

Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi

Edited by Elisheva Carlebach, John M. Efron, and David N. Myers
(Brandeis University Press, 1998, 462pp)

In Search of American Jewish Culture

Stephen J. Whitfield (Brandeis University Press, 1999, 307pp, \$26.00)

The task of bringing together in one essay two works, utterly different from one another, is a tough one. Yet there is, to use the rabbinic locution, a *tsad hashaveh*, a similar aspect, linking together Stephen Whitfield's *In Search of American Jewish Culture* and *Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, the Festschrift honoring Columbia University historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi. Each volume, in its unique manner, explores core issues in the Jewish experience, as refracted through the very different prisms of scholarship and popular culture.

The Festschrift as genre tends to be the ignored child in the world of scholarly literature. It is unfortunate that many a superb analysis remains unread, unknown, unappreciated in Festschriften that languish forever, unopened, on the shelves of the libraries that are the main consumers of these volumes. One hopes that *Jewish History and Jewish Memory* will escape this fate. For one, the volume is a superb collection of essays ably edited by a team of first-class historians. More important, however, is that this commemorative volume, unlike most others in the genre, has a theme — one related to the central explorations of the Festschrift's laureate, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi. Inherent in the book's title, *Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, is the Yerushalmi notion that history and memory, often conflated, are very different activities, with different purposes, goals, and processes. Indeed, Yerushalmi, in his pathfinding 1982 volume *Zakhor*, made the case for the idea that history and memory are oppositional: memory interprets the past selectively; history seeks to be comprehensive in recovering, assessing, and analyzing data.

Yerushalmi and the Festschrift's contributors are from the "old school" of historians who believe "things actually happened in history!" But Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi is harking back in his analysis to a rabbinic past that asked not "What happened?" (who cared?) but rather "How can we set a context, a chronological order, for the events of the Hebrew Bible and for the *halachah*?" It is this context that may provide a link between history and memory. In this respect the Festschrift's contributors offer fascinating and highly nuanced discussions of a range of questions, from David Berger's opening essay on the quest for the historical Jesus through Talya Fishman's nonpareil exploration of the historiography of the responsa collection *Besamim Rosh*; from J. J. Schacter's parsing of history and memory in the writings of the controversial 18th-century Jewish leader Rabbi Jacob Emden to the lovely evocations by Todd Endelman of Jewish converts, "Memories of Jewishness." These

examples suggest the structure that the editors developed for the book: Tradition and the Construction of Jewish History, Time and History in Jewish Thought, The Rupture of Modernity, and Jewish Memory and Historical Writing in the Modern Age — an elegant structure for elegant explorations of an elegant theme.

Stephen Whitfield looks at a different kind of memory — cultural memory — in his provocative and entertaining book, *In Search of American Jewish Culture*. Entertaining because Whitfield, a professor of American Studies at Brandeis, is a storyteller in the best sense. He uses stories and anecdotes — and plain old yarns — as vehicles for charting the movement between "high" and "popular" culture, a free-and-easy trip that is the hallmark of American Jewish culture.

There are gaps in Stephen Whitfield's book; inevitably, a comprehensive survey will never, as a practical matter, be truly "comprehensive." For example, in the world of literature, neither fiction nor the arena of scholarship receives the attention it deserves. One would hope for a companion volume exploring the literary expression of the Jewish experience. Further, one could read *In Search of American Jewish Culture* and conclude that the visual arts played no role in the American Jewish cultural experience. Although the volume is top-heavy in the performing arts, it is difficult to quarrel with the author's selections; they superbly illustrate his theme of American Jewish culture as "polymorphic," the coming together of many forms of culture in creating and enriching an American Jewish social experience.

What Professor Whitfield does include illustrates what to the author is a central question: what is Jewish culture? To Whitfield, the boundaries are more elastic than those of this reviewer. His rubric of "Jewish" culture includes virtually every offering by Jews engaged in the cultural enterprise. This approach goes far beyond a characterization preferred by some that culture is "Jewish" if it explores, through some medium of expression, the Jewish experience. But Whitfield is nothing if not supremely nuanced. "Jewish" is not the issue for him; *In Search of American Jewish Culture* is about the interplay of Jewish culture and America, and the contributions each makes toward a cross-fertilization. Ultimately, it's a dialectic of "Jewish" and "American" rather than "Jewish" and "culture" — and Stephen Whitfield superbly, winningly, entertainingly, "gets it."

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