



PROJECT MUSE®

*Blood and Belief: The Circulation of a Symbol between Jews
and Christians* (review)

Zev Garber

Hebrew Studies, Volume 51, 2010, pp. 414-416 (Review)

Published by National Association of Professors of Hebrew



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/400609>

BLOOD AND BELIEF: THE CIRCULATION OF A SYMBOL BETWEEN JEWS AND CHRISTIANS. By David Biale. Pp. xiii + 209. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2007. Cloth, \$39.95.

Mark Lidzbarski, the noted orientalist of a bygone age, relates in the story of his youth (*Auf Rauhem Wege*) a tale his grandfather was fond of telling; a man, on meeting a misfit wearing a patched coat asked the wearer if he knew what patch came from the original cloth. The fellow replied that nothing had remained from the original material. Such, noted the grandfather, is the state of religion; patch holds to patch, but no one knows whether any patch is of the original fabric.

Nonetheless, religion may be seen as a system of symbols, symbols which are in themselves expressions of a person's unique self-consciousness and capacity to transcend the immediate concrete situation and voyaged to the past as it envisions the future. The objective is to jolt those concepts, approaches, or perspectives which have become too familiar or too habitual to stir the imagination. Take blood for example. In the Western tradition, blood is seen to be symbolic of one's will to live and thus maintain one's own significance and participate in the welfare of the other. Blood (*dam*), used as a symbol, can be a means of discovering the fabric of humanity (*Adam*). It can elicit and bring forward into awareness that which has been forgotten, repressed, or lost to consciousness. It also may reveal new goals, ethical insights, or possibilities.

There is obviously more in blood than is seen under the microscope. In David Biale's *Blood and Belief* is an insightful historio-religio-social study of the symbolism of blood in Judaism and Christianity. The focus is on blood as the ground of covenant and testament, the stuff of ritualistic life, the source or relationship (community, people), and the evidence of ubiquitous violence. This sequence operates in a circuitous route in an attempt to answer Biale's ur-question: why the different literary, cultural, and religious trajectories between scriptural sibling religions? Starting with the sacrificial animal offerings where the blood motif is most strong and central, he moves to the biological fact of blood, particularly its place in human productivity and sexuality. This refers back to rites of circumcision and puberty and forward to the relationship between biology, sacrament, ethnicity, and race. Also, the meaning of blood in a more Jewish society raises conflicting views of the conditions or situations under which bloodshed is permissible or violable in contemporary Jewish thought.

Biale's effort to understand the changing and conflicting symbolic and substantial role of blood in the tradition of Jews and Christians from the biblical era to today is distinguished by a dual accomplishment. By discussing the Jewish and Christian views of blood in the context of clime and time,

and in their sacred oral and written tradition, he has pinpointed evolving characteristics and borders of the scriptural, rabbinic, and church belief and worldview of blood. Second, his erudite exegesis and interconnecting of sources, biblical to medieval to contemporary, help to unseal for the reader the seemingly hermetic methodology and intricacies of the classical Jewish and Christian mind on blood and its multi-faceted tributaries.

Biale's five chapters are carefully planned and argued. Chapter 1 focuses on the centrality of blood in Israelite religion and demonstrates that Israel's earliest covenantal memory is intermixed with blood. In Exodus 24, Moses reads (from) the *sefer ha-brit* (book of the covenant) and the people responded, *na'aseh ve-nishma* (we do and obey), and this is followed by Moses sprinkling *dam ha-brit* on the people (baptism of blood). Connect this with the Sinai moment of the *aseret ha-dibrot* (Decalogue; Exodus 19), attach Levitical sacrificial offerings, and envision *dam-adam-adamah* (blood-humanity-earth). Of particular importance is his discussion of land pollution, birth blood and menses, idolatry, murder, and ritualistic spilling of blood. Essentially and existentially, ritual blood is necessary for atonement, initiation, and redemption. Chapter 2 surveys rabbinic commentaries, extra-biblical material, and Christian Testament and testimonies, compares similarities and differences, and interprets how blood symbolism (semen, menses, priestly cult, ritualized body and blood, etc.) embodies this worldly Judaism and outer worldly Christianity. Chapter 3 reveals how this competitive ideology seeds life and death, polemical accusations and nefarious dealings in the Christian medieval era. Purity and impurity of blood, real and virtual presence of God's body and blood, host desecration and blood libel, wallowing in the physical blood of Christ in the mysticism of Catherine of Sienna, Crusader martyrdom (Jewish and Christian), and so on, are intuitively discussed in this chapter. Chapter 4 exposes the endless blood canard against the Jews as expressed in Nazi anti-Semitism, theory and practice: the parasitic Jewish bloodsucker and polluters of the pure Aryan race (*Rassenschande*). Finally, chapter 5 surveys and comments on referencing the Jews as a blood community asserted in the existentialist philosophy of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, the particulare-universal light unto the nations in the mystic teachings of Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, the nationalist poetry of Uri Zvi Greenberg, and others.

Biale's chapters are construed to show how the power of blood, in all its empirical and symbolic forms, played a significant role in molding the Jewish heritage, identity, and memory through the ages. His mastery of primary and secondary sources enables him to unravel the medieval blood disputations, such as, the Christian charge that Jewish men menstruate and Jews at Passover Seders drink Christian blood (blood libel) to atone for their deicide, and the countering Jewish *Toldot Yeshu* that Jesus was a *mamzer*

ben nidda (illegitimate offspring of a menstruating woman). The author's refreshing writing style is adept throughout. Noteworthy, the author's personal adherence to secular Judaism and left wing Zionism did not adversely affect his religio-center approach nor his selections of Jewish nationalism. Chilling lines that celebrate Zion and the Yishuv as a blood community, include Yakov Cahan's, "In blood and fire, Judah fell, in blood and fire, Judah shall rise again" (*Ha-Biryonim* 'Terrorists') and Uri Zvi Greenberg's avenging manifesto, *dam taḥat dam* (blood for blood) inscribed in his *Sefer Ha-Kitrig ve-ha-Emunah* (The book of accusation and faith).

In sum, this is a formidable, cross-cultural, and intricate study of the belief and practice of blood primarily in the faith and fate of the Jews; a book of exacting scholarship and an exhilarating read.

Zev Garber
Los Angeles Valley College
Valley Glen, CA 91401
zevgarber@juno.com

THE SONG OF THE DISTANT DOVE: JUDAH HALEVI'S PILGRIMAGE. By Raymond P. Scheindlin. Pp. xi + 310. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Cloth, \$35.00.

In the summer of 1140, Judah Halevi, physician, philosopher, religious thinker, and above all, a poet, sailed across the Mediterranean from Al-Andalus to Alexandria, and then onwards to the land of Israel, where he hoped to live and die in Jerusalem. This voyage was the fulfillment of a life-long yearning to reach Jerusalem and achieve religious and national unity. "My heart in the East, and I in the West," he laments in one of his famous poems (poem 15, p. 169), given a fresh new translation in Raymond Scheindlin's new study of Halevi's life and poetry.

This book is much more than a description of Halevi's travels, for Halevi's pilgrimage is unique, a personal and spiritual journey; a decision taken by an individual, advanced in age, to leave his life behind and move permanently to a distant and foreign land. This is not merely the fulfillment of the ancient Jewish aspiration to return to Zion, but a courageous personal choice to live closer to God. We know of no other contemporary who makes this journey without belonging to a religious community or hoping to join one in the land of Israel. In an attempt to explain and understand Halevi's decision to "leave behind / this Spain and all her luxuries" for "the Temple's rubble" (from the poem: "My Heart in the East", p. 169), Scheindlin traces Halevi's religious development and the national problem.