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Jews and the New Political Cultures of Russia and Eastern Europe

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Antisemitism in Context: Three Recent Volumes

Abigail Green and Simon Levis Sullam (eds.), *Jews, Liberalism, Antisemitism: A Global History*. London: Palgrave 2021. 429 pp.

Sol Goldberg, Scott Ury, and Kalman Weiser (eds.), *Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism*. London: Palgrave, 2021. 336 pp.

Scott Ury and Guy Miron (eds.), *Antishemiyut: bein musag histori lesiaḥ tziburi* (Antisemitism: Historical Concept, Public Discourse). Jerusalem: The Historical Society of Israel and the Zalman Shazar Center, 2020. 443 pp.

The literature on the history of antisemitism, together with its various social, cultural, or psychological sources, is by now so vast that it can no longer be surveyed. Still, the expansion of this field of research during the last decade has been truly extraordinary. Among the new publications are the three collections of essays under review.

The volume in Hebrew, edited by Scott Ury and Guy Miron, was published in lieu of four quarterly issues that constitute Volume 85 of the Israeli historical periodical *Zion*. The book contains 19 essays, all written as responses—some more direct than others—to David Engel's article of 2009, "Away from a Definition of Antisemitism: An Essay in the Semantics of Historical Description."[1] Engel's piece has been somewhat refreshed for this occasion and translated for the Hebrew reader as "On the Evolution of the Concept 'Antisemitism' and Its Use as an Aggregate Category." In it, Engel recapitulates his lingering frustration with the unclear nature of the term "antisemitism," which has never had an agreed-upon definition, he claims, a situation that repeatedly causes confusion and misunderstanding, in scholarly as well as in public debates. As a solution, Engel suggests to simply stop using the term. As far as he himself is concerned, he tells us, doing without it has proven easy and productive.

The contributors to this volume, mainly but not exclusively from Israel, were invited to react to this suggestion and their responses, divided into five sections, make up this sizable volume. The first part deals with some historiographical and theoretical sides of the issue; the following three provide a rough historical overview; and the last section consists of three additional theoretical essays directly responding to Engel's claims and suggestion, followed by Engel's own final rejoinder.

All of this is fascinating, readable, and instructive. The collection includes essays on the semantics of the term antisemitism, its changing meaning especially since the latter decades of the 19th century, and arguments that either justify its continued

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application or support the idea of stopping it altogether. Personally, I found particularly instructive the essays that are, in fact, either not directly or only partly related to the core of the controversy. Adi Ophir and Ishai Rosen-Zvi, for instance, expound upon the link between what most historians of the ancient world prefer to call "Judophobia," on the one hand, and "Jewish separatism," on the other. Both of these are exemplified by Ophir and Rosen-Zvi in a variety of Hellenistic and Roman texts. The authors stress the link between rejection of the Jews by non-Jews and the Jews' practice of self-separation in this context, and, in addition, describe how Jews repeatedly imagined acts of extermination planned and carried out against themselves, usually in response to their presumed loyalty to alien rulers. They thus offer an interesting background to Judophobia in the ancient world, if not a full explanation for it. To be sure, the theme of mutual hostility has been dealt with before in Jewish historiography. In his *Two Nations in Your Womb* (2008), for instance, Israel Yuval made the same point with a focus on the Middle Ages. Still, it is always useful, I think, to bring this duality back to our attention in discussing the various chapters in the history of antisemitism.

Moving on to modern times, Ofri Ilani likewise widens our approach to antisemitism by discussing problems that arise in the study of *philo*semitism. In a fine and learned analysis, he makes the distinction between *philo*-semitism and *anti*-antisemitism by recounting the case of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in the latter half of the 18th century. Interestingly, while this is fairly far back in time, it proves to be relevant for present controversies with regard to antisemitism. Equally interesting are the following essays dealing with either the useful or disruptive effects of the main term in question, namely antisemitism, in more limited *national* contexts, such as in Poland (Gershon Bacon), the United States (Eli Lederhendler), and Britain (Arie Dubnov). Finally, two essays on Holocaust research present two contradictory positions. Going somewhat beyond Engel's argument, Havi Dreifuss makes the case that, despite the fact that Jewish victims of the Nazi so-called Final Solution varied considerably among themselves, their murder had much in common, justifying the use of a single term—antisemitism. Generalizations may indeed sometimes lead to false conclusions, she acknowledges, but they are indispensable for making fruitful comparisons and for not losing sight of the overall picture. Against her, Amos Goldberg and Raz Segal argue for exchanging this term with something more "concrete" that would enable us to distinguish among various reasons to discriminate, expel, or murder the Jews in the various regions of Europe. They make this point by observing the joint case of Romania and Bulgaria, where local eruptions of violent state nationalism combined with Nazi imperialist designs normally worked *against* the Jews, but occasionally also *for* them. On this background, they seem to agree with Engel that using a single term covers up too much and illuminates too little. Reading between the lines, however, I feel that in their case studies too, antisemitism—simply meaning a compound of anti-Jewish sentiments and action—always played at least some role in the run of events and often, indeed, a very central role.

Finally, Goldberg and Segal manage to interweave in their essay a discussion of the political use of the term antisemitism not only during the Nazi era but also today. They begin with the present debate on "global Holocaust memory" and end with a critique of the recent definition of antisemitism offered by the International Holocaust

Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). Reading them, one feels that finally, "the elephant in the room" has been addressed. To be sure, an earlier article by Arie Dubnov on the complexities of antisemitism in Great Britain between 1830 and 1982 likewise criticizes the separation of Jewish history from that of other minorities and claims that overuse of the term has only served to obscure the ambivalence typical of attitudes toward Jews in Great Britain for long periods of time. It also tends to obliterate the unique *imperial* context and minimize the degree to which Jews were themselves "active players" in processes of excluding others. In another essay, also based on the British case and titled "Antisemitism and Islamophobia," David Feldman briefly reviews the literature on the linkage between the two and the political changes that recently deepened the rift between them. He argues that both Jews and Muslims now tend to abandon the universalism that previously constituted the foundation of their arguments, so that while the gap between the two groups continues to grow, the alliance between each of them and the anti-immigration and islamophobic—or antisemitic—milieu in Britain as well as in Western Europe becomes ever stronger and ever more self-evident.

But it is, no doubt, with Goldberg and Segal that one faces the principled dilemma head on. They claim that efforts to prevent critiques of Israel, in general, and its policies against the Palestinians in the occupied territories, in particular, have damaged the validity of previous anti-antisemitic arguments. Under these circumstances, many scholars find it necessary to distance themselves from the very term and perhaps even to drop it entirely. Certainly, greater care and more precision are now required in applying the term antisemitism; this is clearly agreed upon by Engel and his critical colleagues. On balance, however, I find the latter's voice more convincing, especially after reading the closing section, including Maurice Kriegel's repudiation of Engel's semantic and historical analysis and Dan Michman's vehement rejection of his overall thesis.

In the end, the debate has produced a rare and interesting exchange among scholars. Individual researchers may now be encouraged to apply greater care in their terminology, though presumably they will continue to use conventional terms such as antisemitism. And in any event, public discourse is generally oblivious to scholarly disputes, and we as historians have only limited influence over its content. As conscientious citizens, we may well press for less political manipulation of terms we use in research in the service of particular interests. I, for one, feel that our scholarship and academic standing hardly affect, justifiably perhaps, such public matters.

In their introduction to the edited collection *Jews, Liberalism, Antisemitism: A Global History,* Abigail Green and Simon Levis Sullam note that, in post-imperial England, "we seek to reimagine a field shaped by European experiences and paradigms," and in which the spotlight is on "issues of race, discrimination and hybrid identities in colonial and post-colonial settings . . ." In such global settings, they add, "neither Jews nor the Holocaust play a very central role" (p. 2). Hence, the present volume of 17 essays, based on a seminar and a conference in Oxford, deal with the complex links among Jews, antisemites, and liberals, not only—though also—in Italy, Spain, and Vienna, but also in the United States (or "America," as it is here called), Turkey, the Middle East, and even the Caribbean.

In what she terms "a reassessment from the peripheries," Lisa Moses Leff selects examples from Romania and Algeria to show the possible alliance between antisemitism and liberal democracy. At first, according to her, the antisemitism of Romanian liberals was an added aspect of fierce nationalism, always mixed with general xenophobia. Later, however, in response to the intervention of Jewish organizations under the umbrella of the Alliance israélite universelle, which had pressed the Western Great Powers to introduce Jewish emancipation in Romania during the late 1870s, the same liberals embraced a full-fledged conspiracy theory. They apparently came to believe in the presumed threat of a "Jewish International," as was increasingly the case among antisemites in other parts of Europe. Still, Romanian liberals believed *theirs* was a more successful model of a national-state than that prevalent in the West and they continued to champion the principles of freedom, equality, and national self-determination. This, Leff claims, is reminiscent of postcolonial nationalists in Africa and Asia, such as in Algeria, where antisemitism emerged together with the quest for democracy, particularly among European settlers, who upheld their own brand of republicanism that was typically *antijuif.* In fact, the possible linkage between liberalism and anti-Jewish sentiment is known from some of the classic cases of European liberalism, even in Germany as early as the 1820s, or in Russia somewhat later during the 19th century. The postcolonial context manifests additional strands of the same alliance and ought to be integrated in our overall view of liberalism, which, Leff indicates, was exclusionist from the start and easily forged alliances with antisemitism.

The book offers other fascinating studies, most outstandingly Laura Arnold Leibman's piece about the clothing habits of Jewish men in the colonial Caribbean. "Clothing became a battleground on which the war over Jewish equality was waged," she writes, and where "Jews used clothes to stage their whiteness and political capabilities" or even their "right capacities" (p. 98). Coining the term "language of dress," she also offers a fine analysis of Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* of 1830, painted when everywhere in Europe "men's apparel signaled their readiness for citizenship" (p. 101). While this point may have been apparent to all at the time, it has generally been lost to historians. Portraits of Sephardic men from 1790 to 1830, known only to specialists, further illustrate her argument, and she claims that since Jews were often considered "swarthy" or "black" in the Caribbean, and since race was by then increasingly defined "by a person's physical form," Jews were preoccupied by male fashion perhaps even more than others. Moreover, all of this preceded similar developments on the continent and in England, where body and dress were eventually key sites of the Jewish struggle for equality. In fact, while the Jewish *body* has received some attention of historians, especially with regard to the second half of the 19th century and increasingly towards its end, *clothing* seems to be overlooked. Leibman's essay brings this theme back to our attention. It is original and refreshing, and the relatively long bibliography at the end invites further study of both texts and visual material.

There are also a number of biographical essays in this volume. Jonathan Kwann treats the life of Heinrich Jaque (1831–1894), a Jewish liberal parliamentarian in Vienna; Ozan Ozavsci reminds us of the lost liberalism of the so-called Revisionists in the Zionist movement through the figure of Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky; and Arie Dubnov, treading somewhat more familiar terrain, examines the "independent voice" of historian Lewis Namier. In the final section, Malachi Haim Hacohen turns to the

"Jewishness" of what he calls "Cold War Liberalism," but though it is in itself a fascinating essay, it seems somewhat out of place at this point. Together with Abigail Green's contribution, reevaluating liberalism among Jews in the wake of the 1848 revolution, they both pull us back, as it were, to the familiar European context. Despite the fact that Hacohen treats European and American liberals together, and Green uses, indeed, what she calls "a transnational perspective," these essays, I feel, let down those readers who were, like me, fascinated by the volume's previous focus on the "periphery."

In its overall search for new conceptual approaches, the Green/Sullam volume leads us almost naturally to the last collection under review—in fact a small encyclopedia—edited by Sol Goldberg, Scott Ury, and Kalman Weiser. As befits such a volume, the list of contributors to *Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism* includes not only historians but also philosophers, psychologists, literary scholars, political scientists, jurists, and an anthropologist. In this alphabetic compendium, properly beginning with anti-Judaism and ending with Zionism, we go through some well-known stations in the form of essays on emancipation, the Catholic church, and nationalism, but then encounter essays on less expected terms, such as gender, orientalism and postcolonialism. Here, too, I found these latter essays particularly intriguing.

Antisemitism, writes Ivan Kalmar, "was not only *related* to orientalism; it was one of its central aspects" (p. 187). He begins by reminding us of the way biblical Jews were visualized as Orientals in European Art. Depicted as "Turks," they projected not only "Ottoman costume," but also the "authoritarianism of the Ottoman government" with regard to both Islam and Judaism. Having added the visual arts to our arsenal of historical sources (like Leibman in her essay in the Green/Sullam collection), Kalmar moves to literary texts, reviewing the philological and philosophical discourse on "Arabs" in Europe, beginning in the early 19th century and peaking finally with Ernest Renan. A theological debate concerning the "racial" origins of Jesus soon became part of this discourses as well, he tells us, showing how this half-hidden thread of associations going back to biblical times eventually led all the way to the Balfour Declaration of 1917. The entire Zionist project—perhaps especially as it was seen by non-Jews, one may add—is explained by Kalmar in the light of that long tradition, in which Jews too were considered "Semites," an integral part of the Orient. Only later, he adds, were they gradually transformed into proper Europeans who were not only foreign to the Near Eastern environment, but turned out to be active settlers and colonizers. The link between Arabs and Jews was thus severed, bringing about a changed image of both, the author claims, so that today's antisemitism no longer has much to do with the previous "oriental provenance of the Jews" (p. 197).

This is a forgotten, or at least long neglected, chapter in the modern history of antisemitism, though surely it has always played a part in some Jewish history books. After all, scholarship dealing with Sabbatai Zevi and Sabbateanism, not mentioned in Kalmar's essay, aimed at reformulating the links between Jews and Muslims, and for the 19th century, one recalls the work of historian Ismar Schorsch, who in some of his exemplary essays reminded us of the attraction felt by German Jews to all things Sephardic, especially to the unique Arabic-Muslim style of architecture known as the "Moorish" style.[2] Schorsch himself doubted that this style was chosen because it referred to the Oriental origins of the Jews, but in view of what we now know, perhaps

this assumption ought to be revised. In fact, the affinity of even Western Jewry with the Orient or with Islam has been often enough noticed, even by scholars of the Wissenschaft des Judentums as far back as mid-19th century. In any case, this topic now requires our renewed attention, theoretically and methodologically, as yet another aspect in the study of antisemitism.

Another side of the same issue is taken up by Bryan Cheyette in his article on "Postcolonialism," which relies in the main (as with his previous books) on artistic, and even more so, *literary* representations of "the Jew." Following the Second World War, Cheyette explains, a number of authors "made connections" between genocidal antisemitism and European colonialism. Among them was Hannah Arendt, whose *Origins of Totalitarianism* he characterizes as "an intersectional analysis of colonial racism and antisemitism *avant la lettre*" (p. 232). This work, he argues, became "a common reference-point" for those within colonial studies who sought to explore interconnections between colonialism and antisemitism soon after the war. Later on, however, postcolonial authors shifted their attention away from what they sometimes called "the globalized Jewish Question" and took care to differentiate between postcolonial and Holocaust studies. This division, Cheyette adds, was deepened after 1967, as postcolonial studies increasingly stressed the plight of the Palestinians, whereas Jewish studies focused on "the plight of the Jews in pre-war Europe." Despite the fact that the two fields could have enriched each other and that their mutual affinities might have enabled both "to move beyond exceptionalist histories of victimization [to] adopt a more open-minded sense of historical connectedness" (p. 240), this step has not yet been taken, according to Cheyette. In fact, a growing number of studies mostly by German historians, among them most prominently Jürgen Zimmerer, deal with the extermination of the Herero and Nama tribes at the hands of German colonists and troops in South-Western Africa, and sometimes make the link, controversial, to be sure, between these atrocities and the later—but after all not *so* much later—Holocaust.

In any case, the choice of articles in this volume, including expected ones on "Nazism" (Doris Bergen), "Conspiracy Theory" (Jovan Byford), "The Ghetto" (Daniel Schwartz), or "Antizionism" (James Loeffler), but also extended entries on "Secularism" (Lena Salaymeh and Shai Lavi), "Gender" (Sara Horowitz), and—for me, especially interesting—"Orientalism" and "Postcolonialism," brings us up to date and makes for useful and interesting reading.

In the end, all three volumes help move the historiography of antisemitism forward in a way that has long been needed, presenting a panorama of new and interesting perspectives about an old but still important, relevant, and hotly debated theme.

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Notes

1. David Engel, "Away from a Definition of Antisemitism: An Essay in the Semantics of Historical Description," in *Rethinking European Jewish History*, ed. Jeremy Cohen and Moshe Rosman (Oxford: 2009), 30–53.
2. Ismar Schorsch, "The Myth of Sephardic Supremacy," in *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 34 (1989), 47–66.