EXCERPTS OF NEW BOOKS BY HUC-JIR FACULTY

The Jews: A History

Joshua Holo, John Efron, Steven Weitzman, Matthias Lehmann, Prentice Hall, 2009

The Jews: A History recounts Jewish history from its ancient Israelite origins to the recent past in a way that captures the religious, cultural, social, and economic diversity of Jewish life. Derived from the 19th-century conception of Jewish national identity, which was rooted in the rise of nationalism and tied to the increased secularization of European and Jewish culture that broadened the definition beyond a community of faith, this volume also reflects more recent intellectual currents. It features new research – recent archaeological excavation in Israel, the discovery and publication of previously unknown texts from the ancient and medieval periods, the opening of archives in the Former Soviet Union, a new attentiveness to Jewish life in Muslim lands, and revisions in Israeli historiography, and many other developments – that have unsettled established ideas about the Jewish past. The authors capture the agency of Jews as Jews within the larger cultural environments in which they have lived and operated, not simply how they have adapted to or mirrored those environments, with the goal of presenting Jewish history as knowable, tellable, and ultimately teachable.

The Fate of Forced Converts

The ideal of *Kiddush ha-Shem* – accepting death or killing oneself to preserve God's honor – was widely embraced as an ideal in medieval Europe, but many Jews nonetheless opted to save their lives and those of their families by accepting conversion to Christianity, and their status posed a difficult legal and social problem: Does a Jew have a greater obligation to preserve his or her own life (with the intent to return to Judaism when it is safe to do so) or to die for the sanctification of God's name? How does coercion affect the status of the person who chooses to convert to save his or her life? And what of forced converts who want to return to Judaism when they are able? Should they be accepted back into the community after having left it for another religion?

Forced converts, though adopting another religion, did not necessarily abandon Judaism in their hearts, and they sustained the family ties and friendships that bound them to the Jewish community. For such reasons, many Jews sought to return to Judaism when it was safe to do so. They were not always welcome, however. As the First Crusade demonstrated, many Jews believed that they had an obligation to sacrifice their lives rather than to betray God. Those who did were treated as heroes, while conversely, those who opted to convert were often deeply resented by fellow Jews.

Seeking to resolve these issues, some medieval authorities tried to strike a balance, acknowledging the ideal of martyrdom while trying to allow room for those choosing conversion over death. Such was the case with Maimonides, for example, who may have briefly converted to Islam under duress. Around 1165, he wrote a letter in which he tried to ease the burden of the Jew who chose to convert under fear of death rather than to die for his faith: "True, it is incumbent upon him to surrender to death, but if he does not, he is not guilty." In fact, he should choose to live, he maintained – to "leave these places (where he was persecuted for his religion) and go to where he can practice religion and fulfill the Law without compulsion or fear." Living under Christian rule, Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg (1215-1293) echoed Maimonides' view. Meir took the position that "although a Jew is required to choose death rather than be forced to worship idols [in this case, to become a Christian], should he violate this law, he would not become disqualified as a witness, though he would be guilty of having committed a sin." In other words, even if forced to submit to baptism, the Jew's core character and faithfulness are not to be doubted by his community, as long as he repents for the sin of idol worship. And Meir goes on to take an even more lenient position for those who clearly converted unwillingly, excusing their action by writing that because "they never actually embraced Christianity, but merely listened without comment to the priest's recitation… [so they] never committed a sin." In his mind, it was legitimate to fake conversion to survive: "A Jew is not required to choose death rather than allow the Christians to deceive themselves into believing that they have converted him." Jews who disguise their Judaism under the guise of conversion have come to be known as crypto-Jews.

Such views created an alternative to *Kiddush ha-Shem* by allowing for the possibility of a tactical or feigned conversion if that was the only way to preserve one's life. They also justified the reintegration of such Jews when they sought to return to the community. On the other hand, when Christians came to recognize the possible insincerity of Jewish conversion, that intensified their suspicions of both Jewish converts and Jews themselves. ■

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Behikansi Atah (In My Entering Now, Selected Works of Hava Shapiro)

Carole B. Balin and **Wendy Zierler,**
Resling Press, Tel Aviv, 2008

After five years of collecting and sifting through materials from publications and archives across the world, Carole Balin and Wendy Zierler have co-edited this anthology of Hebrew writings by the largely-forgotten early-20th century fiction writer, journalist, feminist, and cultural critic Hava Shapiro. Born in Slavuta [Ukraine] in 1878, Shapiro died in Prague in 1943 during the Holocaust. Although a lifelong Zionist, she never immigrated to Palestine, but persisted nonetheless in writing and publishing Hebrew prose in the Diaspora. Besides writing in the ancient language, Shapiro was unconventional in many respects: at the age of 25, she left her husband and son to pursue higher studies and eventually earned a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Berne. Her life story reflects the sacrifices that a woman of her time needed to make in order to pursue a life of the mind and the pen. Shapiro was the first woman to publish fiction in Hebrew; her collection of stories entitled *Kovetz Tsiyurim* appeared in 1909, eleven years before Nehama Puhachewksy's *Bi'Yhudah hehadashah* (1921) and eighteen years before Dvora Baron's *Sippurim* (1927). She was one of the first Hebrew feminist literary critics, composing several path-breaking essays on images of women in Hebrew literature and on women's reading – all of this, several decades before the emergence of feminist literary criticism in England, France, and the United States. From her vantage point in war-torn Ukraine and as a refugee in Czechoslovakia, she reported on Jewish culture and the arts, interpreted European literature for Hebrew readers, and also reported from various Zionist Congresses and gatherings across Europe. From 1899 to 1943, she kept a diary in Hebrew, which was the first known Hebrew diary written by a woman. She also wrote close to 200 Hebrew letters to Reuven Brainin, the famed Hebrew/Yiddish writer and editor, with whom she had a 20-year-long romance. Though Brainin never left his wife for her, Hava clearly never left his heart or mind, for Brainin deposited all of these letters in the Brainin archives of the Montreal Jewish Public Library, which he founded. Shapiro's letters to Brainin constitute the first extended Hebrew correspondence between a literary man and woman. Balin and Zierler's edited collection includes selections from all of Shapiro's writing – fiction, essays, feminist criticism, excerpts from the diary and letters – as well as an extensive bibliography of Shapiro's writings and a critical afterword, which they co-authored.

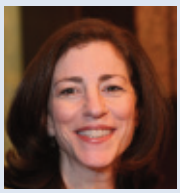
Preface to *Kovetz tsiurim* [A Collection of Sketches] Warsaw, 1909:

In 1909, Shapiro published *Kovetz Tsiurim,* her first and only collection of stories, under the pseudonym *eim kol hai* ["mother of all life," a pun on her given name Hava/Eve]. Prominently dedicated to her mother Menuhah, the volume contains portrayals of women, both those Shapiro admired who broke from traditional molds and those she disdained who conformed to convention. Shapiro prefaced the sketches with an important feminist literary manifesto – the first of its kind in Hebrew literature – on the need to add women's voices to Hebrew literature. Riffing on the famous opening line of the Hebrew poet Y.L. Gordon's *"Kotzo shel yud,"* [which asks: "Hebrew woman, who knows your life?"], Shapiro responds that women ought to take up the pen and depict their own experiences.

Our literature lacks the participation of the second half of humanity: that of the weaker sex.

In my entering now into this unfamiliar sphere, my strongest hope is that many others of my sex will be inspired to walk in my footsteps. So long as they [other women] do not take part, our literature will be impoverished and lacking a certain aspect. Time and again, when we [feminine plural] are amazed and awed by the talents of a "wonder worker," one who "penetrates the woman's heart," we feel at the same time as though a strange hand has touched us. We have our own world, our own pains and longings, and we should, at the very least, take part in describing them.

I know myself that I have not yet fulfilled the requirements that I myself have set before the male or female artist. This collection of sketches is only an attempt, only the beginning of the revelation of



Dr. Carole Balin is Professor of Jewish History at HUC-JIR in New York. She specializes in Modern Jewish History, specifically Eastern European Jewish History, and her books include *To Reveal Our Hearts: Jewish Women Writers in Tsarist Russia* and *Behikansi Atah (In My Entering Now, Selected Works of Hava Shapiro),* edited with Dr. Wendy Zierler. She is a contributor to *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*.

Dr. Wendy Zierler is Associate Professor of Feminist Studies and Modern Jewish Literature at HUC-JIR in New York. Her areas of interest encompass gender and Judaism, feminist commentary on traditional texts, modern Hebrew literature by women, and Holocaust literature. She is the author of *Behikansi Atah (In My Entering Now, Selected Works of Hava Shapiro),* edited with Carole B. Balin, and *And Rachel Stole the Idols: The Emegence of Modern Hebrew Women's Writing.* She is a contributor to *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*.