

It's the Economy, Shmendrick!

AN "ECONOMIC TURN" IN JEWISH STUDIES?

Jonathan Karp

Writing in the 1977 *AJS Newsletter*, Benjamin Braude noted that Jewish history has been compared to a "head without a body," a history of the Jews' spiritual and intellectual achievements rather than of their material and economic experience. The criticism was not new. As early as the 1910s the Polish-Jewish historian Ignacy Schipper lamented the fact that *Wissenschaft des Judentums* had concerned itself only with the "spiritual riches" of the scholars and intellectuals while ignoring the commerce and labor of the workaday Jew. Bernard Weinryb, a later student of Polish Jews, similarly decried the failure of Jewish historians to engage with economic realities in an honest and unapologetic fashion. And in recent years, Derek Penslar has reasserted the grim diagnosis of a Jewish historiography still essentially disembodied from the economic domain.

While somewhat overstated, these complaints do reflect a longstanding problem: a cloud of embarrassed silence has persistently hovered over the topic of Jewish *commercial*

livelihoods. Shylock has cast a long shadow of defensiveness over Jewish self-perceptions. In making this assessment, however, it ought first to be acknowledged that the list of exceptions to this general tendency is substantial—in fact enough nearly to disprove the rule. To the four names mentioned above could be added those of numerous others scholars who have advanced our understanding of Jewish economic history: Raphael Mahler, Selma Stern, and Arcadius Kahan, to mention just a few. Yet despite their individually impressive achievements, there has never been a systematic and programmatic effort to construct a subfield of economic scholarship within Jewish studies. Today, for instance, there are institutes for Sephardic studies, Yiddish language and culture, and a variety of other important areas, but no institute or center for the study of Jewish economic life. No journal specializing in this topic exists today either. The older, multivolume economic histories of the Jews, although still worth reading, are dated and remain untranslated into English.

Yet the long wait may finally be at an end; in this last decade there have

been notable rumblings of change. Whatever larger cultural developments underpin this apparent shift, it is the work of two scholars in particular, Jonathan Israel and Derek Penslar, that deserves much of the credit. Israel's wide-ranging yet meticulous renderings of the Sephardic trading diaspora succeeded brilliantly in fleshing out Fernand Braudel's earlier impressionistic inference of a massive Sephardic impact on early modern trade. In contrast to all other contemporary trading diasporas, the Sephardim alone, insists Israel, "managed to bridge the gulf between all four of the main early modern religious spheres of Europe and the Near East—that is Protestantism, Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Islam; all six of the western maritime empires; and America North and South as well as the old World." In Israel's depiction the Sephardic merchants of Salonika, Amsterdam, and Recife appear as veritable harbingers of our current globalization. Penslar's *Shylock's Children* (published in 2000), although focusing on mentalities far more than on commercial networks, makes similarly broad claims. The book places economic anxieties—prompted by successive efforts of Jewish elites to reshape the occupational profile of the benighted Jewish masses—at the very heart of modern Jewish identity formation. The hypothesis entails a fundamental

reevaluation of the impetus that drove many political movements in modern Jewish life, including territorialism and Zionism, as well as a reconsideration of the importance of Jewish philanthropy (including projects of occupational restructuring) in forging a secular sense of purpose and belonging for countless Jews.

An impressive sequence of conferences and publications succeeded the publication of Israel's and Penslar's books. A 1997 conference sponsored by the John Carter Library on Sephardic culture and commerce in the Western Hemisphere sought to join Jewish history with the burgeoning field of "Atlantic studies" and resulted in a 2001 collection of essays entitled, *The Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West, 1450 to 1800*. In 2003, Johns Hopkins University hosted a symposium entitled, "Atlantic Diasporas: Jews, Conversos, and Crypto-Jews in the Age of Mercantilism, 1500–1800," featuring the work of Israel along with that of some of his students and critics. This conference, too, has occasioned a (similarly titled) volume of important essays. In 2005 the George L. Mosse Program at the University of Wisconsin–Madison sponsored a two-day "international workshop" entitled, "Jewish History Encounters Economy" (likewise the basis of a forthcoming volume). In this instance the focus was not on Sephardic networks but rather the historiography and imagery of Jews in commerce.

One of the peculiarities of Jewish economic historiography is that some of its landmark studies have been written in order to advance large,

metahistorical claims about the overarching significance of Jews to Western economic development. Such was certainly the case with Werner Sombart's early twentieth-century work and, to some degree, with the recent book by Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century*. Both are boldly creative and unabashed efforts to identify Jews with the spirit of modern capitalism, if not necessarily to credit them with its concrete creation. Both yield genuine insights about the special roles Jews came to play within the economic constellation of Christendom and the

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prodigious longevity of their middleman activity. At best, however, both of these works glimpse the forest but miss the trees; that is to say, they heap up numerous examples and statistics while ignoring or discounting contrary evidence; and they eschew comparative analyses with non-Jewish trade networks that could provide essential perspective. Their effect on the course of scholarship is similarly mixed. They usefully puncture the academic silence that obscures a critically important topic, but do so in a manner that lends unfortunate credence to overreactive responses. They thus tend to provide ammunition to those who would argue that any effort to present a master narrative of Jewish economy must inevitably lead to dangerous overgeneralizations and "essentialism," that bogeyman of contemporary academic discourse.

Nevertheless, in the short term, these

works have stimulated debate and generated fresh scholarship. Like Sombart's book, Slezkine's tour de force prompted a burst of lectures, interviews, roundtables, symposia, and colloquia. As the dust settled over Slezkine's thesis that Jews have been the archetypal cultural and economic moderns, the progress that more quotidian scholarship had in the meantime made became evident. One of the clearest indications of the burgeoning field was the decision of the University of Pennsylvania's Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies to devote the entire fellowship year

2009–10 to the topic of "Jews, Commerce, and Culture." The Center hosted twenty-four fellows who presented weekly seminar papers on topics in medieval or modern Jewish economic history.

A three-day

international colloquium followed, featuring some twenty-five presenters, whose research will serve as the basis for a future volume.

As further evidence of heightened activity, during the year-long period of the Katz Center Fellowship Program, no less than four monographs were published on aspects of Jewish economic history: Francesca Trivellato's *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period*; Sarah Abrevaya Stein's *Plumes: Ostrich Feathers, Jews, and a Lost World of Global Commerce*; Eli Lederhendler's *Jewish Immigrants and American Capitalism, 1880–1920*; and my own *The Politics of Jewish Commerce: Economic Thought and Emancipation in Europe, 1638–1848*.

Trivellato harnesses her phenomenal mastery of the mechanisms and mentalities of early modern

commerce to negotiate a judicious middle ground between competing claims about trading diasporas in general and Sephardic commerce in particular. She sees Sephardic traders as neither exemplars of a decidedly *premodern* form of long-distance commerce nor a hermetically sealed ethnic corporation (as depicted by middleman minority theorists). Rather, her study suggests that strict ethnic boundaries actually enhanced economic openness, opportunism, and flexibility while ties of culture and kinship supplied merely a general framework of “familiarity” but no guarantee of trustworthiness in commercial transactions.

Trivellato rejects that cardinal doctrine of both Weberian theory and neoclassical economics that with the triumphant march to modern market society, ethnic niches must inevitably succumb to the calculative force of rationalistic individuals. Sarah Abrevaya Stein’s study of the international feather trade makes a similar point: ethnic networks not only can survive in a modern economy but may even possess certain advantages. Stein’s book is a historical detective story mining clues from Jewish communities and commercial sites in Lithuania, South Africa, Morocco, London, New York, and California. What her intrepid research uncovers is not a crime (although that sometimes occurred, too) but rather the disappearance and rapid forgetting of a once vital international trade largely controlled by Jews. Unlike many studies of ethnic niches, Jewishness is not merely incidental to the tale she tells. Rather, as Stein emphasizes, it “functioned as the glue that bound together a global market.” Jews were geographically well situated (or in some cases actively resituated themselves) to play instrumental roles in all aspects of the worldwide production, transport, refining, and sale of these luxury goods. The apposite division of Jewish labor within this particular industry makes

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it appear as a microcosm of that larger interdependency, ethnic solidarity, and internal class antagonism that characterized Jewry as a whole at the time.

If there is a dissenting voice amidst this chorus celebrating Jewish commerce, it is that of Eli Lederhendler. Stein, for instance, argues that Lithuanian Jews succeeded in the feather business because they possessed a “human capital” derived from an already existing commercial culture in eastern Europe. Although he does not deny that east European Jews may once have comprised a kind of middleman minority, Lederhendler regards this fact as irrelevant to evaluating their status in the late nineteenth century. By that time, he observes, the Jewish masses had become largely declassed (rather than proletarianized), as well as de-skilled and pauperized. Lederhendler thus repudiates the widespread notion that Jewish immigrants to the United States were better prepared for modern economic life than other contemporary ethnic groups. Rather, it was their gradual incorporation into the American working class, their transition from caste to class, that made possible their eventual upward mobility. Although Lederhendler is less interested in Jewish commerce than Jewish conformity, his call for a renewed history of Jewish work life and material circumstance echoes a theme common to the other works discussed here.

That call might well be heeded, assuming that the ghosts of Marx, Sombart, and Shylock on the Jewish Question have been finally laid to rest. My own book, *The Politics of*

Jewish Commerce, returns to these and many other now spectral representations of Jewish economy to ask what exactly the economic image of the Jews might have meant to the evolution of European political culture. Jews were overwhelmingly identified with novel economic behaviors and transactions during an era when modern conceptions of citizenship were first forged. Hence their situation suggested to many contemporaries a nexus between economic and political change. Jews served as emblems of rapidly expanding networks of finance and exchange that, depending on one’s perspective, either threatened classical ideals of the virtuous polity or promised to broaden and revitalize criteria of civic membership. Jewish commerce thus took on a theoretical importance that both directly affected the Jews’ own statuses and helped transform European economic and political thought.

Still, if there is to be a real economic turn in Jewish studies, scholars will probably wish to focus more on the actual than the symbolic meanings of the Jewish economic past. This has been the repeated argument of the economic historian Michael Toch, who has for years been challenging longstanding assumptions about the pioneering importance of Jews in the commerce of medieval Europe. Toch’s goal—as manifested in a forthcoming multivolume economic history of medieval Jewry—is to show that Jews were rarely the economic trailblazers or the occupationally anomalous agents of historians’ imaginations, but rather typically just one among a number of commercial populations seeking to eke out an existence within European life.

Indeed, for too long emphasis on what appears anomalous in Jewish economic life has deflected attention from a question that is fundamental to the history of any group: how did their economic behaviors both reflect and reshape their communal institutions, their beliefs, their internal and external relationships,

and their day-to-day lives? As the following essays on American Jewish economy demonstrate, it is a question that historians are now addressing in a variety of ways. I am very pleased to have had the opportunity to assemble such a fine collection.

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