



PROJECT MUSE®

The Return of the Repressed: Modern Jewish Studies in *JQR*

David N. Myers

Jewish Quarterly Review, Volume 100, Number 3, Summer 2010, pp.
345-348 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jqr.0.0090>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/386321>

The Return of the Repressed: Modern Jewish Studies in *JQR*

AS ONE READS the editorial announcement with which Cyrus Adler and Solomon Schechter opened the new series of *JQR* in July 1910, one gets the distinct sense that they felt themselves at the dawn of a new era. “America,” they wrote, “is fast becoming the center of Jewry, and in all likelihood, will become also the center of Jewish learning in the English world.” The transatlantic passage of the *Jewish Quarterly Review* from London to Philadelphia, from the editorial control of Claude Montefiore and Israel Abrahams to Adler and Schechter, symbolized a broader transition of Jewish scholarship from its European birthplace to its new American home. Well before the devastation of the Shoah—and alongside the fledgling Zionist enterprise in Palestine—America was indeed becoming a center of Jewish scholarship. At first, this growth took place mainly in rabbinical seminaries and Jewish colleges (such as *JQR*’s first sponsor, Dropsie College). Later in the twentieth century, the main institutional venue shifted from seminaries and colleges to the university, where Jewish studies has become a mainstay of humanistic inquiry. One could well imagine Adler and Schechter feeling a mix of sadness and satisfaction that Dropsie College did not survive, but its library—and *JQR* itself—were taken over and put to new use by a research center at the University of Pennsylvania.

Quite similar to the founding fathers of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the first American editors conceived of their journal as filling a need not currently being met by the existing scholarly literature. Research in Jewish studies in America, they asserted, followed either a theological or local historical bent. By contrast, they aimed for a measure of Schechterian catholicity by embracing work in Jewish history, literature, philology, and archaeology.

That said, the journal unavoidably tracked the research interests of the editors. Semitic philology and Bible à la Adler were amply represented in

The Jewish Quarterly Review (Summer 2010)

Copyright © 2010 Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies.

All rights reserved.

the first years, as were articles that reflected Schechter's passion for and expertise in Geniza materials. What was conspicuously lacking was work on modern Jewish history. The editors made clear that they did not intend to retain the old *JQR*'s interest in English Jewish history. Nor did they feel obliged to replicate the efforts of the American Jewish Historical Society.

And yet, topics of modern concern crept into the pages of the journal. In the second issue (October 1911), the scholar of medieval Hebrew literature from JTS, Israel Davidson, wrote an essay that eventually wended its way around to its main subject: a review of a new dictionary devoted to the importation of Hebrew and Chaldean words into Yiddish coedited by C. D. Spivak and the renowned translator Yehoash. In a lengthy prelude to this discussion, Davidson offered an intriguing survey of both Hebrew and Yiddish literature in which he revealed himself to be impressively conversant with belles lettres and criticism in both languages. Even more interesting, though, were his judgments of the status of the two in his own day. Comparing the development of the two literary cultures, Davidson maintained that "in the short space of a quarter century Yiddish literature has made such rapid strides that it bids fair to outstrip modern Hebrew" especially in poetry and fiction. "Where is the Hebrew artist," he asked, "to equal Abramowitz [i.e., Mendele Mokher Seforim], unless we place his own Hebrew works side by side with his Yiddish? What Hebrew writer can measure up with the genius of [Y. L.] Peretz?" Davidson recognized that Hebrew literature was undergoing its own "extraordinary development." But he seemed intent on placing Yiddish even higher on the ladder of success, noting the "gigantic proportions" of its recent achievements. He even sought to explain its advantage over Hebrew by contrasting its mass appeal to the latter's "upper class" orientation.

Davidson hastened to insist that his comparison had nothing to do with the ongoing ideological debate *du jour* about whether Hebrew or Yiddish was the national language of the Jews (as, for example, at the 1908 Czernowitz conference). One might speculate that he did not want to run afoul of the new editors of *JQR*, who sought to reposition the journal as a journal for and by scholars. The previous editors, the Englishmen Montefiore and Abrahams, were keen on enfranchising, as they declared in their introduction to the journal in 1888, the "general reader" on whose behalf "the present, in which we live and through which the future is determined, must not be neglected." A similar impulse was not announced in the opening charge of the American *JQR*. And yet, as with subjects modern (especially in the reviews section), the present made some notable cameo appearances in the journal over the decades.

One particularly passionate and instructive case was the exchange

between Solomon Zeitlin and Bernard G. Richards in 1945. Five years earlier, Zeitlin had assumed editorial control of *JQR*, along with Abraham Neuman, following the death of Cyrus Adler. In the years 1943–45, he afforded himself considerable editorial latitude by publishing a six-part, two-hundred-page study titled *Judaism as a Religion: An Historical Study*. The gist of this study was to argue, simply enough, that the Jews constituted a religion rather than a nation throughout their long history. He was especially keen on dispatching the claim that “the Jews are a nationality in the countries they inhabit” per Simon Dubnow. He then proceeded to describe as an abject failure the effort to win national minority rights for the Jews at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919.

In an act of uncommon editorial magnanimity, Zeitlin opened his pages to a sharp critic, Bernard Richards, who had served as secretary to the American Jewish delegation at the negotiations in Versailles. Richards pulled no punches in accusing Zeitlin of “a superficial, misleading, if not mischievous account . . . of the matter of Jewish national rights.” He went on to describe American Jews, as well as American public officials, as far more supportive of national rights for Jews than Zeitlin had suggested. He concluded by arguing that the failure was not in the core conception of national minority rights but “in a larger problem of the lack of political stability and the impending strife which ultimately brought on a world debacle.” Zeitlin retorted by affirming his belief that the assertion of a Jewish national character in the Diaspora contravened the very “spirit of Judaism.”

I mention this exchange not only because it dealt with a chapter in modern Jewish history, and not only because that chapter had lingering present-day significance for both Zeitlin and Richards. I mention it as well because it marked, in both style and content, a rather striking departure from the more detached and antiquarian ambience that Adler and Schechter consciously cultivated. As such, it reveals a measure of the internal vibrancy of the *Jewish Quarterly Review* over the course of its one-hundred-year history.

* * *

None of the articles included in this third number of *JQR*'s centennial volume directly engages in the kind of present-day, ideological polemics in which Zeitlin and Richards (or even to an extent Israel Davidson) participated. But all are deeply engaged pieces that deal with the modern period of Jewish history. Indeed, it was a conscious desire of the current editors of *JQR*, Elliott Horowitz, Natalie Dohrmann, and me, to make no period of Jewish history foreign to this journal. And we have been

rewarded with a steady stream of fine contributions in modern Jewish history and literature over the past seven years, a select few of which we are pleased to highlight in 100.3. The articles contained in this number are important not just as discrete islands of research but in charting new horizons for the field of modern Jewish history that test and contest fixed geographic, cultural, and scholarly boundaries. It is this kind of boundary-crossing labor that we have always valued—and will continue to feature in the future.

In their “Sephardic Scholarly Worlds,” Julia Phillips Cohen and Sarah Abrevaya Stein paint an altogether new landscape of Sephardic intellectual history, now populated by scholarly personalities whose individual—and surely collective—narratives have rarely been told. Cohen and Stein nobly grapple with the challenge of writing such a history without betraying anxieties of Western influence (e.g., by not casting their subjects as second-order representatives of Haskalah or *Wissenschaft des Judentums*).

Meanwhile, in their entwined contributions, James Loeffler and Judah Cohen recover the legacy of the pioneering Jewish musicologist A. Z. Idelsohn (1882–1938). Each article demonstrates the significant role that Idelsohn had in shaping an important Jewish musical culture in whose midst he lived, first in Palestine and then in America. While serving as an illuminating case study in comparative cultural history, the two essays by Loeffler and Cohen also make clear what profit historians can gain by listening to, as well as reading and seeing, the past.

The final article in this centennial focus on the modern offers an unusual inversion. While much has been written about the nexus between anti-Semitism and the practice of social science in Germany, Amos Morris-Reich explores the distinctive ways in which three social scientists of Jewish background marshaled their disciplinary training to mount challenges to anti-Semitism. Thus, he traces Georg Simmel’s strategy of “circumvention,” Franz Boas’s normalization of anti-Semitism as a strain of human ostracization, and Arthur Ruppin’s analysis of anti-Semitism as both a danger and a preservative force (in limited doses).

Distinct in their temporal and spatial focus, the four articles share the quality of traversing existing boundaries of scholarship, mainly by arriving at subjects understudied or previously fixed in the scholarly imagination. It is this quality of embarking on bold new passages—transatlantic, editorial, and conceptual—that has allowed *JQR* to survive and flourish over the past hundred years. It is our hope to continue into the next century of the journal with this same spirit of adventure and innovation.