Book Reviews

REVIEW ESSAY

The New Jewish Canon: Ideas & Debates 1980–2015. Edited by Yehuda Kurtzer and Claire E. Sufrin. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020. 492 pp.

American Jewish Thought Since 1934: Writings on Identity, Engagement, & Belief. Edited by Michael Marmur and David Ellenson. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2020. 275 pp.

> No canon is fixed, and all guardians of cultural transmission are required to make hard choices . . . . Insofar as we focus on the spaces for debate and contestation within the traditional Jewish canon, we acknowledge the need for, and sustain the possibility of, multiple cultural expressions for the diverse people that we are. (Paula Hyman in Kurtzer and Safran, 371)

In her 2002 essay "Who is an Educated Jew?" the brilliant scholar of modern Jewish history, Paula Hyman (1946–2011), made an argument for Jews (aimed particularly at American Jews) to follow two seemingly contradictory paths simultaneously: on the one hand, to develop a "core curriculum" of Jewish knowledge, and on the other, to embrace an "open canon." The seeming contradiction lies in the tension between the word "open" and ideas such as a core curriculum and canon that signify the elevation of some texts and not others. To Hyman, the immoveable features of what should be at the core of a Jew's personal education—Hebrew, an acceptance of biblical and rabbinic texts as one's own, and Jewish historical knowledge—would give Jews the foundation necessary to pull in texts of many languages, types, and genres as part of a diverse, evolving, and fluctuating Jewish canon. Hyman's idea for such a canon was not something that would be contained in a volume or volumes, but rather something to be experienced. What Hyman had in mind was for Jews to adopt a multicultural model for their own society within the broader multicultural societies in which they lived. An "open canon" would reflect their willingness to accept the multiplicity of diverse Jewish voices.

Yet for Hyman, a community cannot sustain itself without also setting limits. Hyman argued at a symposium in the wake of the assassination of

Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin that "there are times when conflicting visions of Judaism and the Jewish future cannot be reconciled, if we are to remain true to our values." (Marmur and Ellenson, 290). Even an open canon has boundaries, and those demanding a more equal and peaceful Jewish civic, political, and religious discourse should not mute their voices in favor of "Jewish unity" or be afraid to exclude those who favor inequality and violence.

Selections from Hyman's writing were recently republished in two anthologies that self-consciously engage in the process of creating a referential canon for American Jewry. Hyman's essay "Who is an Educated Jew?" appears in *The New Jewish Canon: Ideas and Debates 1980–2015*, edited by Yehuda Kurtzer and Claire Sufrin. This "new canon" of "contemporary Judaism" reflects the editors' efforts to create a "conceptual roadmap" for the current preoccupations of American and Israeli Jewry, the communities that make up the current majority of the global Jewish population (xviii). Kurtzer and Sufrin assembled diverse source types—religious, political, and scholarly writing, interviews, testimony, laws, and liturgy—and dozens of excellent scholars to explain and decode these texts. In doing so they provide educators with one view of what Hyman's open canon might look like if synthesized in an anthology focused on Israel and the United States.

A bigger project inadvertently reflecting Hyman's impulse to create both a core curriculum and an open canon can be found in the multivolume series the Brandeis Library of Modern Jewish Thought (full disclosure: I edited the third volume in this series). According to its series editors, this project "aims to redefine the canon of modern Jewish thought" and has published edited collections in English translation on a range of topics (e.g., race, Sabbateanism, Hasidism), individuals (e.g., Mendelssohn, Spinoza), and areas or provenance of thought (e.g., Middle Eastern, diaspora nationalism). In redefining the Jewish canon, the series shares Hyman's open approach, actively seeking diversity of thought and languages, and rendering texts accessible to an English-speaking audience. Michael Marmur and David Ellenson, the editors of *American Jewish Thought Since 1934: Writings on Identity, Engagement, and Belief*, see their contribution as playing a role "in the loosening of a fixed canon" beyond the long shadow cast by a small number of influential men in Europe and the United States. (xxv)

The scholarship in both volumes expands the range of texts students and educators might utilize to understand the recent American Jewish experience. There is, however, a difference in how the editors present their engagement with canonization. Marmur and Ellenson see a canon of American Jewish thought as already too entrenched and, like the

canon of European Jewish thought, magnifying the influence of a small number of people. The editors thus bring in more of the intellectual progeny of thinkers who continue to cast a long shadow (in particular Heschel, Kaplan, and Soloveitchik) and many others debating the existential questions of American Jewish existence.

The claim made by Kurtzer and Sufrin, not just in their title, but explicitly in their introduction, to be intentionally engaged in the canonization process, is more problematic, because of both the sources chosen and the strength of the editors' insistence that their anthology does in fact reflect a new canon. One is left asking what binds a short segment from an academic book, a newspaper interview, a page from a siddur, and an Israeli basic law? Too many of these fragments speak to too few people to be elevated into a canon. The scholarly essays are excellent, and perhaps ironically they are best when they clarify why the selection has no place in the modern Jewish canon, rather than why it should be there. Examples include Jon Leventhal's deconstruction of the "pure nonsense" at the heart of Leon Wieselthier's "Language, Identity, and the Scandal of American Jewry"; Shaul Magid's essay on a debate between Yitz Greenberg and Meir Kahana; and James Loeffler's poignant analysis of A. B. Yehoshua's insecure polemic against American Jewry. Since the scholarly explanations are far greater in length than the fragmentary sources themselves, it is fair to view the enterprise as one that highlights the different strands of a potential contemporary Jewish canon, even if they do not reflect an existing canon or canonize these works. But I remain in Hyman's camp—even an open canon should have its limits.

Since both of these volumes bring the canonization process up to the near-present, one should be able to ask what do Jews think about today? In the first two sections of *The New Jewish Canon*, it would appear that Jews today think mainly about Israel and the Holocaust; in the second two sections these concerns fade out to discussions of modernity and adaptation, law and covenant. As the editors suggest in the introduction, most Jews today live in one of the "twin poles" of Jewish life—American integration or state sovereignty in Israel—and have "at homeness" in both. So it should be no surprise that the question of how to reconstitute a political, national, and religious community in the wake of the Holocaust is at the center of many of these texts, even composed as they were decades later. One interesting feature of so many of the texts is their focus not only on Israel, but also on the Jews' relationship with Palestinians, whereby one can see the role that not just Israelis, but rather Palestinians, too—whether the actual people or as conceived by Jews—have played in shaping Jewish identity in recent decades.

The second half of *The New Jewish Canon* grapples with questions of Jewish identity and religious adaption, with articles about the role of women in Judaism, Shabbat observance, and the individual obligation to follow Jewish law. Samuel Hayim Brody, in his commentary on works by Arthur Green and Daniel Landes, suggests that Jewish theology has a "relatively low rank . . . in the list of concerns bedeviling twenty-first century Jews" (309). Judging from Marmur and Ellenson's collection, however, the move away from theology in the twenty-first century would mark a major departure from Jewish concerns in the twentieth. The texts in *American Jewish Thought Since 1934* represent sustained theological engagement by Jewish thinkers in the second half of the twentieth century.

Marmur and Ellenson begin their collection in the 1930s because the more obvious periodization—to begin either at the turn of the twentieth century or post-World War II—would not reflect how the emergence of Jewish theology in America began when European philosophical trends in the 1930s influenced American Jews engaged in questions of adaptation and modernity. In particular, Mordecai Kaplan, a European-born, American-raised, yeshiva- and university-educated rabbi published *Judaism as a Civilization* in 1934, a work that Marmur and Ellenson consider "the first mature statement of American Jewish thought" (xxii). The editors argue that, already in the 1930s, before the cataclysm of the Holocaust necessitated a theological response, American Jews with at least one foot in Europe were beginning to question what bound American Jewry. Yet it is clear from the selections in the volume, the earliest of which is Hannah Arendt's 1944 "The Jew as Pariah," that the real American Jewish theological "creative effervescence" began after World War II.

What one can see in the seven thematically based sections on Jewish thought and theological debate is a continuous grappling with how to adapt Judaism—belief, practice, spirituality, self-conception—to the challenges of both a changing American ethos of individualism and the very different political counter-model emerging in Israel. The perspectives and topics included in the texts in Marmur and Ellenson's volume reflect the Jewish aspect of many of the postwar American liberal concerns about the place of women in society, how to work for a more equitable society, the meaning of religion and God, the responsibilities to use military or state power ethically, and how to define and preserve the bonds (and boundaries) of an ethnic and religious community within a universalizing state.

Yet concerns particular to Jews also become clear in this collection. First is the place of *halakha*—the law, and the obligation to fulfill it—in

American Jewish life. The answer to the question of how and whether to follow *halakha* in America, is, perhaps necessarily given the realities of American life, one of choice, and reflects a shift of focus to the individual. "I have chosen to be a *halakhic* Jew" is how Susan Handelman begins her essay "Crossing and Recrossing the Void"; Arthur Cohen in "Why I Choose to Be a Jew" says that with no compulsion to choose to be Jewish, he does so not out of communal bonds but because of sincere religious belief. Joseph Soloveitchik in *Halakhic Man* calls for Jews (well, men) to view and conceptualize the world "through the prism of the Halakha"—an individual's choice. To eat better, to listen better, to believe, to bring Jewish law into policy questions all appear as individual choices to be made. The one area where the thinkers in this volume consistently speak in terms of a collective reconsideration of Judaism is in its marginalization, and sometimes dehumanization, of women.

There is no doubt a gap between what keeps intellectual and religious figures up at night and the pressing concerns of the broader public, and any anthology will by its nature tend to the former. Still, these two volumes do reflect what has most preoccupied post-war global Jewry: the Holocaust and Israel's continued meaning to Judaism and Jews, but perhaps even more, how and whether to reconcile Jewish law (and God) to changing social norms. Selections by Steve Greenberg, the first openly gay Orthodox rabbi, appear in each of the two volumes, and both articulate the competing demands of his desire for acceptance in two communities—to be both gay and an Orthodox Jew. Greenberg states that "religious communities tend to be comprehensive of the human condition. The richness of Jewish living derives in part from its diversity of attention, its fullness" (Kurtzer and Sufrin, 382). While it would be difficult to contain such fullness in an anthology, a series, or even a new canon, these two volumes contribute to the process of expanding the "open canon" to make room for texts more reflective of the diversity of contemporary Jewish experience.

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