
Review

Reviewed Work(s): Nathan Birnbaum and Jewish Modernity: Architect of Zionism, Yiddishism, and Orthodoxy by Jess Olson

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Source: *AJS Review*, NOVEMBER 2013, Vol. 37, No. 2 (NOVEMBER 2013), pp. 427-430

Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Association for Jewish Studies

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24273539>

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Jewish poor, and the presence of Jewish bandits all reinforced the notion that Yiddish was a language of criminals, and that Jews supported criminal activity.

Part three of Elyada's book explores the power dynamics inherent in Christian use of Yiddish. In chapter 7, Elyada describes the Christian view of Yiddish as a "pitiful mishmash" and as a perverted version of German. In chapter 8, she returns to the use of Yiddish as the language used for converting the Jews, pointing here to the reluctance among missionaries and scholars to write in Yiddish, and their preference for writing in German using Hebrew letters. They considered Yiddish to be unintelligible, and saw their use of German as a sign of cultural patriotism. In chapter 9, Elyada discusses Christian Yiddishism in the context of Christian Hebraism. In an insightful discussion about language and power, she demonstrates that Yiddish was used as a tool for distinguishing between Christians and Jews. Christian Hebraists painted themselves as the Jews' heirs to a pure Hebrew language, whereas they painted the Jews as using a corrupted, inferior language. This served to dissociate contemporary Jews from biblical Jews. Elyada concludes from these three chapters that Christian Yiddishism "was part of a Christian attempt to achieve intellectual domination of Jewish culture, inextricable from their ambition to assert control over the Jewish minority in the German lands" (193).

One weakness of this study is its sometimes cumbersome organization. Similar topics (such as the *Judenmission*) are treated in both chapters 1 and 8. Its multiple overt references to theory may overwhelm an undergraduate reader. Nevertheless, Elyada's book lends crucial insights into Jewish and early modern history, and highlights the importance of language as a tool for understanding society. In the conclusion, Elyada suggests future research into the similarities between Christian Yiddishists' perceptions of Yiddish and those of Jewish maskilim, who similarly looked askance at this Jewish vernacular. The field can clearly anticipate further important work from Aya Elyada.

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MODERN JEWISH HISTORY

Jess Olson. *Nathan Birnbaum and Jewish Modernity: Architect of Zionism, Yiddishism, and Orthodoxy*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2013. 408 pp.
doi:10.1017/S0364009413000469

Who coined the word "Zionism"? Ironically, it was a man who is most remembered for getting into a dramatic spat with Theodor Herzl, eventually withdrawing from the World Zionist Organization; for becoming a leader of the pro-Yiddish autonomist movement and chairing the 1908 Czernowitz conference;

and then for abandoning these secular ideologies altogether to become a leading voice in the anti-Zionist, anti-secular Agudas Yisroel.

Nathan Birnbaum, the subject of Jess Olson's biography, has tended to be a footnote to histories focused on other actors, a flighty and ideologically unsure figure. That he ended his life within the fold of Orthodoxy, a fact until recently largely disregarded by secular historians, only increased the scholarly opinion of Birnbaum's instability.

However, as Olson suggests in a careful intellectual biography based on Birnbaum's remarkable personal archives, located in Toronto, Birnbaum should not be thought of as a shape-shifting anomaly in a period that sorted Jewish thinkers according to ideological categories, but rather as a man who rode several of the key ideological waves of his time and moved between them in ways that attest to a certain logic and counterintuitive consistency. Birnbaum never ceased to be concerned with Jewish unity and collective identity in the face of disaggregating assimilationist forces. That he articulated versions of these concerns within seemingly antithetical political frameworks only adds to our appreciation of the significant common threads that snaked through the disparate environments of the European Jewish political world of his time.

Olson offers two key takeaways in this insightful and sweeping work, which also serves as a solid introduction to some of the major ideologies and political players of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe. First, the work emphasizes the degree to which Jewish nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth was still inchoate and subject to multiple interpretations, with Zionism overlapping in rhetoric and aims with non-territorialist nationalist responses to the problems of Jewish exclusion and the need for cultural revival. Second, the book encourages us to reconsider Orthodoxy as a modern Jewish movement, one that was seeking to answer common questions about Jewish cultural survival but in different ways and different terms.

In the 1880s and 1890s, the lines separating Zionism from other forms of European Jewish nationalism were coming into focus, but they were by no means clear. Indeed, Birnbaum, who founded the Kadimah Zionist organization in Vienna in 1883 and a newspaper called *Selbst-Emancipation* (drawing consciously from the title of Leo Pinsker's seminal essay), articulated an idea of Zionism not wholly focused on Zion (though he was optimistic about the potential for Jewish settlement there). Rather, he gave first priority to the development of collective national consciousness in the diaspora against what he saw as an excessive penchant for assimilation among his fellow German-speaking Jews.

Birnbaum's drift away from organized Zionism in the 1890s is punctuated by his gloves-off spat with Theodor Herzl. Where Birnbaum highlighted the importance of Jewish cultural and national revival, including in the diaspora, Herzl advocated a political and economic program to resolve the Jewish Question. Though this organizational break proved decisive for the way Birnbaum would be remembered, Olson's deeper inquiry suggests that the break was not as sharp as it might appear, and that as his thinking evolved, Birnbaum continued to emphasize Jewish cultural unity and vibrancy in the diaspora much as he had before. In other

words, it was not so much Birnbaum who had moved away from the Zionist movement, as it was the Zionist movement that had moved away from Birnbaum.

Birnbaum's Yiddishist period emerged organically out of his grappling with Zionism. It was while defending Aḥad Ha-'am's 1902 critique of Herzl's utopian novel *Altneuland* that Birnbaum seemed to reject the Palestine option, hinting with disapproval that Aḥad Ha-'am and other cultural Zionists had subordinated a national spiritual program to Hebraism and Palestinism. However, even when Birnbaum suggested that "the exile is nothing less than indispensable to the Jewish renaissance movement" (149), he was still operating within a broader field of nationalist discourse that included some Zionists. Indeed, the decision to act through European political structures to achieve Jewish nationalist ends, supposedly at the apex of his "Yiddishist" period, was motivated by a concept known as *Gegenwartsarbeit* (national and political activities in the diaspora "at this time"), also employed by Russian Zionists at their third congress in 1906. While the subtitle of the biography and its overall conceptualization present Birnbaum's Yiddishist period as one of three discrete stages, the evidence seems to suggest that Birnbaum's diaspora nationalism diverged from his Zionist activity more because of his changing institutional relationships than because of stark ideological breaks.

Birnbaum came to Orthodox observance after the period of malaise that followed his lackluster Yiddishist period. Those years were marked by his embrace of Yiddish, his ill-fated run for the Austrian Reichsrat as part of a Jewish nationalist ticket in 1907, and the similarly ill-fated (though nostalgically remembered) Czernowitz conference in 1908, which met resistance from both the Jews of Czernowitz, who preferred German language and culture, and by the Bund, or Jewish socialist party, which rejected the conference's "bourgeois" national politics. Supported by Tuvia Horowitz, the nephew of the Viznitser Rebbe and a man who viewed Birnbaum as a sort of prophet, Birnbaum founded the Oylim Movement, encouraging young Orthodox Jews to adopt an active rather than passive approach to bringing redemption, through spiritual practice and observance. Birnbaum later became a leader of the more powerful Agudas Yisroel, an organization founded in 1912 which drew to its ranks disaffected Eastern and Western Orthodox Jews as well as religious former Zionists.

While we might suspect that Birnbaum's narrative of his own move to Orthodoxy would demonstrate teleological logic—and it does—Olson convincingly shows that, for Birnbaum, religiosity was truly a continuation of his advocacy for a more meaningful and vibrant modern Jewish community: "He embraced orthodoxy not as a means to escape the contentious political and philosophical questions that he had struggled with his entire life, but to answer them once and for all" (221). His search for a way to achieve Jewish unity, evident in his earlier writings, remained dominant. Now, however, he insisted that that unity would be based on a more primal and deeply rooted Jewish religiosity.

To the reader who might have expected whiplash from his seemingly inexplicable shifts, Birnbaum's Orthodox advocacy in fact has strikingly familiar features. If the threat to Jewish unity presented in his nationalist writings was assimilation, now the trans-historical threat was paganism, which he understood

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as an acceptance of false idols. Likewise, while Zionists were among the Agudah's main enemies—and Birnbaum's own credibility derived in large part from being a defector—his statements on Palestine are of a piece with some of his earlier views. “The Land of Israel must not simply become a land of Jews,” he said in a speech to an Agudah delegation in New York in 1921, “it must be a *Jewish Land*, a land that carries the seal of the Holy Torah, the seal of the Holy One, blessed be he...” (281). The basic importance of maintaining the Jewish character of a Jewish homeland, though restated at this point in theological terms, evokes the earlier statements of Aḥad Ha-'am and the younger Birnbaum in their critiques of Theodor Herzl.

Olson's biography leaves us with the picture of a man whose basic concerns recurred even as his organizational commitments changed dramatically. We also find a consistent personality trait: at every stage he was paradoxically known both for his leadership and for his distance from, and suspicion of, the institutions that he so influenced. “His confidence in his convictions faltered before the gritty reality of party politics” (292), Olson writes of Birnbaum's participation in the Agudah, a statement which might sum up his entire career.

The continuity of Birnbaum's ideas coupled with the discontinuity of his professional affiliations might serve as a cautionary note for historians who assume that organizational allegiances circumscribe and define historical actors' positions. Though Birnbaum is exceptional in the way he moved through different nodes of modern Jewish thinking, his very movement helps underscore the common concerns that led Jews to such intense and diverse forms of Jewish communal activism around the turn of the twentieth century.

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Anat Helman. *Young Tel Aviv: A Tale of Two Cities*. Translated by Haim Watzman. Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England, 2010. 228 pp.
doi:10.1017/S0364009413000470

In the last decade, as Tel Aviv's centennial anniversary in 2009 approached, a massive wave of studies about Tel Aviv came crashing on the city's shores, reflecting an increasing interest in Jewish urbanity, or “Jews and the City.” Among them is Anat Helman's *Young Tel Aviv*, first published in Hebrew in 2007. This work provides a remarkably thick description of everyday life in interwar Tel Aviv. Amid the recent wave of scholarship, this book stands out for its intentional dissociation from the mythological discourse created by Tel Aviv's artists and writers. Each chapter in the book describes and analyzes one aspect of everyday life in the first Hebrew city: public events, consumer culture, leisure activities, and urban subcultures. The book is written in a talkative, fluent, and often amusing style.