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Review of John M. Efron, *Medicine and the German Jews: A History*

Abstract

John Efron's new book pursues two scholarly trajectories simultaneously. On the one hand, it offers a history of Jewish physicians and medical practice in Germany from the Middle Ages until the Holocaust period. On the other hand, it examines the uses of medicine and medical discourse to bolster or undermine political, racial, and national agendas, both Jewish and antisemitic, in the modern era. Although Efron seeks to link these two subjects as one, they do not mesh as organically as he intends. Moreover, while the second trajectory is generally well-conceived and well-argued, making a genuine contribution to modern Jewish cultural history, the first is more sketchy and uneven, and is clearly less accomplished.

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | History of Religion | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Jewish Studies

JOHN M. EFRON. *Medicine and the German Jews: A History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. Pp. viii + 343.

John Efron's new book pursues two scholarly trajectories simultaneously. On the one hand, it offers a history of Jewish physicians and medical practice in Germany from the Middle Ages until the Holocaust period. On the other hand, it examines the uses of medicine and medical discourse to bolster or undermine political, racial, and national agendas, both Jewish and antisemitic, in the modern era. Although Efron seeks to link these two subjects as one, they do not mesh as organically as he intends. Moreover, while the second trajectory is generally well-conceived and well-argued, making a genuine contribution to modern Jewish cultural history, the first is more sketchy and uneven, and is clearly less accomplished.

Already in the introduction of the book, the challenge of meshing the two narratives together and unambiguously formulating the composite nature of the project is apparent. In the first place, Efron attempts to justify both the limited geographical area of his study and its timeframe. The story of Jewish doctors in Germany is unique, he argues, because there was such a high percentage of Jewish doctors in Germany and because of the especially virulent forms of German antisemitism that singled out the Jewish practice of medicine (pp. 3–5). Despite his attempt to focus exclusively on Germany, however, the history of his subject is not always nationally bounded and he constantly crosses over in almost every chapter to southern, western and eastern Europe, and even to America, to illustrate his points about Jewish doctors and about the antisemitic discourses accompanying their practice.

For Efron, his book is a history of those moments from the early modern period to the rise of Hitler, when "the Jewishness of physicians and patients actually counted for something meaningful" (p. 2). As becomes increasingly clear as the book progresses, for Efron, these moments are primarily located from the 18th century on (see especially p. 64 and below). Such a conclusion is problematic, to say the least. Were Ḥasdai ibn Shaprut, Moses and Abraham Maimonides, and hundreds of other pre-modern doctors any less interested in their own Jewishness or that of their patients than their modern counterparts? Medicine, in its quest for curing human patients, theoretically transcends national and ethnic boundaries. But in the complex social realities that shaped Jewish medical practice, both in the medieval and modern periods, Jewish doctors primarily treated Jewish patients, and constantly connected their individual physical well-being to the collective welfare of the Jewish community as a whole. One might even argue that medieval Jewish medical texts, composed in Hebrew and directed exclusively to a Jewish readership, reflect even greater "Jewish" concerns on the part of pre-modern doctors than some modern ones. The notion that mod-

ern Jewish doctors employ more intensely the discourse of contemporary medicine to ponder the nature of their Jewish identity is also misleading and ignores the significant place of medical discourse in legal, homiletic, and exegetical Jewish literature throughout the biblical, rabbinic, and medieval periods.

Similarly flawed is Efron's strange notion that only in the modern period do Jews have a physical as well as a spiritual identity in their self-discovery of the "Jewish body" (p. 4). Did Jews lack a sense of their physicality before 1800? What precisely does Efron mean by this distinction and is it sustainable, given the wealth of evidence for Jewish medical care and treatment of actual Jewish bodies long before the 19th century?

Other examples of Efron's loose and imprecise formulations might be mentioned. At one point, he lumps together the history of medicine and science, assuming that the categories are the same both professionally and culturally (p. 3). But, of course, for some scientists, medicine is hardly a science at all, and the long preponderance of Jews in medicine, compared with their recent success in the sciences during the last century, suggests that a differentiation is necessary. What about Eron's claim that in modern Germany, Jews are distinctively labeled as diseased (pp. 6–7)? As he himself points out, the roots of this stereotype are decidedly medieval, and one might argue that they are even rooted in antiquity. Is this exclusively or even predominantly a modern phenomenon? And is Germany unique in possessing the largest corpus of medical antisemitism (p. 5)? Without minimizing the centrality of Germany, one might argue that in many respects medical antisemitism first developed in the Iberian peninsula, where the obsession with the Jewish doctor long preceded that of the Germans.¹ Moreover, the origin of hostility towards the Jewish doctor in Germany from the 17th century on is directly related to the entry of *converso* physicians into German space, a point not made strongly enough by Efron in the first place. In other words, the German story is clearly a continuation and further expansion of one which began in Spain and Portugal.

Finally, Efron's imprecise language is exemplified by his fleeting treatment of the Zionist thinker A. D. Gordon in the introduction (p.8). Should Gordon's philosophy of nature really be linked to Zionist medical polemics as Efron seems to suggest? Is medicine in fact the primary factor in Gordon's ideology or can it be located more meaningfully in a broader and deeper cultural context of romantic notions of land, self-labor, gendered discourse, and racial stereotyping, in which medicine and medical discourse occupy only a small part? Does medicine, in the case of Gordon, ultimately shape the main contours of his thinking, as Efron seems to imply, or is it simply an added dimension? This and previous formulations require greater care and precision than Efron gives them.

¹ See, for example, J. Caro Baroja, *Los Judios en la Espana moderna y contemporanea* (Madrid, 1961), 2:162–94.

Efron's first two chapters describe the origins of the medieval Jewish physician and specific circumstances of German Jewish medicine from the medieval period through the 18th century. Based heavily on the work of others, which Efron clearly acknowledges, both chapters offer a broad and generally conventional treatment of the subject. Efron initially claims that Jewish medicine dates only from the Middle Ages, since in the rabbinic period it did not possess a self-contained therapeutic discourse (p. 13). Given the incomplete picture we have of the actual practice of medicine in the rabbinic period, it may be wiser to say that the more visible manifestations of medical practice and writing emerge in the Middle Ages, but its origins are most likely earlier. This development is hardly unique to the Jews. Furthermore, one should not assume, as Efron seems to, that medicine in medieval times was self-contained. Maimonides' medical concerns, for example, are hardly unconnected to either his halakhic or philosophical ones.²

Efron's chapter on German Jewish developments attempts to offer a rather sketchy overview over some five centuries. Here as well, there are points one might chose to contest. Efron tries hard to argue for a medieval Ashkenazic tradition of medicine as significant as that in Provence, Italy, and Spain (pp. 34ff). While the evidence points to some medical literacy in the north, the southern communities are clearly more significant, as the evidence of Joseph Shatzmiller and others have made clear.³ Efron's interesting attempt to argue that German Jews were more suspicious of doctors than those in Eastern Europe is not fully persuasive either (pp. 40–44). While some doctors held communal positions in early modern Poland, they were also considered suspect, especially those emanating from Italy or Portugal. In contrast to the remarkable alignment of rabbis and physicians in Italy, the situation in Germany and Eastern Europe appears to me quite analogous. Finally, Efron's treatment of medical antisemitism in the 17th and 18th centuries clearly adds to previous work by Harry Friedenwald and others, but still does not tackle the topic sufficiently. Especially critical in this history is its linkage to similar developments in Italy and the western Sephardic diaspora prior to and during the outbreak of hostility towards Jewish doctors in Germany. In making this episode primarily a German phenomenon, Efron understates these critical polemical links. He mentions, for example, the defenses of Jewish doctors by David de Pomis, an Italian doctor, and Isaac Cardoso and Benedict de Castro, *converso* physicians in Italy and Hamburg, without pausing to consider that the vilification of

² See, for example, I. Twersky, "Aspects of Maimonidean Epistemology: Halakha and Science," in *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism: Intellect in Quest of Understanding; Essays in Honor of Marvin Fox*, eds. J. Neusner, E. S. Frerichs, and N. Sarna (Atlanta, 1989), 3:3–24.

³ As discussed in J. Shatzmiller, *Jews, Medicine, and Medieval Society* (Los Angeles, 1994) and in his articles cited in Efron, p. 274, n. 9.

the Jewish doctor was not merely a German phenomenon but a European one.⁴ Early modern medical antisemitism in Germany originated from an economic rivalry between Sephardic doctors and the Protestant medical establishment (See pp. 50–51). The polemics were thus fueled by an understandable tension over gaining the revenue of patients, over cultural and professional differences between immigrants and old-timers, and between two distinct medical cultures. All of this is not sufficiently stressed in Efron's account.

In the chapter called "Haskalah and Healing," originally published as an article, Efron presents the questionable assumption that the modern Jewish doctor was the first to express Jewish concerns in the course of his medical practice and the first to be focused not on individuals alone but on the entire group (p. 64). While some pre-modern doctors primarily treated "royalty and clergy" as Efron claims, the vast majority treated Jewish patients and saw themselves as working within the Jewish community. Efron proceeds to offer only three examples to argue for the novelty of this modern Jewish doctor. His broad conclusions, based on so small a sample, remain unsubstantiated. But even when these three cases are examined more closely, his position is not so clear-cut.

Nahman Gelber, in an essay Efron does not cite, had long ago underscored the role of doctors in the Haskalah as agents of change and social reform.⁵ On this point, there is hardly any disagreement and one wishes that Efron had pursued this insight with more examples than those of Elkan Isaac Wolf, Moishe Marcuze, and Marcus Herz. It is when he stresses that these doctors were more focused on Jewish issues that his argument becomes more questionable. Wolf indeed wrote a book on Jewish diseases, but this focus was not entirely unprecedented. Decades earlier, Tobias Cohen also wrote on the Jewish disease that entangled the hair of Ashkenazic Jewish women.⁶ As Efron himself points out, the self-help manuals of early modern Jews were quite similar to Marcuze's Yiddish composition at the end of the 18th century (pp. 79–82). Also problematic in Efron's account of German maskilic doctors is the inclusion of Marcuze in the first place.⁷ Despite his German medical education, is the provenance of his *Sefer Refuos*

⁴ Some of this is discussed in D. Ruderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe* (New Haven, 1995; Detroit, 2001), chapter 10.

⁵ N. M. Gelber, "On the History of Jewish Doctors in Poland in the Eighteenth Century" (Hebrew), in I. Tirosh, ed., *Shai le-Yeshayahu, Sefer Yovel Le-Yishayahu Volfsberg* (Tel Aviv, 1956), especially pp. 351–353.

⁶ See D. Sadan, "Plica Polonica," in *The Field of Yiddish: Studies in Language, Folklore, and Literature*, 4th collection, eds. M. I. Herzog et al (Philadelphia, 1980).

⁷ Efron misses the important essay on Marcuze by A. Gutterman, "Sefer Refuot of Doctor Marcuze and his Proposals for Reforms in Jewish Life" (Hebrew), *Gilad* 4–5 (1978–79) 35–53.

connected to Germany at all? Marcuze's work, written in Yiddish for Eastern European Jews as a polemic against Ḥasidic and other forms of folk-medicine, is marginally connected to a German context. Given the large number of German Jewish doctors Efron might have considered in this chapter, Marcuze does not seem to be the best selection he could have made.

Even more problematic is Efron's treatment of Marcus Herz and his role in the debate over early burial in Germany.⁸ For Efron, Herz's critique of the "barbaric" practice by the rabbis and *hevra kedisha* of precipitously burying the Jewish dead without proper medical supervision, admirably demonstrates the desire of the enlightened Jewish doctor "to wrest control of the Jewish body from the Jews" (p. 104), and to focus on the needs of Jews as a group, who would be better guided in ethical matters by physicians than clergy. While Efron is aware of Martin Davies' wonderful monograph on Herz,⁹ which he cites in a note, he ignores the broad philosophical underpinnings of Herz's medical practice so clearly delineated in Davies' work. In contrast to his position on early burial, Herz took a radically different position against vaccinating Jewish children, based on philosophical prepositions that he could not overcome at the end of his life, despite overwhelming empirical evidence that vaccination could save lives, and despite the fact that most rabbis encouraged the practice, Herz's position had little to do with Jewish concerns and with caring for the Jewish group.¹⁰ In other words, the characterization of Herz, the enlightenment doctor, as expressing Jewish concerns in his medical practice is misleading and ultimately wrong, certainly in this latter case. On the subject of early burial, he fits Efron's model; in the case of vaccination, he does not. Thus, defining the maskilic Jewish doctor as Efron does is premature, based on the limited and contradictory evidence he supplies. The subject requires further study.

In the following chapter, Efron shifts to the subject of the pathology of the Jew as it is reflected in four discourses on alcohol abuse, the vital statistics of the Jews, tuberculosis, and diabetes, which he sets out clearly and succinctly. Many of the medical writers Efron cites in this chapter will be familiar to readers of his first book on race science.¹¹ The treatment of these discourses extends into the 20th century and beyond Germany. Except in

⁸ The most extensive treatment of this subject is found in M. Samet, "Burial of the Dead: On the History of the Polemic on Fixing the Time of Death" (Hebrew), *Asufot* 3 (1989-90) 613-665, which Efron misses.

⁹ M. Davies, *Identity or History?: Marcus Herz and the End of the Enlightenment* (Detroit, 1995).

¹⁰ See D. Ruderman, "Some Jewish Responses to Smallpox Prevention in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries: A New Perspective on the Modernization of European Jewry," *Aleph, Historical Studies in Science and Judaism* 2 (2002).

¹¹ See J. Efron, *Defenders of the Race: Jewish Doctors and Race Science in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (New Haven, 1994).

the case of diabetes, however, they do not appear to substantiate the stereotype of the sickly Jew, the alleged theme of the chapter. This chapter leads into the next chapter on the psychopathology of everyday life, which looks especially at the issue of Jewish mental disease from the perspective of non-Jewish, Jewish diaspora, and Zionist psychiatrists. Efron effectively develops here the close connection between medical discourse and political agendas. My only quibble with him is his claim that Elkan Wolf was the first to treat Jewish mental disease. Surely Efron is aware of the rich literature on Jews, melancholia, and Saturn, a staple of pre-modern culture. Efron's narrative would have been enriched by reference to the pre-modern reflections on Jewish insanity.¹²

Efron's chapter on the use of medical arguments in defense of Jewish rituals (circumcision, ritual slaughter, and kashrut) is extremely well done and perhaps the most interesting chapter of the book.¹³ His last chapter, on Jewish doctors prior to the Holocaust, is an able summary of the field already well-researched by others.

In sum, Efron's masterful account of the political and cultural uses of medicine by Jews and non-Jews in the 19th and early 20th centuries, its intimate connection with the Jewish quest for civic emancipation, embourgeoisement, and national liberation, and its use in defense of Jewish interests, represents the most significant achievement of this book. As a history of Jewish doctors in pre-modern and modern Germany, it is uneven and less successful. But the former's strengths clearly compensate for the latter's weaknesses.

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¹² See, for example, M. Idel, "Saturn and Shabbetai Zevi: A new Approach to Sabbateanism," (Hebrew) *Mada 'ei ha-Yahadut* 37 (1997) 161–87, and the earlier literature cited there, especially Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*.

¹³ Beth Wenger, "Mitzvah and Medicine: Gender, Assimilation, and the Scientific Defense of 'Family Purity,'" *Jewish Social Studies* 5 (1998–99) 177–202, should be read in conjunction with this chapter.