

RECENT SCHOLARSHIP ON EASTERN JEWRIES

Harvey Goldberg

In the spring of 1976 a symposium sponsored by the Education and Culture Committee of the Knesset discussed introducing the topic of the heritage of Eastern Jewry into Israel's educational system. The occasion showed growing awareness that the histories and cultures of Middle Eastern Jewries had been ignored in the curricula of Israeli schools. This awareness, in turn, reflected the increased electoral strength of the voters from non-Ashknazi backgrounds, expressed dramatically a year later when the Mapai party was voted out of power for the first time in Israel's history.

Despite widespread feeling within and outside academe that it was now time to encourage exploration of Yehudei Ha-Mizrah (Jews of the East), the historian Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson delivered an address at the symposium challenging the new efforts. Ben-Sasson made several points. The heritage of the Jewish people consisted of a plurality of traditions, he argued, and should not be divided simply into "eastern" and "western" sections. Moreover, not all Middle Eastern Jews shared a monolithic Sephardi heritage; Middle Eastern Jews, in fact, were at times in tension with one another. In addition, colonialism was experienced differently, for example, by North African Jews

under French control and by Iraqi Jews under British imperialism. The issue of comparability and comparison was further complicated by communities such as the Jews of Yemen

who were relatively isolated from Western influences and thus might be more accurately compared with traditional communities in eastern Europe than with other Eastern Jewries.

Ben-Sasson pointed out another pitfall that might well beset an



The first Jewish National Fund Committee, Tripoli 1915. © Beth Hatefitsoth, Photo Archive, courtesy of The Cultural Center of Libyan Jews, Tel Aviv.

attempt to identify a Jewry of the East for educational curriculum: the possibility to reduce the cultures of those communities to "museum artifacts," "folklore," and the popular veneration of sainted rabbis. To this end, he advocated studying their literate traditions, a bold suggestion, considering that it was not yet clear what sources would become available for this work.

The eminent historian did not win over his audience that day; later that year the Ministry of Education and Culture established a unit to promote the study of Eastern

Jewries, from grade school to university settings. Ben-Sasson's cautions, however, provide a background to describe some of the important advances in the scholarship of Jews in Middle Eastern countries in modern times. His insights on colonialism provide a good starting point for a brief review of this recent scholarship. The colonial contexts are central for two related reasons. First, the economic penetration and political control by European states of Middle Eastern lands resulted in economic changes, demographic shifts, and new formal statuses for the Jews living there.

Colonialism carried a second meaning for Eastern Jewries in relationship to European Jews. The latter claimed that the former required "regeneration" in order to follow the road to emancipation in ways that paralleled Western Jewry. A central player in this paternalistic project was the Paris-based Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU). Aron Rodrigue's *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition*

(1993) explores how teachers in AIU schools perceived communities in the Balkans and the Middle East, while Daniel Schroeter's *The Sultan's Jew* (2002) traces the process whereby Jews in Europe first came to see themselves as different from and superior to Jews in "the East." Schroeter's analysis is complemented by *Haskala* author Samuel Romanelli's *Travail in an Arab Land*, translated by Yedida and Norman Stillman (1989). Dealing with the period after World War II, Yaron Tsur's *A Torn Community* (Hebrew, 2001) shows the confluence of and tension

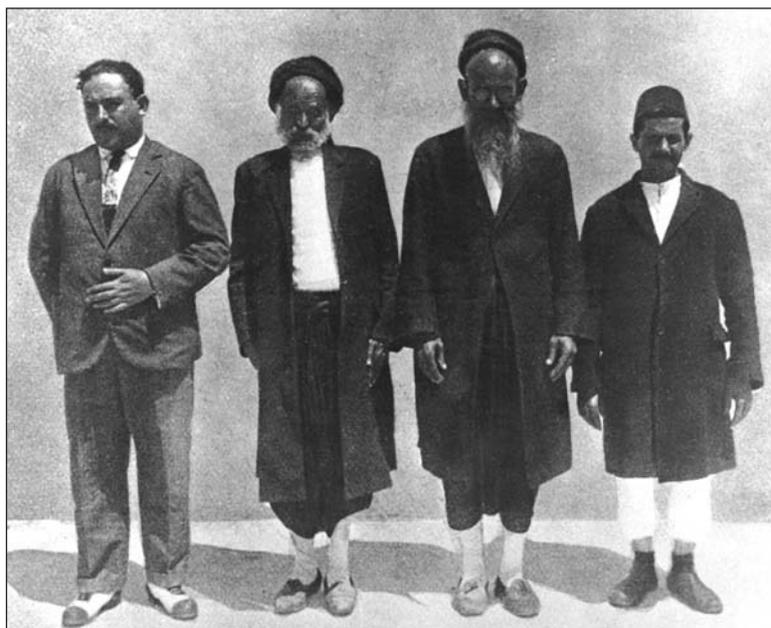
between views of Jews in Morocco as representing a background lagging behind the West and ideologies that envision them as part of a Jewish future. Taken together, this recent scholarship illuminates the complexity of the relationship between Western and Eastern Jewry and the colonial experiences of the latter.

The scholarly agenda of those studying Eastern Jewry has also explored relationships between Jews and the Muslim majority in which older patterns of interaction continued while responses to colonial contexts emerged. Some of this research has effectively combined anthropological and historical perspectives to demonstrate the complications of that relationship. *The Last Arab Jews* (1984), a study of Jerba, Tunisia, by Abraham Udovitch and Lucette Valensi, and Harvey Goldberg's *Jewish Life in Muslim Libya* (1990) are examples. Bat-Zion Eraqui Klorman's *The Jews of Yemen in the Nineteenth Century* (1993) demonstrates how the religious and political cultures of Jews and Muslims were interlaced, and Ammiel Alcalay's *After Jews and Arabs* (1993) points to the pitfalls of sharply dichotomizing "Jew" and "Arab" as bifurcated realms. Yoram Bilu's *Without Bounds: The Life and Death of Rabbi Ya'aqov Wazana* (2000) shows how demonology among sections of Moroccan Jewry involved not only a set of notions and practices remaining from the past but continued to be part and

parcel of twentieth century socio-historical developments. Joelle Bahloul's *The Architecture of Memory* (1996) illustrates the

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complex position of Jews in an Algerian town navigating between Muslim and European worlds. This



Members of the Rabbinial court of Benghazi, and the secretary of the community board, 1920(?). From right: Rabbi Rahamim Medar, last chief Rabbi of Benghazi, Rabbi Mordecai Hacoen, author of Higgid Mordecai, Rabbi Hammus Fellah, chief judge of the court.
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scholarship has been particularly effective at demonstrating the multiple experiences of Jews in Arab countries, and underlining the important intellectual constructs required for the study of these groups.

While a substantial portion of the scholarship on Middle Eastern Jews is devoted to establishing its historical and cultural frameworks, a further challenge has been to analyze processes internal to Jewish life in these cultures. Shlomo Deshen's *The Mellah Society* (1989) draws on rabbinic literature combined with anthropological

analyses of communal organization and leadership to portray Jewish life in Morocco in the period prior to European influence. Zvi Zohar's

The Luminous Face of the East (Hebrew, 2001) documents trends in halakic decision-making among nineteenth- and twentieth-century Sephardic rabbis.

Zohar demonstrates that Sephardic rabbis were more lenient than their Ashkenazi counterparts. He

suggests that the flexibility inherent in traditional Sephardic rabbinic culture resulted from the absence of competing religious ideologies. Matthias Lehmann's *Ladino Rabbinic Literature and Ottoman Sephardic Culture* (2005) examines rabbis writing in the vernacular while reacting to new trends in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thought. These works utilize sources that illuminate the cultures of Sephardic and Middle Eastern Jewries

and effectively demonstrate that the extant models of European Jewry of a comparable period are not sufficient for understanding Eastern Jewry's experiences.

Significant scholarship has dealt with Eastern Jewry's engagement with political and intellectual movements usually associated with European Jewry only. In addition to histories of the rise of Zionism among Eastern Jews, scholars have also studied the *Haskalah*, which, for example, stimulated local creativity in Hebrew. Harvey Goldberg's publication of Mordecai Ha-Cohen of Tripoli's *The Book of*

Mordechai (1980) brought to light the existence of “native” movements outside of Europe that reflected the desire to invigorate Jewish life rather than change it radically. Sarah A. Stein’s *Making Jews Modern* (2004) examines the Ladino and Yiddish presses in order to provide a comparative view of vernacular-reading communities. Taken together, these studies show how Eastern Jews underwent processes of modernization not unlike those of their European counterparts, albeit according to different patterns of engagement.

Transnational analyses have been critical to illuminating the dynamics of Jewish life. Walter Zenner’s *A Global Community* (2000) follows Jews from Aleppo, beginning with their historical origins in Syria, to the Americas and Israel. Another example concerns Egypt, where the origins of the Jewish population were diverse. Different aspects of Jewish experience there are emphasized by Gudrun Krämer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt, 1914–1952* (1989), Michael Laskier, *The Jews of Egypt, 1920–1970* (1992), and Joel Beinin,

The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry (1998). The latter work challenges the way nationalist-based narratives, both Israeli and Egyptian, skew the complex past and ongoing diasporic features of these Jews.

Transnational questions also enter into the realm of narratives, and appear in the complexities of identity embedded within both written and spoken languages. Examples of scholarship on this issue are Nancy Berg’s *Exile from Exile* (1996), which discusses the Arabic writings of Jews from Iraq living in Israel, and Esther Schely-Newman’s *Our Lives Are But Stories* (2002) depicting Tunisian women in an Israeli village who continue to narrate in Judeo-Arabic.

A number of edited collections of the scholarship of Eastern Jewry are now in print, ranging from Norman Stillman’s *The Jews of Arab Lands in Modern Times* (1991), which is also a sourcebook, to the recent *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times* (2003) by Reeva Simon, Michael Laskier, and Sara Reguer. Others include Deshen and Moshe Shokeid’s *Predicament of*

Homecoming (1974), Goldberg’s *Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries* (1996), and Deshen and Zenner’s *Jews among Muslims* (1996).

Looking back at Ben-Sasson’s address, it appears that despite the somewhat arbitrary and monolithic notion of “Jews of the East,” the scholarship that emerged, both in Israel and elsewhere, has amply documented the diversity of historical trends and cultural creativity among these Jews. Ben-Sasson’s warnings were well placed, but the flourishing of this scholarship suggests that the complexity and diversity of these cultures and histories have not been ignored. Indeed, the combination of both ethnographic and historical sources, the study of peoples at “home” and in the “diaspora,” and the effective use of comparison may well serve as models for the study of Jewish life in other regions.

Harvey E. Goldberg is Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.



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