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The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times  
(review)

Oren Kosansky

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I enjoyed *Palestinians Born in Exile*, but I bring to the book experiences from my own fieldwork in the West Bank, including a number of months in Ramallah while at Bir Zeit University, and many evenings in Checkers (the favored hangout for Amrikan Palestinians to which Hammer often refers). I, too, was fascinated by this subgroup of Palestinians who both blended in and stood out in ways both similar to and different from me. Although I would have liked Hammer to push her material further so that it would appeal to those outside the field of Palestinian studies, I applaud her work for pointing to the complexities of the experiences of this little known group of returnees who are carrying the weight of (at least) two worlds on their shoulders.

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**The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times**, edited by Reeva Spector Simon, Michael Menachem Laskier, and Sara Reuger. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. 549 pp. \$26.00.

The past fifty years have witnessed the emergence of an extensive scholarly literature, across a range of disciplines, on Middle Eastern and North African Jewries. Although this scholarship is no longer as marginal as it once was in Jewish Studies, there has yet to appear a coherent synthesis of modern Jewish history in the region. It is to fill this gap that Reeva Spector Simon, Michael Menachem Laskier, and Sara Reuger offer *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*. Whether or not the editors have succeeded in compiling a coherent and compelling synthesis, we are fortunate that they have made the attempt. The result is a useful collection that furthers the cause of both expanding the scope of Jewish Studies and integrating Jewish history into the broader historiography of the region.

Insofar as one theme unites the historical narratives compiled in this edited volume, it is the conventional theme of the transition from tradition to modernity. Beyond this, and even though nearly one-third of the chapters are authored by the editors themselves, there are notable tensions and contradictions between specific contributions. To take one significant example, there is a disagreement between some of the authors regarding the extent to which local rabbis “had a vested interest in the continuation of traditional ways” (p. 287) as opposed to the extent to which rabbinical authorities emphasized “the

capability of accommodating Judaism to modern conditions" (p. 72). This tension, no doubt, reflects diverse rabbinical responses to modernity, but it also reflects differences in the extent to which the authors themselves approach tradition and modernity as concrete, successive, and mutually exclusive domains. Taken together, the chapters go far in demonstrating the variety of specific European interventions in the region and the forms of local Jewish response thereby entailed, but only some of the chapters resist reducing this variety to the master narrative of modernization. In particular, the chapters by Zvi Zohar (religion), Ammiel Alcalay (intellectual life), and Harvey Goldberg (Libya) productively challenge the putative features of tradition (i.e., retrogression, stagnancy, resistance to change, insularity) and demonstrate the nuances and ambiguities of Jewish modernity in North Africa and the Middle East.

What distinguishes this volume, then, is less its coherent synthesis and more its encyclopedic form, its accessible style, and its potential interest to a varied audience. The volume comprises twenty-six chapters, half of them organized thematically (economic life, education, music, etc.) and half of them organized geographically, from Morocco in the west to Afghanistan in the east. The volume also includes an outstanding CD audio companion, which demonstrates the heterogeneity of musical styles, languages, and performance genres in the region. Dedicated graduate students may read the volume straight through and come away with a sense of the general historical transformations experienced by Middle Eastern and North African Jewish communities during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The volume provides a serviceable introduction to regional Jewish society and culture, to the modern history of Jewish experience in specific national contexts, and to the local chronologies, forms, and impacts of European colonialism and Zionism. Undergraduate instructors might find use for the volume as a textbook to accompany more critically oriented articles and monographs.

In attempting to satisfy such a wide range of readerships, however, the editors have set themselves the difficult task of balancing breadth, accessibility, and rigor. In the end, the book is neither self-sufficient as an introductory text nor entirely satisfying as an edited volume of scholarship. Beginning students without a background in Jewish and Middle Eastern studies may be overwhelmed by the wide ground covered in a volume so dense with names, dates, texts, locales, and foreign terms. Advanced students and scholars may be frustrated by the lack of citations or extensive bibliographies that conventionally accompany contributions in edited volumes. Given these limitations, *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times* may be most useful as a sourcebook of basic information on particular topics and national com-

munities. In this regard, the extensive index provides an excellent resource for knowledgeable researchers looking for specific information.

Finally, what I perhaps enjoyed most about reading this volume were the gems of historical trivia that complicate stereotypes of Jewish insularity and passivity in the region. I learned, among other things, that Jewish merchants were involved in the selling of booty captured by pirates in the Maghreb (p. 36), that the lyrics of Egyptian diva Umm Kulthum were translated into Hebrew and incorporated into liturgical poetry (p. 91), and that Yom Kippur was at one point declared an official holiday in Tunisia (p. 456). These are the kinds of memorable facts that point researchers in productive directions and that provide instructors with vivid examples of the complexity of modern Jewish history in the region.

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**Over the Top Judaism: Precedents and Trends in the Depiction of Jewish Beliefs and Observances in Film and Television**, by Elliot B. Gertel. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003. 316 pp. \$45.00.

**Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting**, by J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003. 336 pp. \$52.50.

Coinciding with the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of American Jewry, a spate of books about the Jewish contribution to American popular culture has been published.<sup>1</sup> The companion volume to the Jewish Museum's impressive exhibition

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<sup>1</sup>For example, from 2003 to 2004, the following books on the role of Jews in various facets of American popular culture have appeared: Michael Alexander, *Jazz Age Jews* (Princeton, 2003); Scott R. Benarde, *Stars of David: Rock 'N' Roll's Jewish Studies* (Hanover, NH, 2003); Vincent Brook, *Something Ain't Kosher Here: The Rise of the 'Jewish' Sitcom* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2003); Paul Buhle, *From the Lower East Side to Hollywood: Jews in American Popular Culture* (New York, 2004); David Desser and Lester D. Friedman, *American Jewish Filmmakers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Urbana, 2003); Ben Furnish, *Nostalgia in Jewish-American Theatre and Film* (New York, 2004); Jack Gottlieb, *Funny, It Doesn't Sound Jewish: How Yiddish Songs and Synagogue Melodies Influenced Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and Hollywood* (Albany, NY, 2004); Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA, 2004); David Zarawik, *The Jews of Prime Time* (Hanover, NH, 2003).