



2003

Menorah Review (No. 58, Spring/Summer, 2003)

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VCU MENORAH REVIEW

NUMBER 58 • CENTER FOR JUDAIC STUDIES OF VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY • SPRING-SUMMER 2003

For the Enrichment of Jewish Thought

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The Quest for the Historical Rabbi

*The Sinner and the Amnesiac:
The Rabbinic Invention of
Elisha ben Abuya
and Eleazar ben Arach*
by Alon Goshen-Gottstein
Stanford University Press

A Review Essay
by Peter J. Haas

In 1962, Jacob Neusner, then a newly minted Ph.D., published his biography of Yohanan ben Zakkai. It was a fairly standard biography for the time, rather Wissenschaftlich in its attempt to glean from the Rabbinic traditions whatever actual facts were there so as to produce a more or less accurate historical account of the life of a particular sage. But the biography also turned out to mark the end of an era. It occurred to Neusner, at some point in the process, that the stories about Yohanan he was getting from later (say, Amoraic) sources were of a different character than those he was finding in earlier (i.e., Tannaitic) sources. By arranging the stories about Yohanan by source and in the order of their appearance rather than by events and in the order of Yohanan's life, Neusner discovered that while he could not write reliably about the actual life of the historical Yohanan, he could write about the history and development of the traditions that created the legend of Yohanan. Thus appeared in 1970 his *Development of a Legend: Studies on the Traditions Concerning Yohanan ben Zakkai*. The rest, so they say, is history. In that methodological transition a paradigm shifted and Neusner—along with his students—applying for almost the first time the already well-established methods used in Biblical studies, launched a new approach to the academic study of Rabbinic texts. His concern, as he puts it, was not with the content of the traditions but with their formation, in particular, the history of the forms in which they were cast. The focus

was no longer on names and events that had reference across the Rabbinic literature but on the characteristic approach each document took in articulating its contribution to the Jewish tradition. This, of course, threw into question whole generations of scholarship. Needless to say, the reception was rough, even vicious.

The notion that the Rabbinic stories and legends tell us more about their authors than their subjects is now being taken more or less for granted by most academicians of Judaism. There is little doubt, outside maybe portions of the Yeshiva world, that the Talmud, for example, is composed in layers and that the successive authors of these layers had different interests and agendas when they went about their work. In some cases, Jeffrey L. Rubenstein's recent *Talmudic Stories*, for instance, this shift in view needs merely to be acknowledged along the way. To be sure, many contemporary scholars no longer share Neusner's interest in "Form Criticism," but the notion that the Rabbinic legends have to be treated as legends and not bits of reliable historical data has taken hold. It is, in fact, hard nowadays even to imagine anyone trying to write a "biography" of a Talmudic age in the model of the 19th *Wissenschaft*. The revolution of the seventies has become virtually commonplace.

In light of this development, the book before us is both expected and surprising. On the one hand, the basic premise of the book is perfectly in line with the new approach. Goshen-Gottstein approaches the stories of Elisha ben Abuya and Eleazar ben Arach not as the stuff out of which a biography can be written but as the vehicles through which the Rabbinic authors set about "work-

ing out ideological concerns that are central to Rabbinic culture" (p. 269). As he says in the introduction, "The suggestion that the study of Rabbinic biography is the study of the evolution of traditions allows us to reflect on the role of interpretation in the formation and development of biographical stories" (p. 13). In other words, for Goshen-Gottstein, the Rabbinic legends are the common tools by which the transhistorical community of Rabbinic sages work out and express its intellectual problems. What is surprising after this start is the length to which Goshen-Gottstein goes again and again (and again) to reiterate and even justify this way of reading the Rabbinic literature and is not sure at all that his readership is. In fact, at times it sounds like the author is not so much applying the method as still trying to establish its validity. A few examples will illustrate my point. His analysis of the Bavli stories in Chapter Four ends as follows: "The point of the episode is not Elisha's sinning but his identity. It can be concluded that what is told of Elisha in this story has more to do with the storytellers and their manner of making a point than it does with the historical portrait of Elisha ben Abuya and his actions" (p. 124). Chapter Five, which looks at the stories of Elisha's relationship to Meir, ends by asserting that the result of this chapter's investigation leads to the conclusion that "...Elisha ben Abuya's story is not his own. It is the story of Rabbis, of the Torah and of its values..." (p. 162). Then, in Chapter Six, Goshen-Gottstein concludes, "[O]nce again, the material presents more about the world of rabbis and their ideology than about the historical Elisha ben Abuya" (p. 198). Then, on the next page, Goshen-Gottstein begins his summation of the Elisha ben Abuya stories as follows: "My analysis of the narration of the story of Elisha by the Bavli and the Yerushalmi shows that in order to appreciate the details of the stories, we must first recognize the broader ideological concerns that shape the narration. It is now clear that the storytellers are not interested in transmitting historically accurate information..." (p. 199). Even in the middle of chapters the argument unfolds

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in a way to make it at times hard to determine whether the author's main interest is in using the method or in establishing it.

But with this obsessive need for justification aside, Goshen-Gottstein in fact carries out the demands of this method with remarkable insight and subtlety. His examination of the traditions and stories take on life and color by the prodigious connections in language and reference he draws to other stories, traditions and teachings across the literary board. The scholarly control of the literature reflected in his work is truly impressive. In some ways, this is reminiscent of more standard Talmudic *pilpul*, but the object in the end is always to find the common vocabulary and store of symbols on which the authorship of one or another story about Elisha is drawing. In this way, Goshen-Gottstein is even able to show how later stories can, at times, be best understood as commentaries and interpretations of earlier materials. We have not a series of discrete legends but a complex web of legends and their later commentaries, expansions and interpretations, which themselves then become the basis for further elaborations and commentaries. One can really see generations of Rabbinic minds at work as they contemplate and re-contemplate the nature of the sage through their analysis of the strange events attributed to Elisha ben Abuya's and Eleazar ben Arach's lives. I only wish Goshen-Gottstein had kept his focus on this rather than constantly reminding us that his method is really OK.

A word should probably be said at this point about the choice of these two particular sages as the subject of this study. One feature that commends these men, Goshen-Gottstein informs us, is that the body of material on them is very limited, making a study of the depth we find here possible at all. Another, and for Goshen-Gottstein's purposes a very important one, is that both Elisha ben Abuya and Eleazar ben Arach are relatively obscure figures that have had virtually no role to play in the development of standard Rabbinic halakhah. This frees them, as it were, to serve as ciphers with which the Rabbis can work out their own issues concerning the nature of the sage and the character of true scholarship. In the case of Elisha, the issue, Goshen-Gottstein argues, is what happens when a true Torah scholar like Elisha (the stories of his conversion to idolatry are later) sins in such a way as to mislead students. Can he in fact be excluded from heaven for misleading students despite his Torah scholarship? Or, to put matters another way, does Talmud Torah really outweigh everything else? As the tradition of Elisha evolves, various aspects of this conundrum are held up for examination. For Eleazar, on the other hand, the question is one of method in studying Torah. The question is whether a sage is to be active and innovative, like a flowing spring, or a more

or less passive repository of past wisdom, like a well-lined cistern. In each case, the way the Rabbis go about adducing their diverse answers is not by stating great philosophical principles but by describing the details of some exemplary personality. The events narrated in one story then become the focus of later interpretations that hone the conclusions to a finer point. As Goshen-Gottstein assures us, "...the act of interpretation can be applied to a person or a situation as much as to a text. Rabbinic culture is a culture of interpretation. The grand cultural oeuvres are great tomes of interpretation..." (p. 263).

While at times repetitious and plodding, the book does show us where an application of source and literary critical readings on the midrashic literature of the Rabbis can take us. Together with books like Jeffrey Rubenstein's we see a vista before us that promises to throw light on the internal ideological and philosophical struggles of the Rabbinic estate as it attempts to define and shape itself in the first millennium. This book is one more powerful testimony to how important it is to move from a credulous and historicist reading of the Rabbinic literature to a reading that focuses on the mind of the authorship. It is the inventors, not their inventions, that should interest us when reconstructing how, and why, Rabbinic Judaism took the shape that we have inherited. Despite its uncertainty, this book is an important, and impressive, contribution to that project.

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"Giants" Are Still Human

Elie Wiesel and the Politics of Moral Leadership
by Mark Chmiel
Philadelphia: Temple University Press

A Review Essay
by Kristin Swenson

How much should we expect from giants? For what should we hold great persons responsible? When do the cumulative words of prolific writers and the sustained actions of seemingly tireless activists become empty and hypocritical? Elie Wiesel, Jewish survivor of Hitler's Nazi atrocities, has become a giant of a human being. Simply to list his accomplishments—writing and teaching through books, essays, interviews, speeches, advising heads-of-state, and facilitating dialogue in the university classroom and be-

tween Nobel laureates and world leaders—is a feat. Mark Chmiel argues that what Wiesel has done is not enough. Chmiel claims that not only is it not enough but, in some cases, it should have been different. Chmiel's book is well-researched and well-written, but he has missed the mark. He has missed the humanity of one who champions the humanity of others.

Chmiel identifies the goal of his book on page 15: "My aim is to analyze the stringent either/or in Wiesel's discourse, practice and evolving social location: Either a political silence before victimization (which benefits the powerful) or a practical solidarity (which sides with the victims of power)." Chmiel's method is clear. He uses Wiesel's passionate call for action in the face of human rights abuses, his uncompromising demands for justice and Wiesel's own example of seemingly tireless activism against Wiesel. The author cites Wiesel's commission to side with and speak for victims around the world, and then identifies examples of Wiesel's silence and/or failure to demand justice from perpetrators guilty of abuse.

In the process, Chmiel attempts to portray Wiesel as political, despite Wiesel's sustained refusal to be so identified. Chmiel cites this refusal and Wiesel's espoused suspicion of politics and politicians; and then Chmiel shows how Wiesel has operated within a political arena, enjoyed the audience (even friendship) of many heads-of-state and affected the political atmosphere through his writings, private meetings and public appearances. And Chmiel easily succeeds in all these things. He has a larger-than-life target; and so, paradoxically, he has missed the mark. Wiesel is a giant but not larger-than-life. Chmiel's criticisms of Wiesel suggest that Chmiel is himself interested in championing the humanity of the world's citizens and in bringing guilty parties to justice. If so, Chmiel has confused his target with a fellow archer. The need for people to fight cruelty, environmental degradation, hatred, greed and ignorance around the world is depressingly enormous. Instead of applauding his companion's struggle against injustice and abuse, and taking up where Wiesel's limitations leave off, Chmiel has chosen to spend a great deal of time and effort attempting to portray Wiesel as a self-interested hypocrite.

In Chmiel's attempt to reveal sufferings and injustices that have been and continue to be unsatisfactorily addressed, that is, in his quest for the humanity of all, he has paradoxically denied the humanity of his primary subject. Chmiel's research and methods have left no room for the questions, the dreams and the appreciation of mystery that Wiesel proffers to those who listen. Wiesel does not claim to have done everything perfectly nor to have all the right answers. Rather, he has posed a constant challenge to himself and to anyone who will listen to seek

what is good and to condemn whatever is wrong. But Chmiel dismisses Wiesel's style as "an apocalyptic rhetoric, so different than the rationalistic, categorizing tendency of 'the scholars'" (p. 34).

Some of us have the luxury of indulging naivete, others the luxury of analyzing straightforward facts to arrive at rational conclusions. To those of us who have not suffered senselessly in the face of a hatred that rejects one's own being, who have not been forced to witness the humiliation and torture of those we hold most dear, Wiesel may seem illogically preoccupied with his own. Those of us who have not experienced punishment for no crime, abuse that defies reason and cruelty that dissects the spirit have the luxury of saying "ah, the madness of fear" about those who have.

Chmiel's evaluation of Wiesel vis-a-vis Israel and the Palestinians, in particular (though not only), is not unique. Others have also criticized Wiesel's comparative silence in the face of Israeli injustices. Here, too, Chmiel is right...and wrong. In criticizing Wiesel's posture vis-a-vis Israel, Chmiel neglects to consider three interrelated aspects of Wiesel's position, aspects that are characteristic of a particular human being. One, Wiesel has explained that he fears anti-Israel sentiments will fan feelings of anti-Semitism and send it raging through the world like wildfire again. Two, as a Jew who does not live in Israel, Wiesel has been the target of reproach from Israeli Jews; as a Diaspora Jew, he is reticent to criticize Israel outside of Israel. Three, Wiesel has shown in his novels, stories and plays that Israel is to him as intangible and fantastic as it is a physically and temporally bound, geographic locality.

Out of the baffling mix of nature and nurture, of personality/character and life experience, out of the mystery that composes each individual, Wiesel has emerged as a kind of realist-madman, extraordinarily sensitive to anti-Semitism. Our world, with its long history of suspicion for and violence against Jews, has proved that it needs such people. Wiesel has shown himself able to inform and mobilize millions of people both by clear and sensible calls for accountability and compassion as well as by the poetic prose of his many stories. Yes, as a Jew he has dedicated himself to Jewish causes more than any other(s); but no, he has not denied the human rights of any other group. On the contrary, he has both spoken out about many different issues, and he has provided public forums for others who know the particulars of other issues better than he.

The interrelated aspects that inform Wiesel's position with respect to Israel and to the Palestinians are characteristic of one human being. That does not mean they should be defining characteristics of everyone. Indeed, Wiesel's position not only need not but cannot be everyone's. As with

any issue worth discussing, there are at least two voices that must be heard; and seldom, if ever, can one person fully describe both or all sides. Wiesel has eloquently shown his image of Israel, expressed his concerns and shared his hopes for the Jewish state. He has not hidden the fact that the welfare of Israel is his first priority; and, given his personal history, that seems simply human. But Wiesel has also articulated, in the absolutist terms that expose him to the criticism of people like Chmiel, that cruelty must never be tolerated, that people must speak out for those who are disenfranchised and abused. Consequently, others have rightly depicted very different images of Israel as itself guilty of crimes against Palestinians. That is, others have taken up Wiesel's charge and spoken out against the position that Wiesel himself holds. Paradoxically, then, Wiesel has encouraged this.

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Wiesel's novels, stories, essays, plays and speeches are filled with questions, many of which are never answered; some maybe have no answers. In the enormous body that is Wiesel's written work, there are these constant and humbling reminders of the limits of knowledge and the limits of a life. Also recurring in Wiesel's work, written and otherwise, is the theme of dialogue, the antidote to limits. The conferences Wiesel has organized, the discussion he demands in his classes and the characters he has brought to life with their conflicts, doubts and questions show his commitment to dialogue. And while such dialogue requires the participation of individuals, it is not arrested by one person's limits. Rather, it allows for the expression of several, sometimes contradictory claims and ideas. By consistently promoting dialogue, Wiesel has encouraged voices other than, and sometimes disagreeing with, his own. But Chmiel takes Wiesel's uncompromising demands to be vigilant in condemning abuse and defending victims as grounds to portray Wiesel as a hypocrite. Chmiel does not account for the fact that when Wiesel has spoken out to express deep sympathy for Palestinian suffering and an attendant desire to hasten peace, he has done so with integrity, as a person who owns the characteristics that are informed by his past.

Chmiel charges Wiesel with privileging Israel, and he charges Wiesel with having spoken out only when Jews were the victims or when it was politically expedient

to do so. But Chmiel has forgotten the goal that drove Wiesel's early, post-Holocaust life—to witness for those who had died, to make the world remember Hitler's Germany with its Jewish victims. Wiesel writes, "Long ago, *over there*, far from the living, we told ourselves over and over... The one among us who would survive would...turn his entire life into a weapon for our collective memory." Faithful to this promise, Wiesel says, "there were times after the liberation when I saw myself as a messenger carrying only one message: to say no to forgetting, to forgetting the life and death of the communities swallowed by night and spit back into the sky in flames" (*And the Sea Is Never Full*, translated by Marion Wiesel, [New York: Knopf], 1999: p. 405). Chmiel does not acknowledge the awesome fact that Wiesel has sustained this terrible project not for a year or two but for decades. And Chmiel does not acknowledge that these many years later, Wiesel reflects, "I didn't know that I was like Kierkegaard's jester who shouted "Fire!" and people thought he was joking" (*And the Sea Is Never Full*, p. 405).

In his attempt to call the world to remember and in his work to promote human rights, Wiesel has operated within the political sphere. Chmiel is determined to cast Wiesel as a political man, despite Wiesel's protestations. Again, Chmiel is not the first to do so. In 1979, Wiesel responded to Soviet Attorney General Roman Rudenko, "...If what I write sometimes has political connotations and repercussions, it is not my fault" (*And the Sea Is Never Full*, p. 202). While Wiesel has operated within and affected the political sphere, he nevertheless has never run for political office, has not campaigned for one or another political party, and does not attempt to define and promote a particular ideological system. Nevertheless, Chmiel would like Wiesel first to admit his political-ness and then to use it...in the manner Chmiel sees fit.

In arguing that Wiesel is politically savvy and, therefore, cautious about how and when he speaks to government leaders, Chmiel dismisses the many times Wiesel has spoken out against U.S. presidents, other world leaders, and the wealthy and powerful elite. And Chmiel does not report the countless times Wiesel compromised his standing in the halls of power by expressing the integrity of his convictions. In pointing to the occasions when Chmiel insists that Wiesel knew better but did not act, Chmiel again exposes his indifference to Wiesel's humanity. How could there not have been times when the Jew who survived Auschwitz and so fears another plague of anti-Semitism sees Israel, the only nation of Jews, as less culpable than it is; or when the poet-mystic for whom there is a transcendent Jerusalem more real than the one of mortar and stone, sees Israel's soldiers as melancholy heroes? And how could it not be that the man who for

so long had no country, no home of his own sometimes has had trouble seeing blood on the hands of the country that embraced him? Do such things render meaningless Wiesel's charge to speak out, challenge corrupt power and expose the guilt of abusers? What a terrible thing if they do! Who could stand, who could speak, if denial of one's particular history and a dispassionate perfection are prerequisites?

Wiesel does not claim to be the world's savior, single-handedly championing each individual cause. But his mobilizing rhetoric of justice and compassion encourages individuals to work for their own and commissions others to work on their behalf. Indeed, Wiesel has affected inestimable good in matters that extend far beyond eliciting the world's memory of Nazi horrors. In the process, he has done more than speak for victims, he has given them a language to speak for themselves. He writes, "as a Jew, my duty is to evoke the Jewish tragedy. But in so doing, I incite other groups to commemorate their own" (*And the Sea Is Never Full*, pp. 186-187).

Despite Wiesel's facility with language and consequent ability to make himself eloquently understood, he regularly laments the impossibility of speech, the limits of language. In denying Wiesel his own humanity, Chmiel is blind to Wiesel's recognition of contradiction and paradox; and Chmiel is deaf to Wiesel's own questions and doubts. And in his determination to belittle Wiesel's activism, Chmiel forgets that Wiesel is especially committed to writing, to giving flesh and voices to the characters of his memories and dreams. It is easy to forget the simple fact that such writing takes a lot of time. Chmiel is only one of many who forget. Wiesel explains, "I trouble some people when I raise my voice, others when I don't speak up. There are people, good people, who often make me feel as though I owe them something... And I say to myself that even taking into account my stories and novels, my essays and studies, analyses and reminiscences, I know that it is not enough" (*And the Sea Is Never Full*, p. 405).

Like Wiesel, each of us is both limited and equipped by the peculiarities that make us individual human beings. And that seems oddly appropriate, since the world's needs are complicated and greater than any one person can address. Sometimes, with Chmiel, I, too, would like someone else to fix the problems we face—the injustices of rapacious business practices, misogyny and environmental degradation, to name a few. I, too, would like giants such as Wiesel to champion ceaselessly each and every victim by name. But to criticize him for not doing so is to neglect both his humanity and our own responsibility. In reflecting on Wiesel's part, why not, instead, simply consider ourselves blessed to share in the lifetime of a man who has done extraordinary good and

continues to mobilize others? Why not adapt and adopt what is good in Wiesel and, in his words, to effect our own acts of justice and compassion?

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The Feminist Corner and the Reference Shelf

A Review Essay
by Sarah Barbara Watstein

HISTORY

Her Works Praise Her: A History of Jewish Women in America from Colonial Times to the Present. By Hasia R. Diner and Beryl Lieff Benderly. New York: Basic Books. Diner and Benderly bring us the first social history of American Jewish women over the last four centuries. A celebration of struggle and achievement, *Her Works Praise Her* is the story of how this vital community forged new ways of being Jewish and profound ideas of what it means to be a woman. Here is the untold story of America's Jewish women, including complex portraits of everyday flesh-and-blood characters in addition to well-known figures like Emma Lazarus, Mrs. Wyatt Earp, Ethel Rosenberg, Betty Freidan and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. American Jewish women have brought a distinctive sense of self and community to bear on the economic, social and family life around them. *Her Works Praise Her* is a magisterial account of how America transformed generations of Jewish women—and how these women transformed America.

Women and American Judaism: Historical Perspectives. Edited by Pamela S. Nadell and Jonathan D. Sarna. Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press. Portrayals of the religious lives of American Jewish women from colonial times to the present, these essays offer a gendered overview of three centuries of American Jewish religious life. They raise key questions about how women from across the nation conceptualized their ideas of Jewish womanhood even as they transformed their roles at home, in synagogues, as volunteers and in the public eye. Here are essays about, for example, religion, politics and womanhood in the Civil War writings of American Jewish women; the public religious lives of Cincinnati's Jewish women; women and religious identity in the American West; sisterhoods of personal service in New York City, 1887-1936; Jewish women and self-definition in late 19th-century America; gender, assimilation and the scientific defense of "family purity;" the road to Bat Mitzvah in America; the religious leadership of *Rebbezins* in late 20th-

century American Jewish life; the prophetic tradition; and feminism and American Judaism. This is a rich collection; readers will come away with a better understanding of the fact that women form a critical part of the history of American Judaism.

THE HOLOCAUST

Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered. By Ruth Kluger. New York: The Feminist Press. A true 20th-century coming of age story—an extraordinary reflection on the most brutal events of the era by someone who witnessed them firsthand and the account of a young woman's struggle to arrive at autonomous selfhood. Swept up as a child in the events of Nazi-era Europe, Ruth Kluger saw her family's comfortable Vienna existence destroyed. By age 11, she had been deported, along with her mother, to Theresienstadt, the first in a series of concentration camps that would become the setting for her shattered childhood. Survival meant not only escaping but also rebuilding an identity and a life afterwards. In occupied Germany, and later in New York City, Kluger would face multiple challenges to that process, from the ghosts of the dead who haunted her to the anti-Semitism and restrictive ideas about women that surrounded her. In addition to succeeding as a memoir of the Holocaust, *Still Alive* succeeds as a classic account of the pursuit of inner truth and a contemplation of a life fully lived. You can say this—Ruth Kluger loves to live. I suspect she will become as much a source of inspiration for you as she has become for me.

TRADITIONS

Lesbian Rabbis: The First Generation. Edited by Rebecca T. Alpert, Sue Levi Elwell and Shirley Idelson. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. Today, it is possible to be a lesbian and a rabbi. This book is a collection of the stories of 18 rabbis who define themselves as lesbians. Readers are asked simply to listen and try to understand. No doubt many will approach this book with questions, for despite the fact that there are lesbian rabbis today, there are still questions. For lesbian rabbis, what does it mean to serve a denominational movement? What does it mean to serve congregations? To serve gay and lesbian congregations? To work with Jews "at the margins" and on campus? What about lesbian rabbis and conservative Jews? And what does it feel like to be a pioneer? Is it as lonely as we might imagine? This book is very much about all these questions, and it is very much a book about spirituality. It has been said that lesbians are creating a new rabbinate. You must read this book and to judge for yourself. One thing is very clear—as readers, we are blessed with the stories of 18 individuals whose lives and work are informed by a commitment to wholeness and holiness.

Shabbat: The Family Guide to Preparing for and Celebrating the Shabbat. By Dr. Ron Wolfson. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing. Candles, Kiddush, challah, special dinners and the family together—for many of us this constitutes our memory of Shabbat. Today, many Jews continue this commitment to a Friday night Shabbat dinner, and many are increasingly “in the dark” as to the meaning of Shabbat—its rituals, prayers, blessings and songs. This text consists of multiple layers of information about the Shabbat Seder—the Friday night home table service. The first chapter is an introduction to the process of making Shabbat. The complete text of the Shabbat Seder is presented in Chapter 2. The detailed explanations of each of the 10 steps of the Shabbat Seder are the focus of the next 10 chapters of the text. These steps include candlelighting, peace be to you, family blessings, sanctification of the day, washing the hands, the blessings over the bread, the Shabbat meal, Shabbat songs, the blessing after the food and the Sabbath day itself (Shabbat morning, the final hours, the third meal). In essence, a spiritual sourcebook, this guide to Shabbat practices and rituals, prayers, blessings and song is a necessary reference for every Jewish home.

So, why is it included in the Feminists’ Corner? Ah, now there’s the rub! This book is targeted to Jewish families of all backgrounds and levels of observance. It is not written by a woman, for women, or about women per se. Indeed, the series of which this book is a part, *The Art of Jewish Living*, is a project of the Federation of Jewish Men’s Clubs and the University of Judaism. However, given the traditional roles women have played in Jewish homes, and in Jewish holy days in particular, this text seems as relevant, perhaps even more relevant to Jewish women, than to their Jewish men. Over the decades, Jewish women have made Jewish practices dynamic, have endowed them with both practical and spiritual depth. This book helps make the Shabbat the most important day of the Jewish week and may very well contribute to making it the most important day in women’s weeks as well.

PHILOSOPHY

Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem. Edited by Steven E. Aschheim. Berkeley: University of California Press. The contents of this volume represent the fruits of the first international gathering of scholars ever assembled in Israel to consider the life and work of Hannah Arendt. Assembled here are essays by a distinguished roster of contributors on a broad spectrum of themes, including Arendt’s politics and philosophy, the origins of totalitarianism, Arendt and Jewishness, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and her complex identity as a German Jew. In the intellectual discourse of the day, Arendt has become, as the editor notes, something

of an icon. Many readers are familiar with her deeply controversial, explosive book on Eichmann (1963), of course, but, as these essays reveal, there is much more to Arendt’s thinking than this. These essays illustrate the breadth and depth of her intellect as well as the nature of her person. Immerse yourself and you will find much about your own cultural self-understanding and biases. Arendt’s work and tone violated some of society’s basic taboos; the experience of reading these essays, while not the same as reading Arendt, is, nonetheless, powerful and memorable. Kudos to Aschheim, Professor of Cultural and Intellectual History at Hebrew University, for bringing these essays together for our benefit.

Scholem, Arendt, Klemperer: Intimate Chronicles in Turbulent Times. By Steven E. Aschheim. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. This book draws its inspiration from some remarkable documents penned by three extraordinary and quite distinctive German-Jewish intellectuals: Gershom Scholem, Hannah Arendt and Victor Klemperer. Aschheim has assembled what are in essence personal documents revelatory of the most intimate aspects of the private self—responding creatively to the vicissitudes of public experience. Taken collectively, they form a kind of composite portrait of the turbulent history of German Jews in the 20th century—from Wilhelminian times, through World War I, the Weimar Republic, the Nazi nightmare and its aftermath. If you are interested in letters and diaries and in personal attitudes and intellectual process, as opposed to public utterances, this is a must read. And, all the more so, if you are interested in Arendt—an iconoclastic intellectual, political theorist, philosopher, historian, Jewish activist, Zionist (of sorts) and author. Arendt’s letters concern the complexities of Jewish selfhood; they shed light on German-Jewish and non-Jewish friendships, of marriages and intimate relations—their successes and failures.

The Wisdom of Love. By Alain Finkielkraut. Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press. French thinker and social critic, Finkielkraut offers us a unique rethinking of love as a critical ground for social thought. Here is a new way of thinking about the relationship between minority and majority culture in an increasingly multicultural age. What are your views about the relation between minority and majority cultures? Is there a Jewish position in the multicultural debate? What does it really mean to recognize difference in our own terms and passions without cancelling it? What does this have to do with the wisdom of love and the ethical demand itself? And, what will love look like in the next century? This short book is not an “easy read.” *The Wisdom of Love* challenges read-

ers to think critically about our global-market-dominated world and its impact on values. It challenges readers to think about universalism and partisanship for the ethnic or racial Other. It asks readers to think about genuine respect for the Other in the context of universal justice and equality. This is cultural criticism at its best.

Sarah Barbara Watstein is the director of Academic User Services, VCU Libraries, and a contributing editor.

The Core of Jewish Tradition

The Image of the Shtetl and Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination
by Dan Miron

New York: Syracuse University Press.

A Review Essay
by Brian Horowitz

This volume has been touted by its publisher as a sequel to *A Traveler Disguised* (incidentally now available in a paperback edition also from Syracuse). If we recall how that volume gave us an entirely new paradigm for understanding Yiddish literature, the expectations placed on this book are admittedly enormous. Without exaggeration, this is a wonderful book since, just as in the earlier one, here too Professor Miron tackles big questions: How does the Jewish writer interact with his society? What is the purpose of Jewish literature? Why should Jews today be interested in Yiddish culture?

The Image of the Shtetl consists of nine previously published articles that span Professor Miron’s career from the 1970s to the present. There are essays on the image of the Shtetl, Sholem Aleichem, Mendele Mocher Sforim, Bashevis Singer and the use of folklore by Yiddish writers. Since we are dealing with a collection, we might expect disparate subject matter. Nevertheless, the book holds together by virtue of the small number of tightly organized questions Professor Miron poses.

Dan Miron is especially interested in the intersection of authorial intent and textual reception. In his article on the image of the Shtetl, he shows how Mendele parodied other literary texts and crafted an imaginary Shtetl. Therefore, the sociological critics were wrong, Mendele’s Shtetl resembles less a snap-shot of reality than a purely literary world. Similarly, in his essay “Folklore and Anti-Folklore in the Literature of the Haskalah” Professor Miron discusses the cultural paradoxes of Jewish enlighten-

ment. Since the Jew had to suppress his Jewishness to be accepted in 19th-century Russia, there appeared within individuals a psychological attraction and repulsion to folklore. According to Dan Miron, Mendele Mocher Sforim found a way out of this dilemma by depicting pre-industrial Jewish communities with a mixture of irony and loving attachment. In his essay "Passivity and Narration," Professor Miron underscores the paradox between Bashevis Singer's writings, which embody a desultory fatalism, and the needs of a post-Holocaust Jewish society that sought a literary hero to immortalize the lost world of East European Jewry. By giving the writer this role entirely inappropriate to him, the Jewish public distorted the meaning of Bashevis Singer's writings.

Four articles on Sholem Aleichem also deal with issues of literature as well as society. For example, Professor Miron discusses how readers, who have been nourished on the literary fare of *Tevye the Milkman* and Menachem-Mendl, resisted accepting either the dark humor of the *Railroad Stories* or the jubilant optimism of *Motl the Cantor's Son*. Taking a fresh look, Dan Miron advocates including *Motl* and the *Railroad Stories* in the circle of Sholem Aleichem's best writings.

In a key article devoted to the meaning of Sholem Aleichem's name, Professor Miron treats the complicated relationship between author and hero. As we know, "Sholem Aleichem" was more than a mere *nom de plume* but engulfed the writer's entire life. Dan Miron invites us not to think about the writer's successes but rather to contemplate the constraints Rabinovitch brought on himself by creating a literary double.

Moreover, one can sense how, more than one time along his career the presence of Sholem Aleichem constrained the author, perhaps even prevented some possible developments in his literary art. This is seen most remarkably in the genre of the novel, where he constant intervention of Sholem Aleichem in the development of the plot, his loquacity and tendency to sum up the protagonists and send them about their business, often had disastrous results. Here and there one can perhaps trace some well-concealed expressions of resentment against the omnipresence of this overpowering image. However, such resentment, even if it became fully conscious, came too late to have any effect either on the reading public or on the writer himself, who let his Sholem Aleichem share with his real name the authorship of the most personal and unfacetious of documents—his will (pp. 131-132).

This idea of constraint is intriguing. It is

entirely possible that, when superimposing Sholem Aleichem on his own person, Mr. Rabinovitch sacrificed freedom of movement in his art. Similarly, by making the choice to blend the boundaries between life and art, Rabinovitch/Sholem Aleichem also was able to create the illusion that he was "one of the people," while, at the same time, he invited readers to conflate the author and hero. This conflation perhaps had the unwanted effect of reinforcing a typology in which the readers believed the views of the protagonist were identical with those of the author.

In the final essay, "Is There Really One Modern *Klal Yisroel* Literature?," Dan Miron raises the question of why we should study Yiddish literature. Entering into a polemic with the Israeli scholar, Don Sadan, who proposed uniting separate Jewish literatures into a single, united Jewish culture, Dan Miron rejoices in variety: different languages, genres and cultural experiences. Aiming to save modern Yiddish literature and, by extension, the diaspora experience from reductionism, he refutes any interpretation of Yiddish letters as merely an offshoot of a larger literature of Haskalah. For Professor Miron, Yiddish literature is *sui generis*, irreducible to anything else. By analogy, the culture of East European Jewry is also *sui generis* and irreducible. This insight is important because, if we forget what is the core of our tradition and what is context, we risk misunderstanding ourselves. According to Professor Miron, Yiddish and the East European diaspora experience are progenitors of the cultural history of post-Holocaust secular Jews. This experience is ours and it still awaits proper understanding. With so much at stake, we—scholars and readers—will need *The Image of the Shtetl* since it, along with a small number of other vital polestars, can help us reassess essential knowledge.

Brian Horowitz holds the Sizeler Family Chair, Tulane University.

On Early Synagogues

*The Ancient Synagogue:
The First Thousand Years*
by Lee Levine

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press

A Review Essay
by Matthew Schwartz

In recent years, opinions about synagogues have often reflected the thinker's personal socio-political framework. In this massive volume, however, using a vast collection of sources, Professor Lee Levine

presents a full and balanced study of the first thousand years of synagogue history. His conclusions reflect his highly judicious and thorough scholarship.

The ancient synagogues were, in some ways, nothing short of revolutionary in comparison both to the Jerusalem Temple and to pagan centers of worship. They could be located anywhere Jews lived. The leadership was open and democratic, not restricted to a single caste or social group. The congregation was directly involved in all aspects of synagogue activity, participating actively in reading of the Torah, prayers, rituals and study, as well as feeling, to a certain extent, very much at home. Non-Jews too attended synagogues, sometimes regularly. Synagogues reflected the character of their own congregations, and there were great variations of style and practice of architecture, ritual and prayer, the last becoming fixed into tradition only during the course of some centuries. The very earliest synagogues do not show a great deal of evidence for strong Rabbinic control but Rabbinic teaching exercised increasing authority as time passed. A great deal of specialized research has been invested by many scholars in areas of synagogue studies—art, liturgy, social patterns, magic, to name a few. The purpose of this volume is to integrate the data from all these various studies into a comprehensive account, tracing the synagogue's growth and development in light of the history of the Jewish community and also of forces from without.

Let us look at Professor Levine's views on a few issues that hold special interest for both specialist and non-specialist in our own time:

(1) When were the first synagogues formed? The earliest hard evidence of synagogues comes in inscriptions from the third century B.C.E. in Egypt, which mention a *proseuche*, the usual diaspora term. The oldest archaeological remains of a synagogue building are on the Aegean island of Delos, from the late second and early first century B.C.E. Not until the first century C.E. does the synagogue truly emerge into the light of historical report. Still, scholars have argued for the existence of some sort of synagogue or prayer center as early as First Temple times, based on Biblical passages or later Rabbinic traditions. Some opt for an origin in Israel, others for Babylonia or Egypt. Professor Levine suggests his own approach. The first century synagogue, he argues, served as a center for communal activities as well as for prayer and religious functions. In the Middle East during earlier times, these functions were carried out at the city gate, which served as market place, law court, business exchange, lecture hall and religious center as well. Over the course of time, these activities were relocated into buildings that became the first synagogues, largely community centers with some religious functions. It would be only

several centuries later that the synagogues would become more largely religious. This process may have been pushed along more quickly in the diaspora where the city gate area would have been pagan.

(2) What were the synagogues called? Actually, the earliest institutions seem to have been more often referred to as *proseuche*, which may indicate an attempt to emphasize its religious and sacred nature. This may have been more important to Diaspora communities, who believed it was necessary to define themselves vis-a-vis their pagan surroundings. The Judean synagogue was almost exclusively termed "synagogue" from the earliest years when the term and the institution were not primarily of a religious character.

(3) When did public Torah reading begin? Public reading of the Torah long preceded regular communal prayer and was fully institutionalized as the core component of public worship between the fifth and third centuries B.C.E. Rabbinic tradition ascribes its origins to Moses and further development to Ezra. Babylonian Jews used an annual cycle, by which the entire Pentateuch was read in the course of each year. This cycle may have originated in Israel, although there a triennial cycle was more common. In this way, the Pentateuch was completely read once every three or three and a half years. Individual communities followed their own practices and schedules, and the reading cycles did not become strictly fixed for some centuries.

(4) How many synagogues were there in ancient times? Certainly by the end of the first century C.E. there is both literary and archaeological evidence for many synagogues. In effect, every community must have had at least one. Jerusalem, at its peak, may have had hundreds. Five are known in Bet Shean.

(5) Were many synagogues destroyed in the growth of Christianity? There are stories of Christian violence against synagogues in the Byzantine period but the real decline came only after the Moslem conquest in the 630s. There are also cases of the defacing of synagogue art work. However, it is not clear whether this latter was the work of Moslems or possibly even of Jews who opposed art on religious grounds. Still, 25 synagogues are known in the Golan and many more in Judea between the fourth and seventh centuries. This serves to argue against the widespread fallacy that the Jewish settlement in Israel depleted quickly after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E.

(6) Did non-Jews play any role in ancient synagogues? The evidence indicates that non-Jews did attend synagogues to pray and to seek advice or to participate in festive occasions. Bishop John Chrysostom of Constantinople harshly criticized the Christians of his day, late fourth century, for frequently attending synagogues. Before

the triumph of Christianity, there were numerous God-fearers (*phobomenoi*) who sympathized with Judaism but were not formally converted.

(7) How involved were the Rabbinic sages in synagogues? Professor Levine argues that the early synagogues often did not follow Rabbinic views. Many Rabbis did not approve of synagogue art. Nor were the earliest prayers nor the order of prayers all of Rabbinic provenance. Rabbis are known to have occasionally expressed disapproval of synagogues, certainly in comparison to the Rabbinic study hall. By the third century, however, the Rabbinic sages were more involved with synagogues and the sources often note their presence there for praying, preaching, teaching or adjudicating legal matters.

(8) How did the liturgy develop? The growth was not linear. Full-scale communal prayer probably developed in the Yavneh period, argues Professor Levine, but prayers were not composed *ex nihilo*, instead deriving from the Bible and various traditional ideas. The Rabbis of that time used many precedents, which they reworked and developed. Regularizing weekday prayers was a significant step. Christian prayer, developing about the same time, also used Jewish prayers from the Second Temple era. Later, Rabbis like Rav and Shmuel in Babylonia as well as R. Yehoshua ben Levi and R. Yohanan in Israel contributed much to synagogue rituals and to the text of prayers.

(9) When was the piyyut (liturgical poem) introduced into the synagogue service? The piyyut appeared about the fourth or fifth century and, at times, it replaced the regular service by incorporating the mandatory prayers into its composition. Some piyyutim consisted of choral refrains or responses, and a chorus may have joined the prayer leader in his recitation. The term piyyut derives from the Greek *poetes*, but Hebrew piyyut is not an outgrowth of Greek literature. Scholars differ in finding its origin in Hebrew midrash, homily or poetry. Some scholars argue that Christian liturgical poetry influenced Jewish forms, while others believe the Jewish influenced the Christian. Several themes like the zodiac and the 24 priestly courses, which appear frequently in piyyut, have been found also in synagogue art of that era.

The great complexity of many piyyutim raises another question—how many people actually understood these compositions? Certainly it seems strange that the effort to read the Torah and spread its interpretations among the people should coexist in the same ritual with piyyut, which would seem well beyond the comprehension of the average synagogue goer.

(10) What role did women play in the synagogue? Many sources mention women attending the synagogue to pray or to hear lectures. Professor Levine is inclined to

follow Professor Shmuel Safrai's view that there were no physical barriers between men and women in the early synagogue. Inscriptions often mention women as benefactors, and a certain woman in Phoecea is noted as having a seat in the front of the room. (One wonders if she ever actually sat in it.) Women officiants are also mentioned (e.g., a *gizbarit*). Professor Levine goes so far as to suggest that, at least very early on, women may have been called to read the Torah since a passage in the Tosefta is needed to forbid it. Certainly this practice, if it was ever followed, did not last very long. There is less reason to believe that women ever led prayers or gave lectures.

The history of the ancient synagogues also offers a panorama of the encounter between the Jews and the Greeks. Few people in the Roman Empire could be wholly oblivious to the various cultural and social forces. Even to reject Hellenism meant giving it some attention. So, it should come as no surprise that synagogues might here and there show traces of borrowing from or lending to neighbors. However, the synagogue was still unique, differing from pagan temples and Christian churches, perhaps most notably in that the latter seem focused on divinity and were led by officials who were supposed to have been touched by deity. The synagogues were more inclusive, demanding everywhere active involvement of the congregants. They had a communal, almost a populist character along with their sanctity.

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

DRUNK ON HEAVEN

In between the rains we prayed for and got
our ceilings walls and windows dripping mold
—if we'd had faith we would have fixed them
summers but Gd had faith in us and
poured us gold—

the air a blessing in the lungs and throat
the sun and wind a kiss upon the skin
the cloudless blue an ease inside the eyes
a bottle day from cellars of the sky

The crowds came out to watch the placid
sea and drink their day cafes upon the beach
or crunching shells and pebbles trekking
sand along the tide still high
on storms to come

Each step each breath each wave distilling
how so drunk on heaven
grace on earth is now.

—Richard Sherwin

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.

Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition: Defense, Dissent and Dialogue. By Eric Lawee. Albany: State University of New York Press.

The Rebbe, the Messiah and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference. By David Berger. Portland, OR: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization.

The Murderous Paradise: German Nationalism and the Holocaust. By Pierre James. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Jewish Origins of Christianity. By Carsten Peter Thiede. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Portraits of Our Past: Jews of the German Countryside. By Emily C. Rose. Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society.

Unfinished People: Eastern European Jews Encounter America. By Ruth Gay. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Holocaust Testimonies: European Survivors and American Liberators in New Jersey. Edited by Joseph J. Preil. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Legacy of Rage: Jewish Masculinity, Violence, Culture. By Warren Rosenberg. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Post-Holocaust Politics: Britain, The United States and Jewish Refugees, 1945-1948. By Arieh J. Kochavi. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

The Brigade: An Epic Story of Vengeance, Salvation and World War II. By Howard Blum. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King. By Baruch Halpern. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Catholics and Jews in Twentieth-Century America. By Egal Feldman. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

Days and Memory. By Charlotte Delbo. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Covenant and Chosenness in Judaism and Mormonism. Edited by Raphael Jospe, Truman G. Madsen and Seth Ward. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.



NUMBER 58 • CENTER FOR JUDAIC STUDIES OF VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY • SPRING-SUMMER 2003

Menorah Review is published by the Center for Judaic Studies of Virginia Commonwealth University and distributed worldwide. Comments and manuscripts are welcome. Address all correspondence to Center for Judaic Studies, P.O. Box 842025, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA 23284-2025, jdspiro@vcu.edu. Web Site: www.vcu.edu/judaicstudies.

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