

Defining Neighbors: Religion, Race, and
the Early Zionist-Arab Encounter. *By*
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***Defining Neighbors: Religion, Race, and the Early Zionist-Arab Encounter.* By Jonathan Gribetz.**

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Treatments of Israeli/Palestinian history often presume that the seemingly intractable conflict in that region is—and has always been—a national conflict over a piece of territory. Though that assessment became increasingly salient in the years following World War I, it is not as useful for understanding early Zionist-Arab mutual perceptions in the decade or so preceding the Great War, as Jonathan Gribetz shows in his field-changing new book *Defining Neighbors*.

This was a period “before the political stakes of the encounter were quite so stark” (2) and, as importantly, when encounters between intellectuals, though tinged with suspicion, were not entirely negative or unsympathetic. Through close, sensitive readings of a fascinating set of texts, Gribetz shows that two communities—or at least a small stratum of intellectuals within them—were engaged in an intellectually curious quest to understand each other. These communities, moreover, were not strangers. They had long been linked by bonds (or perceived bonds) of religion and, in modern times, came to share a sense of racial connection as Semites. These texts, some of them unknown until now and present only in manuscript form, were written by Arabs in Arabic about Jews, by Jews in Hebrew about Arabs, and by Jews in Arabic about themselves, with an eye to persuading an Arab readership (Christian and Muslim) to think of Jews or Zionists in a more sympathetic light.

While in some instances members of the communities did meet—Gribetz begins the book with a meeting between the noted Hebrew promoter Eliezer Ben Yehuda and Palestinian teacher and writer Muhammad Ruhi al-Khalidi—the author focuses primarily on what he calls “textual encounters,” whether texts that imagined encounters or texts that had encountered other texts and sought to represent them to a new audience. Gribetz demonstrates a degree of interconnectedness between communities whose histories are normally written separately; his attention to religion and race within these texts

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helps move the scholarly discussion away from a focus on secular nationalism and from a common resistance to discussing the often highly politicized idea of race.

In addition to having succeeded in unsettling analytical categories, *Defining Neighbors* also insists upon a more expansive geographic frame for studying the Zionist-Arab encounter. As Gribetz argues in chap. 1, these encounters occurred within several overlapping geographic spheres. First, he considers the Ottoman Empire, which had just recently defined Jerusalem (but not Palestine per se) as an independent district. Both the historical (though in flux) *millet* system of religious categorization and the recent, ethnically inspired Young Turk Revolution of 1908 influenced patterns of thinking on race and religion. Second, the Zionist-Arab encounter occurred within a Middle East region in which intellectuals—many influenced by Arab nationalism—circulated between Cairo, Beirut, and Damascus, often making stops in Jerusalem on the way. Finally, the region as a whole was shaped by the presence of European missionaries as well as other European institutions enabled by the Ottoman capitulation agreements. These diverse geographies shape Gribetz's choice of texts. While some do come from the territory that would become mandate Palestine, others were penned in Cairo by non-Palestinian Arabs. Moreover, many drew from sources written by authors far outside the Middle East: the British Jew Richard Gottheil's encyclopedia entry on Zionism was revisited and rewritten by several Arab writers. *Defining Neighbors* reminds scholars that intellectual history (or any history, for that matter) need not be circumscribed by the boundaries of a real or desired nation-state.

The categories of religion and race, Gribetz argues, were in a state of flux both regionally and internationally in the pre-World War I period. Moreover, each community, whether Jewish, Muslim, or Christian, Arab or Zionist, was engaging in intensive internal debates about its collective identity. Some of Gribetz's most interesting texts pick up on cleavages within the population under consideration and elevate perspectives considered most expedient. Take for example the remarkable text that is the focus of chapter 2, Khalidi's 1913 *As-Sayunizm*, which presents a narrative of Jewish history and the origins of Zionism, in part on the basis of the Gottheil encyclopedia article mentioned above. While Khalidi acknowledges an ancient Jewish connection to Palestine, he contends that later Jews are forbidden from seeking a homeland beyond where they live by what he calls "Mendelssohn's Theory," after the Haskalah thinker Moses Mendelssohn. Gribetz, while showing that Khalidi's reading of Mendelssohn omits key details and qualifications, acknowledges that "al-Khalidi was hardly exceptional in associating Mendelssohn with an opposition to Zionism; Jewish Zionists and anti-Zionists of al-Khalidi's time did the same" (61). Khalidi's analysis is also influenced by active trends in the

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Arab world. “Mendelssohn’s Theory,” Khalidi writes, is binding on Jews as the result of an *asqamah* (agreement, probably a bastardization of *haskamah*) among rabbis. (Khalidi was probably thinking of the anti-Zionist statements propagated by both Orthodox and Reform rabbis.) The idea that a group of clergy could overturn a long-established principle comes from the Islamic concept of *‘ijma*, which was central to the Salafist thinking of the *nahda*, or Arab enlightenment, around that time.

While Khalidi attempted to understand modern Zionism, a range of Jews, both Sephardim and Ashkenazim, pondered the communities of non-Jews that they were encountering in Palestine. Here, too, conceptions of religion and race informed the terms by which they understood Arab Muslims and Christians. Gribetz, in chapter 3, explores shifting categories—signs of the “intriguing complexity and fluidity of this moment” (130)—through a study of three Hebrew newspapers: *Ha-Herut*, *Ha-Zvi* (and its later iterations *Ha-Or* and *Hashkafah*), and *Ha-Ahdut*. He finds that the more religiously identified Jews of the so-called First Aliyah, as well as many Sephardim, were more comfortable using religious terms (Muslim or Christian) to refer to the Arabs they met, while those of the Second Aliyah, whose intellectual elite was more secular, tended to shy away from such terms in favor of the racial/ethnic term Arab. Sometimes journalists used composite labels like Muslim-Arab or Arab-Christian, occasionally with the implication that Christians were somehow less Arab than Muslims. Gribetz speculates that this distinction between Muslims and Christians was related to a larger, ongoing discourse about Muslims being more favorably disposed to Jews and Zionism than Christians. Certain liminal figures such as a Karaite, who could be both Arab and Jew, further challenged Zionists’ conceptions of what constituted a Jew and what constituted an Arab. Another intriguing trend in Zionist thinking was the race-based claim, propagated by the Labor leader Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, among others, that Arab peasants of Palestine were in fact the descendants of ancient Jews.

In the context of this newspaper survey, Gribetz engages an emerging historiography that has claimed that Sephardi Zionists were on the whole more favorably disposed toward Arabs than Ashkenazi Zionists and that they constituted a more peaceable form of Zionism than that offered by the Ashkenazi mainstream. Gribetz’s analysis, however, suggests that both Sephardi and Ashkenazi Zionists, at least those represented in the press, were concerned about anti-Zionist sentiments and were committed to demonstrating to Palestine’s Arabs that they would benefit from Zionist settlement. The difference was only that Sephardi Zionists were more active in trying to do so in Arabic and more likely to speak of racial kinship in making their arguments. Far from questioning the basic goals of Zionism in light of emerging Arab opposition, Gribetz argues, Sephardi Zionists, like Ashkenazi Zionists, wanted peaceful relations only on their own terms.

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In piecing together pre–World War I Arab discourses on Jews and Zionism, Gribetz contends that it is not sufficient to read only texts produced in Palestine by Palestinian Arabs. In chapter 4, he looks to the conversations taking place in Beirut, Cairo, and Damascus to understand how Arab elites were thinking about Jews, antisemitism, and Zionism in the light of religious and racial categories. Three Cairo-based journals—*Al-Muqtataf*, *Al-Hilal*, and *al-Manar*—because of their wide circulation in the Middle East, provide clues about the likely thinking of Palestinian intellectuals. Gribetz also considers a fascinating monograph on the Israelites by *Muqtataf* editor Shahin Makaryus.

Surprisingly, given the strong identification of Zionist settlers as European colonists both at the time and retrospectively, Gribetz finds that the Arabic journals tended not to see Zionists as Europeans: rather, there was an assumption, based on popular race science discourses, that Jews were relatives of Arabs. The suggestion of similarity led some writers to suggest that if Jews, fellow Semites, could so succeed in the modern world, so, too, could Arabs. A combination of “respect and fear, sympathy and resentment” (134) pervaded these treatments of Jewish history. Gribetz emphasizes that despite Jewish assumptions that Muslims were more tolerant than Christians, this assessment does not describe these writers: both Muslim and Christian intellectuals undertook good-faith efforts to understand Judaism; both harbored suspicions and prejudices about them.

These Arab treatments of Jewish history defend Jews against common claims against them—for instance, the blood libel—but also in many cases share critiques of Jews based in familiar religious polemics and some linked to widespread, long-standing antisemitic tropes, especially those related to Jews and money. For example, some articles in the more religious *Al-Manar* followed a common Islamic trope in suggesting that Jews do not have a concept of an afterlife and thus focus all of their energies on this-worldly gain. Other journals make related claims based on European biblical research, sometimes in service of their opposition to Zionism. When *Muqtataf* considered the history of the Torah in 1895, for example, it suggested only a limited Jewish connection to Jerusalem. It also suggested that, in any case, perhaps modern Jews would not be interested in returning to Palestine.

Gribetz impressively dissects texts to find all manner of references and allusions to other texts. *Al-Muqtataf*, for example, based some of its analysis on a modification of a text by British orientalist scholar David Samuel Margoliouth. *Al-Hilal*, in an article by Emile Zaydan (son of *Nahda* writer Jurji Zaydan) republished a cartoon of a Jew holding a globe that, it turns out, was originally published in a Yiddish satirical journal. Sometimes texts and images were modified to emphasize a particular anti-Zionist interpretation; at other times the interpretations were far more sympathetic to Jews.

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“The prominence of the perception of commonality at this early state of encounter,” Gribetz argues, “necessarily cautions us about projecting far back into this period the deep, seemingly impenetrable divisions that developed later” (184).

In the final chapter of the book, Gribetz turns to Arabic-speaking Jews who wrote about Judaism in Arabic and tried to influence others’ writing about it. This chapter emphasizes a point that emerges throughout the book: textual encounters consist of and are enabled by translation, a fact that placed Jewish speakers of Arabic at a particularly important point of intersection between communities. Some such Jews, most notably Shimon Moyal and Nisim Malul, took on a project to “conquer the Arab press” by encouraging, sometimes financially, articles more sympathetic to Zionism and by submitting Arabic articles of their own. These individuals also worked to translate Arabic articles into Hebrew so that Hebrew readers could know what was being said about them. In a particularly intriguing case, Sephardi Zionists translated into Hebrew Najib Nassar’s Arabic translation (and interpretation) of Gottheil’s encyclopedia entry on Zionism. “Translation was thus a tool used to expose Arabs to the dangers of Zionism, on the one hand, and to expose Zionists to the dangers of Arab perceptions of Zionism, on the other—both ostensibly based on the same text” (186). In 1913, Moyal was involved in publishing a Zionist newspaper in Arabic called *Sawt al-Uthmaniyya* (Voice of Ottomanism), with the goal of explaining Zionist ambitions to Arabs.

Moyal made his own effort to improve Arab perceptions of Jews by publishing a translation and explanation of the Talmud (a text often pejoratively depicted in the region). The text is alternatively an apologetic and a polemic; it presents Jewish history in nationalist terms while discussing Judaism as a religion. While claiming a strong affinity between Judaism and Christianity (including through New Testament citations), he also claims that Christianity grew out of an inauthentic, Hellenized form of Judaism. Though Moyal mentions Islam less explicitly, he uses several terms from Islamic thought, like the term for the “pillars” of Islam, to refer to Jewish practices like regular prayer, and *jihad* as a translation of the Jewish concept of *milhemet mitzvah* (obligatory war). Malul, for his part, also wrote an explanatory text in 1911, *Secrets of the Jews*, which is more explicitly apologetic: he claims that all religions have the same goal and that Jews are not to be perceived as disloyal or obsessed with money, and he adds that antisemitism is simply a European import, a microbe that has come and infected the East.

If race and religion were such important—and flexible—categories prior to World War I, what happened as time moved forward? Though Gribetz acknowledges that religion and race never disappeared (and in many ways have become more relevant in politics and rhetoric as time has moved on), the category of the nation came to predominate and the categories of religion and

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race were progressively delegitimized. The rise of nationalist thinking was, in part, a consequence of a global rise in national sentiment after World War I, but it was also conditioned by the British, who had referred to “non-Jewish communities” in the Balfour Declaration but who seemed to consider religion irrelevant by the time the Mandate documents were formulated in 1922. Paradoxically, under the British “these categories [religion and race] were at once acknowledged and, at the same time, relegated to the unspeakable and politically irrelevant” (243).

Gribetz closes on a note of optimism: if the terms and tone by which Arab and Zionist intellectuals understood each other have changed so dramatically in the last one hundred years, there is no reason to suppose that they cannot change again. Indeed, such a sensitive treatment of historical texts, in light of multiple political contexts, geographic frames, and religious and cultural discourses should serve as a model for many historians working to interpret, categorize, and contextualize the texts they encounter—and for all those who study how changing circumstances change the terms of discourse and lead to mutual understanding or misunderstanding.