of classical Western culture. This introductory chapter is followed by two chapters on the politics of anti-Semitism in Germany (up to 1914 and from 1914 forward); two chapters on the politics of anti-Semitism in the Austrian Empire (up to 1918 and from 1918 forward); two chapters on France (to 1914 and from 1914 forward); two chapters on Poland (to 1918 and from 1918 forward) and one chapter entitled *The Italian Exception*. All this is followed by a short chapter of *Concluding Speculations*. This organization of matters suggests that the

author had in mind an analysis of how in the first four countries mentioned (Germany, Austria, France and Poland) anti-Semites were able to deploy their Jew-hatred into mass (if not majority) political movements that in turn made acceptance (or at least toleration) of the Holocaust possible. The chapter on Italy was to make, as it were, the counter-case; that is, to present us with a country in which anti-Semitism did not become part of routine political dialogue. By contrasting the first four and Italy, the author would then be in a position to tease out what made the politics of Italy different and so derive lessons for the contemporary world. Unfortunately, this is not what happened. The recounting of all this history was not mined for nuggets of new insights into the political processes that generated the Holocaust.

The failure to carry out the apparent plan lies in the fact that in each of the chapters the politics of anti-Semitism in the relevant country is not so much analyzed as simply described. This is no small feat in its own right and has its own usefulness. Thus when reading chapter six (France Before 1914) the reader comes away with a good overall view of the role anti-Semitism played in France starting with the Revolution and Napoleon, through the political alignments of the First Republic, the rule of Charles X, the Second Republic, Napoleon III and the Third Republic and so on. Along the way we learn about the role of Alsace-Lorraine, how the Action Française came into being, the role played by the Catholic Church, the impact of Edouard Drumont's *La France Juive*, and the Dreyfus Affair. In short, one gets in a relatively brief sweep a good overview of the history of the shaping of French political anti-Semitism up to World War I. The problem, however, is that once again nothing that is said in this chapter is new. That is, the author has not gone into archives or done other primary research that throws fresh light on any of these developments. Further, there is no method of analysis that helps us understand the established data in a new way. To be sure the various parts are laid on the table and related to each other, but no new meaning emerges from this exercise. It is as if the author expects us to get the point on our own, or as if the data self-evidently provides for its own interpretation.

The interpretation of the facts leading up to the Holocaust is not, of course, self-evident. In fact the presentation here, by making this assumption, is misleading at a very fundamental level. The various chapters focus almost exclusively on one line of discourse, namely anti-Semitism, to the exclusion of virtually all other trends and forces except as they impact the development of anti-Semitic rhetoric. The result is that one could easily come away from reading Weiss' book with the conviction that anti-Semitism was at the very center of all political dis-

course in the West during the nineteenth century. The chapters on France, for example, allude to other central issues such as the question of the nature of French society, the place of the monarchy in French identity, the struggles with modernity, the place of the Roman Catholic Church and so on. But these come across as side issues that are relevant only insofar as they nudge anti-Semitism in one direction or the other. It is of course true that there were always anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic voices in France, and there were times, as in the Dreyfus Affair, when anti-Semitism moved to center stage for a while. But France (or Germany or Poland or Austria) faced many other political agendas and for most of the time anti-Semitism was not at the center but at the fringes of these debates. In short, the brief overviews given here provide a rather distorted view of the politics of the century and a half leading up to the Shoah. In fact, anti-Semitism in nineteenth century European politics is best understood in its larger context, as part of the complicated weave of political, social and economic struggles and activities that made up modern European states' attempts to define themselves. It hardly needs to be said that there was much in French politics that did not denigrate Jews and even supported them. At the end of the day, then, the question is not whether or not there were anti-Semites in Europe, we all know that there were. The question rather is why and how this one stream of political rhetoric suddenly rose to become a European-wide policy of genocide in the 1940's. This is precisely what is not addressed in the book. As I noted above, it is as if the author assumes that by merely documenting the existence of anti-Semitism he has thereby in some way explained the Holocaust.

In this regard, the chapter on Italy is actually somewhat illuminating. Weiss does show us that anti-Semitism in Italy simply did not rise to the pitch, or achieve the resonance, that it did in the other four countries. Again, I am not sure this is news, but in his rehearsal of how anti-Semitism functioned (or did not function) in Italian political rhetoric, one begins to see a scheme of analysis. There does seem to be something fundamentally different about Italy. But what this is never becomes the subject of sustained reflection or methodologically rigorous analysis. The chapter on Italy is another parade of facts. Thus one comes to the last chapter hoping that this final speculation will finally at least limn out the possibilities for further research and reflection. But here again this expectation goes unfulfilled. Instead, the chapter gives us platitudes about how Europe is different nowadays, how ethnic tensions seem to rise in the wake of the fall of multi-ethnic empires and how the development of modern technology in general and weapons in particular has played a role in modern ethnic and racial

genocides. Again, I have no particular quarrel with any of these conclusions, but they are neither strikingly new, nor do they really flow from the preceding chapters. In fact, ironically, the book may function best if read in reverse B the concluding chapter articulating the basic assumptions while the preceding chapters serve to illustrate those assumptions.

I should end by saying that this book is useful in its own way. It documents anti-Semitism in Europe in a clear concise and accessible way. But for those looking for an analysis of how the politics of anti-Semitism were used to overtake all other considerations to become the guiding ideology of Europe and so produce the Holocaust, then this book will not prove to be helpful. The Holocaust remains as inexplicable, and unexplained, as before.

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## Jews Courageous

*The Brigade: An Epic Story of Vengeance, Salvation, and WW II.*  
By Howard Blum. Harper Collins.

A Review Essay  
by Matthew Schwartz.

With all the intensity of a good novel, *The Brigade*, tells the story of the Jewish Brigade -- a unit of 5000 Palestinian Jews who fought in the British army in Italy during the closing months of World War II. It is well researched, based on many eyewitness accounts as well as government and military records and published works. This is not a systematic comprehensive history of the Jewish Brigade. Instead, Blum focuses on the stories of three officers -- Israel Carmi, Johanan Peltz and Arie Pinchuk. This proves an effective device for conveying not only facts but events in which emotions were very powerful. For there are moments in this story when a reader will feel impelled to make decisions about great historic dilemmas, and there are other moments when even the most objective of readers can hardly hold back tears. Carmi began life in Danzig, while Peltz and Pinchuk came from small towns in Eastern Europe. All three had fled Europe to Palestine in the late 1930's.

The British were reluctant to include a Jewish unit in their army for fear that Jewish boys trained in the skills of warfare could one day use those skills against the British occupation of Palestine. Indeed this was an important aim of the Jewish leaders, and

many of the Brigade's soldiers, in fact, did return to Palestine to fight against the British and later against the Arab invaders in 1948. It was with some reluctance then that the Brigade was finally shipped to Italy and sent to the front lines late in 1944. They fought well for some months in the area of Bologna, often suffering heavy casualties. There were noteworthy moments, such as the rise of a Jewish flag in battle, perhaps for the first time in centuries, and later the raising of the flag over a captured German command post. Fourteen German soldiers, caught sleeping in their bunks were awakened by Captain Joram Lewy shouting, "Heraus, ihr Schwein. Die Juden sind hier."

These young soldiers were very conscious of their Jewishness and of their place in the process of history. In 1943, when the first soldiers of the Jewish Brigade were training in Benghazi, they refused the order of a British colonel to remove their Magen David flag. The incident nearly led to a mutiny which would have seen Jewish and British soldiers shooting at each other, but the matter was finally compromised quietly.

The Passover of 1945 was memorable. Carmi led a seder with his men in a trench. After all the activities of the day, most of the supplies for the seder never arrived. The mules carrying the Passover items had bolted under a Nazi artillery barrage. It was late into the night before Carmi led the kiddush over a tin cup which held only a sip of wine. The seder was makeshift, and Carmi was lonesome for his wife and daughter back home. Yet he felt that this seder was making all future seders possible.

These were not ordinary times, and men like Carmi had strong sense of what they were fighting for. With the end of hostilities in May, the Jewish Brigade entered into a new phase. They were to be sent into Germany as part of the occupying force. However, an incident in which some Jewish soldiers threatened violence to Nazi prisoners led to a change of plan. They were stationed instead in Tarvisio, a town in Northern Italy near the borders of Austria and Yugoslavia. Tarvisio turned out to be a passage way for thousands of refugees, and it was from these people that the Brigade soldiers began to comprehend the full measure of what had been done to the Jews of Europe. Peltz and Carmi were able to visit Poland, where they saw the camps and visited Zabiec, Peltz's hometown, only to learn that his family had been entirely wiped out. The two men returned much affected by their experience. Carmi joined British intelligence, planning to use his position to find and punish Nazi criminals. Execution squads organized by Brigade officers in fact assassinated 200 Gestapo or SS men in the months after the end of the war in Europe. Carmi and Peltz and another soldier, Oly Givon, became expert at luring Nazis into the woods alone where Carmi and Peltz

would execute them "in the name of the Jewish people."

Yet, as full of righteous anger as these men were, they found their role as avengers troubling. Finally an incident took place which set Carmi and Peltz on another track. They learned through American intelligence about an SS officer hiding in a church in a small Polish town. Driving to the town, they entered the church fully armed in their Brigade uniforms with the Star of David on the shoulder. A group of young girls singing there disturbed them. They decided to wait until the girls left. After a bit, one of the girls ran shyly to Carmi and pointed to his Star of David. "Magen David," she said. "Are you Jewish," Carmi asked her in Yiddish. Indeed she was. Her family had been murdered, and she wanted to leave the nuns and to be with other Jews. The two soldiers forgot their original purpose and took the twelve year old Eve back to a barracks for Jewish children in Italy.

From that point, Carmi and Peltz along with others of the Brigade joined the secret network helping the bricha -- the clandestine transfer of Jewish refugees from Europe to Palestine in the face of harsh British opposition. The story continues to read like a mystery thriller with forged documents, brilliant ruses, harrowing escapes -- and some tragic failures.

So typical of Jews through history, Carmi also helped to establish schools for the children in the detention camps. The Jewish soldiers felt the intense human warmth and the sense of miracle in bringing new life and hope to the people who had survived so much. Brigade soldiers stationed in Holland and Belgium did important work in secretly collecting and shipping arms to Palestine for the Haganah. Carmi was involved in the amazing story of 1014 refugees crowded on an Italian ship, the *Fede*, whose name they changed to the *Tel Hai*. When the British refused to let the ship sail from Italy to Palestine, the people went on a hunger strike and threatened to commit mass suicide. With international pressure growing, the British finally sent Harold Laski, the Labour Party leader, who negotiated a settlement, and the *Tel Hai* did sail.

A moving sub-plot interwoven with the Brigade's activities is the story of Arie Pinchuk. Born and raised in Reflavik in the Ukraine, Pinchuk became increasingly worried about his family from whom he had had no word since early in the war. He spent many weeks searching DP camps all over for his young sister Leah, until finding her in a camp near Linz.

Some readers might be perplexed by the chapters describing Jewish soldiers hunting down and executing Gestapo and SS criminals. Can this be justified? Indeed, Carmi and the others felt little compelled to obey the laws of nations, even Britain, that were unfair and harmful to Jews who had

gone through so much. Author Blum recounts a discussion between Peltz and Pinchuk. Peltz felt that the executions were a duty to the memory of the slain. "Future generations need to know that Jews avenged the deaths of their brothers." Pinchuk agreed that it was right to take revenge on people who killed one's own family but argued that wider revenge was too close to murder and was immoral. Carmi had been overwhelmed by his visit to Mauthausen and felt that it was necessary to pay back for centuries of cruel persecution. He became convinced that the passivity of the ghetto Jews had helped make the Holocaust possible and that the Jewish-haters needed to learn that the Jews would strike back. Blum himself suggests that these men achieved a higher sort of vengeance -- by building the State of Israel.

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### Thinking Heart of A Concentration Camp: The Spiritual Journey of A Young Woman in Holland Under Nazi Occupation

*Etty: The Letters and Diaries  
of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943,  
edited by Klaas Smelik and  
translated by Arnold  
Pomerans. William B.  
Eerdmans Publishing*

A Review Essay  
by Cliff Edwards

Some will know Etty Hillesum, the young Jewish woman from the Netherlands murdered at Auschwitz in 1944, through the 1984 work *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries and Letters of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943* or the 1986 *Letters from Westerbork*. Now this 2002 publication of 800 pages brings these sources and more together in one volume along with almost 700 carefully prepared explanatory notes.

Etty, or Esther, Hillesum was the daughter of a Russian mother and a Dutch father who taught the classics in a series of Dutch schools before his dismissal with other Jewish teachers during the Nazi occupation. Etty, born in 1914, attended grammar school in Deventer, studied law in Amsterdam, and took master's exams in Dutch Law in 1939. Later she studied Slavic languages, gave lessons in Russian language and literature, and acted as disci-

ple and secretary to Julius Spier, a "psycho-chirologist" who had undergone instructive analysis with C.G. Jung in Zurich. At Jung's recommendation, Spier had opened a practice in Berlin before leaving Nazi Germany for Amsterdam in 1939.

But these few background details do not prepare one for the free-spirited young woman who kept a diary from age 27 to 29 in an Amsterdam feeling the tightening grip of Nazi oppression. Her frank musings on her sexuality, devotion to her Jungian mentor, longing to become a great writer, and will to suffer with her people, fill hundreds of pages of introspective self-examination and keen observations regarding her times. Scattered references document the Nazi regulations requiring the wearing of the yellow star, exclusion of Jews from public transportation, confiscation of bicycles, closing of parks and shops to Jews, multiplying stories of arrests and murder.

In the midst of the Nazi threat, Etty's growing spirituality, meditative reading, and deepening sense of a mission to champion the power of love over hatred, become increasingly evident in her journal entries and letters. She read the Psalms and the Gospel of Matthew, van Gogh's letters and St. Augustine, Dostoevsky and Jung. But above all, she constantly read and copied out passages from Rainer Maria Rilke's Letters to a Young Poet and Book of Hours. She confessed, "Rilke... fills my days and is part of my being" (447).

The reader's knowledge that Etty will die at Auschwitz at age 29, in November of 1943, makes her struggle to find a life-work all the more poignant. She felt that she "must write," become a novelist or poet, perhaps "join a psychological practice," complete her Russian studies and become a "mediator" between Russia and the West. But as the journal progresses, she sees her mission more and more as being "the chronicler of the things that are happening" in Nazi occupied Holland. Even that mission gradually transforms into her need to simply be with her people in their suffering. She therefore refuses the offers of friends who wish to hide her, and she returns, even from a sick-bed leave in Amsterdam, to work at Camp Westerbork, a "Police Transit Camp" in the barren Drenthe region, a camp that gradually became a pause on the way to Auschwitz for thousands of Jews.

Through the Bible, Jung, Rilke, and her people's suffering, Etty discovers that "... there is a really deep well inside me. And in it dwells God" (91). Her journal entries often become prayers or inward conversations, a "silly, naive, or deadly serious dialogue with what is deepest inside me, which for the sake of convenience I call

God" (494). On God's relationship to the plight of the Jews she affirmed:

And God is not accountable to us for the senseless harm we cause one another. We are accountable to Him! I have already died a thousand deaths in a thousand concentration camps. ...And yet I find life beautiful and meaningful (456).

The reader will find in Etty's journal rich material on spiritual formation, mystical moments of enlightenment during which she speaks with the moon, trees, flowers, friends, and the depths within. Equally haunting are her descriptions of her love for Camp Westerbork and her poetic descriptions of that barren landscape:

At night the barracks sometimes lay in the moonlight, made out of silver and eternity, like a plaything that had slipped from God's preoccupied hand (529).

As Etty struggles to discover her proper life-work, it may well dawn on the reader that she was fashioning her only literary masterpiece through her journal entries, and that the "piece of God" deep inside her was creating one of the most poignant "songs" of the Holocaust. In October of 1942 she wrote:

There is no hidden poet in me, just a piece of God that might grow into poetry. And a camp needs a poet, one who experiences life there, even there, as a bard is able to sing about it (542).

One might well find Etty's descriptions of her transforming self to be among the most revealing of her journal entries. She names herself "the girl who learned to pray" (547), and records the hope that she might become "the thinking heart of a whole concentration camp" (543).

Among the letters preserved in this volume are two by witnesses who describe Etty's sudden departure on a "transport" train from Westerbork to an uncertain fate in Poland, to what we know turned out to be Auschwitz. One letter notes that she "for herself asked only for a Bible and a Russian grammar (669). It adds that "on a postcard picked up on the railway line" Etty had written, "we left the camp singing." A letter by a second witness describes Etty walking to the train "talking gaily, smiling, a kind word for everyone she met on the way" (667). It goes on to state, "I think she was actually quite looking forward to this experience, to sharing anything and everything in store for us all" (668).

*Cliff Edwards is professor of religious studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, contributing editor and editorial consultant. His most recent book is The Shoes of Van Gogh: A Spiritual and Artistic Journey to the Ordinary.*

## Great Russian-Jewish Historians

*Evrei V Rossitskoi Imperii xviii-xix: Sbornik Trudov Evreiskikh Istorikov (Jews in the Russian Empire XVII-XIX Century: A Volume of Works of Jewish Historians, edited by A. Lokshin. Moscow-Jerusalem: Jewish University in Moscow Press.*

*A Review Essay  
by Brian Horowitz*

The editor, A. Lokshin, opens this edition of essays by the most important Russian-Jewish historians of the end of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century this way: "For the Jewish intelligentsia in Russia, the beginning [of work] in national history was an important signpost for the development of Jewish self-consciousness in Russia" (5). The idea that the essential requirement for national identity is the creation of a national past is obvious today. Yet how did the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia invent their history?

The writers featured in the volume come from the period 1890-1920, during which national consciousness suddenly erupts and flashes in a marvelous burst, only to be forcibly extinguished by the late 1920s. Recall the years after the pogroms of 1881-82 and the establishment of the "temporary" May Laws with their suffocating legal restrictions. But one also found the development of a Jewish workers movement (Bund), an increased interest in Zionism, and the rise of a broad, acculturated intelligentsia, composed of both university graduates and businessmen. The works here by Semyon Dubnov, Maksim Vinaver, Saul Ginzburg, Israel Tsinberg, Pesakh Marek, Iulii Gessen, and Semyon Ansky reflect the vitality of Jewish consciousness at this time.

And they were explosive pyrotechnics! These were the years when Jewish historiography fully matured, when one after another there appeared brilliant editions of materials, memoirs, letters and volumes of scholarly research: Registers and Inscriptions (regesty I nadsipi) (2 vols [1899]), Our Experience (Perezhitoe) (4 vols. [1910-1913]), 25 volumes of the journal, Jewish Past (Evreiskaia starina) (4 vols. [1910-1925]) and Jewish Encyclopedia (16 volumes [1906-1913]). For a short time, historical endeavors towered over the

other arts, over music, literature, poetry and even, if only momentarily, over painting.

Rarely are historical articles worthy of reading 100 years later, factual knowledge and scholarly method are superseded, ideological positions become dated. But the works in this volume remain vital today for two reasons. Since the Soviet government prohibited independent research on Russian Jewry, non-ideological scholarship was blocked during the 70 years of Bolshevik rule. Because of a lack of competition, these essays retain much of their importance in the Russian language. Secondly—and this regards scholars in English—the historians articulate a particular Russian-Jewish consciousness which itself deserves careful interpretation.

Although their political views are not exposed here, it is not difficult to connect the historical work with political advocacy. In his politics, Semyon Dubnov, a leader of the *Folkspare*, articulated the necessity for Jewish autonomy and nationhood. His historical writings serve as it were to summarize the reasons for Jewish political independence. Writing about Jewish economic life under Nicholas I, Dubnov describes what occurred when the Jews lacked control of their fate. "The economic life of the Jews was completely shattered by the system of cruel guardianship which lasted a quarter of a century. With this system the government wanted to 'transform' their life. All these police activities—the hurling of people from country to city, from the border zone to within the Pale, the repression of some professions and the artificial encouragement of others—could create no economic reform, rather destruction" (p. 381).

Or take, for example, the work on the early Jewish workers' movement by Boris Frumkin, who was one of the leaders of the Bund and an editor of many Bundist publications. Despite the inability to organize a successful Jewish worker's movement in the 19870s, socialist ideals were already receiving form in the realm of the Hebrew language. In the monthly journal, *Assefat Chachamim* (Meeting of Wiseman), were printed ideas which would inspire later Bundists. For example, in "Visions of a Madman" (1878), the early socialist Moris Vinchevsky (pseudonym) writes: "Go and tell them that all people are brothers, that in nature there are not great and no little people, lords and slaves, rich and poor, that there is not a person in the world who could say, 'I have the right to use the fruits of your work, the labors of other people's hands'" (p. 634).

This volume also offers key pieces on the history of the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia, its cultural organizations and groups. The editor includes Semyon Dubnov's appeal for the creation of a Russian-Jewish historical society, a frag-

ment from Maxim Vinaver's memoirs, detailing his experiences in the Historical Division of the Society for the Promotion of Enlightenment and Semyon's Ansky famous appeal of 1909 for a Jewish ethnography in the introduction to his article, "Jewish Folk Art." In that article, Ansky calls for the creation of a Jewish ethnography to save the artifacts of "our people." He urges: "Each year, each day, marvelous pearls of folk art die, disappear, Dying, the old generation, predecessors of a cultural break, carry the heritage of a thousand-year-old folk art to the grave.... At present an urgent task stands before us: to organize a systematic and broad collection of works in all the fields of folk art monuments of the Jewish past, descriptions of all the aspects of old Jewish life" (p. 643).

Looking at the choice of essays, one is urged to ask: do these essays offer a coherent and united historiography? I do not believe so. Despite the apparent unity of theme, the authors treat very different subjects. More importantly, these historians do not share any methodological or ideological approach. While Dubnov asserts the primacy of the unified experience of the Jewish people, Pesakh Marek focuses on the fissures within Russian Jewry. The question of the Russian government's attitudes interests Iulii Gessen, while the fusion of ideas and individuals attracts Israel Tsinberg.

Nevertheless, the issue of power in the diaspora, which has become so important in today's Jewish historiography, is present here. In fact, in these essays one can see the origins of our contemporary problematics. In over half the essays, the authors deal with the problem of political power, taking as their premise the view that the Jews were not entirely powerless and that the disappearance of overt political independence led to the construction of other centers of political, economic and religious control. For example, in his article, "The Crisis of Jewish Self-Rule and Chasidism," Pesakh Marek connects the rise of Chasidism to the weakening of the Kehilla. Similarly, in his "Predecessors of the Jewish Enlightenment in Russia," Israel Tsinberg shows how the struggle against Chasidism enlivened traditional rabbinical power by making it open to Western knowledge. In this way, rigorous rabbinicalism was a force of intellectual control, particularly in the Northeast, balancing the Jewish community between the extremes of mysticism and secular enlightenment.

Interestingly, Professor Lokshin features those historians who envisioned a vibrant Jewish life in Russia, as opposed to emigration and Zionism. This is clearly a political decision. This volume with its

emphasis on Jewish history in pre-revolutionary Russia, and its neglect of the Soviet period, appears to be in tune with the resurrection of Jewish culture going on in today's Russia. Instead of looking for predecessors in other countries, or in their own recent past, today's Jewish intellectuals are reaching to the years just before the Bolshevik revolution when Jewish historians were engaged in creating a modern Russian-Jewish history. Ironically, is this multivalent past on which, so it seems, they have placed their unambiguous hopes for vigorous future for Jewish life in Russia.

*Brian Horowitz is Associate Professor, Director of the Program in Jewish Studies, Sizer Family Chairholder in Judaic Studies at Tulane University, and a contributing editor.*

## CHILDREN'S MERITS

stranded in heaven  
childless broke and combing the  
beaches for bottles  
to cash in for coconuts  
no credit left and hungry

for eternity  
and thirsty for good deeds too  
late to do and stripped  
ancestral bank accounts and  
despondent stuck with judgments

Not totally lost  
though second hand discounted  
slowly wireless word  
floats up the shore of those we  
helped to something better and

relieved the futures  
chargeable upon the good  
they and those they help  
will do and I may yet man  
a check out counter for saints

Richard E. Sherwin  
Herzliya, Israel

# NOTEWORTHY BOOKS

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

**Platforms and Prayer Books: Theological and Liturgical Perspectives on Reform Judaism** by Dana Evan Kaplan. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

**Into The Inferno: The Memoir of A Jewish Paratrooper Behind Nazi Lines** by Yoel Palgi. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

**The Military and Militarism in Israeli Society**, edited by Edna Lomsky-Feder and Eyal Ben-Ari. Albany: State University of New York Press.

**The Woman Who Laughed at God: The Untold History of the Jewish People** by Jonathan Kirsch. New York: Penguin Putnam Inc.

**Israel, the Impossible Land** by Jean-Christophe Attias and Esther Banbassa. Stanford University Press.

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

**Beyond The Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia** by Benjamin Nathan. Berkeley: University of California Press.

**The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics: Bundism and Zionism in Eastern Europe** edited by Zvi Gitelman. University of Pittsburgh Press.

**My War: Memoir of a Young Jewish Poet** by Edward Stankiewicz. Syracuse University Press.

**History and Literature: New Readings of Jewish Texts in Honor of Arnold J. Band**, edited by William Cutter and David C. Jacobson. Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies.

**The Image of the Jew in American Literature: From Early Republic to Mass Immigration** (2nd edition) by Louis Harap. Syracuse University Press.

**Birthing the Nation: Strategies of Palestinian Women in Israel** by Rhoda Ann Kanaaneh.

**Translating Israel: Contemporary Hebrew Literature and its Reception in America** by Alan L. Mintz. Syracuse University Press.

**American Jewish Women's History: A Reader** edited by Pamela S. Nadell. New York University Press.

**Myths in Israeli Culture: Captives of a Dream** by Nurith Gertz. Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell.

**The Politics of Hate: Anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust in Modern Europe** by John Weiss. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher.

**Conversos, Inquisition, and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain** by Norman Roth. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

**The Jewish Book of Fables: Selected Works** by Eliezer Shtaynberg. Syracuse University Press.

**Immigrants in Turmoil: Mass Immigration to Israel and its Repercussions in the 1950s and After** by Dvora Hachohen. Syracuse University Press.

**What A Life! The Autobiography Of Pesach'ke Burstein, Yiddish Matinee Idol**. Syracuse University Press.

**What Jews Know about Salvation** by Rabbi Elliot B. Gertel. Austin, TX: Eakin Press.

**A Love Made out of Nothing and Zohara's Journey** by Barbara Honigmann. Boston: David R. Godine Publisher.

**The Rabbi and the Hit Man: A True Tale of Murder, Passion, and the Shattered Faith of a Congregation** by Arthur J. Magida. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

**Looking Backward: True Stories from Chicago's Jewish Past** by Walter Roth. Academy Chicago Publishers.

**Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting** by J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler. Princeton University Press.

**From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible** by Lillian R. Klein. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

**Holocaust Historiography: A Jewish Perspective** by Dan Michman. Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell

**Constructing the Holocaust** by Dan Stone. Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell.

**Like Leaves in the Wind** by Rita Blatberg Blumstein. Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell

**Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship** by Lawrence Fine. Stanford University Press.

**The Pluralistic Halakhah: Legal Innovations in the Late Second Commonwealth and Rabbinic Periods** by Paul Heger. New York: Walter De Gruyter.

**In The Shadow of the Holocaust: Nazi Persecution of Jewish-Christian Germans** by James F. Trent. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.

**Nothing Sacred: The Truth about Judaism** by Douglas Rushkoff. New York: Crown Publishers.

**The Stakes: America and the Middle East** by Shibley Telhami. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.



**NOTEWORTHY BOOKS**, *continued from page 7*

*The Origins of Nazi Violence* by Enzo Traverso. New York: The New Press.

*The Curtain: Witness and Memory in Wartime Holland* by Henry G. Schogt. Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

*Identity Theft: The Jew in Imperial Russia and the Case of Avraam Uri Kovner* by Harriet Murav. Stanford University Press.

*The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy* by Gil Anidjar. Stanford University Press.

*Imagining Zion: Dreams, Designs, and Realities in a Century of Jewish Settlement* by S. Ilan Troen. Yale University Press.

*You Shall Not Stand Idly By* is a new book published by the American Jewish Committee and written by Dr. Steven Windmueller, director of the Hebrew Union College's School of Jewish Communal Service in Los Angeles, and one of our contributing editors. It is an essential handbook for Jewish political advocacy and the Jewish community relations field. Dr. Windmueller reviews core principles and techniques of Jewish community relations and offers strategies to meet the ever-changing political landscape.

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