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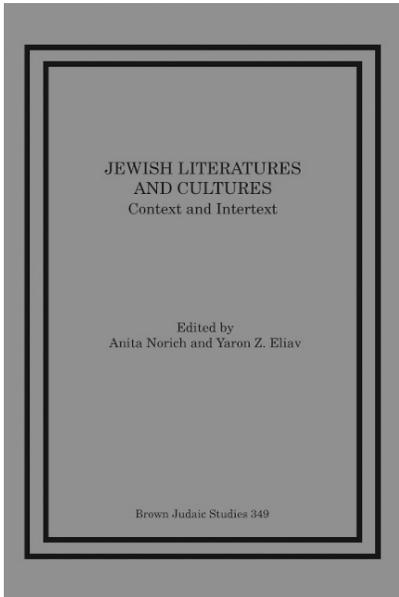
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Norich, Anita, and Yaron Z. Eliav, eds.

Jewish Literatures and Cultures: Context and Intertext

Brown Judaic Studies 349

Providence, R.I.: Brown Judaic Studies, 2008. Pp. xii + 260. Cloth. \$39.95. ISBN 9781930675551.

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Given the title *Jewish Literatures and Cultures: Context and Intertext*, one may expect the essays included in this publication to deal with questions posed in postmodern parlance. The central question of such an approach is whether one can speak about a Jewish culture as a unified, cohesive, and insular entity that aims at erecting boundaries between itself and the world outside and attempting to live and develop inside its own space. Indeed, is there a one and only Jewish history, or must we speak of Jewish histories of particular communities, each of which possesses its own Jewish mode of living? Preferring to title the book with the nouns “literature” and “culture” in the plural may hint at embracing such a theoretical point of departure. Anita Norich’s introduction and approach reflect these concerns, and she suggests the following as a guideline to readers of the articles: “[being] developed alongside *and* inside a wider, non-Jewish world and that, nonetheless, for all the diversity within and among Jewish communities, there is such a thing as Jewish culture and Jewish particularity.” Norich and most of the book’s contributors claim that external influences indeed helped shape internal traditions and Jewish cultural manifestations, and Jewish culture developed and changed according to conditions of place, time, and occasion. Therefore, Judaism is perhaps the paradigmatic example of multicultural studies. Nevertheless, despite external non-Jewish influences and internal variety of life experiences, a unified Jewish culture that was/is shared by whoever who

wishes to be recognized as a Jew can be recognized and documented. Norich is aware of the postmodern debate but stresses that no definite answer choosing for one or the other is offered in the book.

The book includes thirteen essays covering subjects from antiquity to post–World War II experiences. They discuss language, literature, art, and history. *Text* is understood in the broadest terms possible. Moreover, since all the authors aim at showing the fluidity of situations, the changing circumstances and their effects, and the multiplicity of influences and their shifting results on Jewish cultural expressions, it is perhaps worthwhile not only to employ the notion of “text” but also to introduce the idea of “experience” as a central and viable notion of discussion and reference.

The concept of a culture being in constant motion, of a culture that invents and reinvents itself, of the importance of local and temporal variations on understanding general trends and vice versa occupy each and every article. Michael Satlow concludes in his “Beyond Influence: Towards a New Historiographic Paradigm” that “throughout antiquity Jewish identity was largely voluntary, with Jews deeply embedded within their wider environment”(53) Gabriele Boccaccini, in “Hellenistic Judaism: Myth or Reality?” insists that the term Hellenistic Judaism in fact has been “one of the most influential Judaisms [plural!], one that played an essential role in late antiquity as an autonomous movement, and that has remained an influential tradition of thought both in Christianity and in Rabbinic Judaism” (76). Martha Himmelfarb, dealing with 1 Maccabees in “‘He Was Renowned to the Ends of the Earth’ (1 Maccabees 3:9): Judaism and Hellenism in 1 Maccabees,” wishes to picture a relationship between Jews and Greeks in terms of a fruitful acquaintance rather than in terms of animosity. Yaron Eliav (“Roman Statues, Rabbis, and Greco-Roman Culture”) shows that rabbinic interpretations were entrenched in modes of explanation, as in the case of statues, which were normative in the Roman world at large. Kalman Band expands the discussion on visual art to modern times in “Idols of the Cave and Theater: A Verbal or Visual Judaism?” David Ruderman wishes in “The Ghetto and Jewish Cultural Formation in Early Modern Europe: Towards a New Interpretation” to demonstrate that the world of the Italian ghetto (specifically that of Venice) never meant a total physical isolation and certainly no cultural separation between Jews and non-Jews. In “Hybrid with What? The Variable Contexts of Polish Jewish Culture: Their Implications for Jewish Cultural History and Jewish Studies,” Moshe Rosman rejects the theoretical validity of the term “hybridity,” a central postcolonial notion, when dealing with Polish Jewry and prefers a description that insists on the multifaceted nature of both Jewish and Polish society and culture, thus also influencing a variegated picture of local Jewish culture. Gabriella Safran, in “‘Reverse Marranism,’ Translatability, and Practice of Secular Jewish Culture in Russian,” demonstrates the space and boundaries of translations (translatability, in her words)

analyzing S. An-Sky's "Dybbuk," a play written in a European language, Russian, and intended to be an example of a possible modern Jewish culture but that later attained a level of canonicity in Hebrew and Yiddish, two Jewish languages. In "Diaspora and Translation: The Migrations of Jewish Meaning," Naomi Seidman's story of her father's Yiddish-French-Yiddish "translation" incidence highlights the volatility and its advantages and dangers within and outside the Jewish space in which translation takes place. Shachar Pinsker ("Intertextuality, Rabbinic Literature, and the Making of Hebrew Modernism") and Julian Levinson ("Brooklyn am Rhein? The German Sources of Jewish-American Literature") deal respectively with the employment of an older internal tradition in the formation of modern Hebrew literature and external German influences in Jewish American writings, showing the dependency of two Jewish literatures on other sources.

The overall picture that emerges from the contributions is that Jewish history and culture should be understood and studied as a dynamic phenomenon. Although accepting in principle the idea of the existence of a "Jewish culture" in the singular, it should nevertheless be understood on two levels: it is an amalgamation of a series of ever-changing "Jewish cultures"; there are general Jewish traits that occupy a position within each of these cultures and, therefore, enable us to speak of one Jewish culture. As Norich rightly insists, this trend is not to be associated with the modern era only, attributing such an attitude to secularism and other modern -isms that broke up unity and harmony in Jewish history. Such motion can also be fruitful in periods when Judaism is/was labeled as "traditional" and subsequently monolithic.

This collections of essays is highly recommended, since the editors and authors do not attempt to force an argument and rather prefer to present a pluralistic approach in two areas: reflecting a multifaceted historical picture of events, situations, and texts; and treating theory with a open mind, allowing it to unlock hidden and new spaces of inquiry and still not let it distort realities.