No Place in Time: The Hebraic Myth in Late-Nineteenth Century American Literature by Sharon B. Oster (review)

Ezra Cappell

American Jewish History, Volume 105, Numbers 1/2, January/April 2021, pp. 305-307 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/ajh.2021.0027

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/804172
socialization they did not receive growing up Hasidic. He did not, as far as I could discern, interview people who had left their communities 20 or 30 years ago; his interview sample seemed skewed toward those who were young and early in their process of becoming integrated into the larger society. Furthermore, he does not give attention to the other side of exiting—joining—in their case, whatever communities or groups the exiters choose. In my book *The Spiritual Transformation of Jews Who Become Orthodox* (2019), interviewees expressed a great deal of anxiety over becoming part of a religious community. This was because they lacked the academic and social skills needed to navigate their new communities. Newfield suggests that some of the participants had a difficult time initially, but he does not expound on their struggles. It appears that the liminality that Newfield attributes to the exiters has much to do with uncertainty about the competencies, knowledge, and social “know-how” they need to find their place and “make it” in secular society.

This book provides a good introduction to the workings of Satmar and Lubavitch and is a commendable contribution to the literature on Jews who leave Hasidic sects for the larger, more secular society. Considering that most contemporary Jews are successors of previous generations of Orthodox or Ultra-Orthodox Jews, it offers a glimpse into a process one ordinarily does not see. The book is well conceptualized and contains rich examples of the reported experiences of exiters. It calls for a sequel on the later lives of those who left their Hasidic communities.

Roberta G. Sands
*University of Pennsylvania*

---


The old Jewish joke goes something like this: two Jews are sitting on a park bench on New York City’s Lower East Side reading newspapers. Shmulik holds a copy of the *Forverts* and is shocked to see his friend Yankel engrossed in reading *Der Stürmer*, the Nazi propagandist newspaper. Shmulik turns to his friend and says:

“Yankel, what's the matter with you that you read such trash?”
“Trash?” responds Yankel. “Trash? You call this trash? In your newspaper we Jews are poor, we’re starving, we’re being killed in massive pogroms. In my newspaper, we Jews control the world’s banks, we own Hollywood—we’re the most prosperous people on the face of the Earth. Now you tell me who the fool is?”

While much critical attention has been given to the antisemitic figure of the Jew in nineteenth-century and modernist literature, not nearly as much has been written about its contemporaneous opposite: a philosemitic modernist portrait. Sharon Oster has set out to change this unfortunate state of affairs. Yet, not surprisingly, according to Oster, the news is not all good. In trying to create a contemporary Jewish figure “in time” (in their own era), modernist writers still needed to negotiate their understanding of the historical figure of the “noble Hebrew.”

Readers of George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda will recall the trope of the noble Jew, a character who is not really of the era in which he or she appears, but rather a stand-in for ancient Jewish virtue—a quality upon which the New Testament is based. As Oster explains in this beautifully written and important book, the challenge modernist writers faced was to place this ancient Jewish figure back “in time” so as to become a living, breathing, contemporary (modern) character. As Oster states in her introduction: “I read philosemitic discourse as fundamentally about time, pervading the writing of even the most prolific literary realists of the era” (3).

Readers might understandably ask, why is this project of representing the Jew in realist and modernist literature so important, both then and now? The resulting Jewish characters that authors created were not just minor players on the American stage. Rather, according to Oster, once placed back in time (and not just a historical idealistic portrait of Biblical nobility), the figure of the Jew became a guarantor of a grand American future—the realized promise foretold in our founding documents and dramatized by an earlier generation of American writers. Oster convincingly argues that in the aftermath of the great Jewish migration to America, the challenge for modernist writers, both gentile and Jew, was to transform the myth of the Biblical Jew into a realistic, well-rounded character. As Oster frames it, to the prevalent Protestant writers of the age, Jews were “anachronistic” and thus were figures literally “out of time” (6). Through each chapter in her book, and in her close readings of writers as diverse as Edith Warton and Anzia Yezierska, what Oster does is place Jewish and gentile writers in dialogue with one another. In placing Jewish characters back in time, Oster create a more well-rounded portrait of Jewish literary characters.
So while many modernist and realist writers created Jewish figures that a contemporary ear might perceive as less than flattering, Oster’s dramatic shift in temporal orientation is a welcome one that leads to a greater understanding of not just how major Protestant writers like Henry James and Edith Wharton perceived of and wrote about Jews, but also how Jewish immigrant writers like Abraham Cahan, Mary Antin, and Anzia Yezierska wrote about their co-religionists, fellow recent immigrants to American shores.

Unlike so many scholarly works grounded in cultural theory, Oster’s book is elegantly written, and *No Place in Time* helps readers understand a vitally important period of American literary history while explicating how that crucial time period continues to impact contemporary images of Jewish Americans. Oster makes a compelling case for a major shift in our understanding of the ways Jews were perceived and portrayed in late-nineteenth century and early modernist literature and culture.

Oster concludes her book discussing the proto-Zionist ideas that helped shape both Christian perceptions of Jews and the Jewish community’s understanding of itself: “The poetic noble Hebrew of the past and the Christian Zionist vision of the future constitute the two temporal ends of the spectrum of Hebraic mythology” (238). In her analysis of Emma Lazarus’s work, Oster shows how Lazarus’s strident defense of Jewish identity looks “back towards the biblical past,” but only to help conceive of a bright Jewish future (239). Oster illustrates how the work of earlier Jewish writers like Lazarus, but also Antin and Yezierska, inspired the Jewish American literary visions of Grace Paley, Tillie Olson, and numerous contemporary Jewish American writers. This highly recommended book will be equally useful for scholars of Jewish American culture and folks just interested in the peculiar ways Jews have been and continue to be perceived in America. *No Place in Time* illuminates the great promise of Jewish renewal in the twentieth century, a process that, Oster shows, continues, however fitfully, to this day.

Ezra Cappell

*College of Charleston*