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Oriental Neighbors: Middle East Jews and Arabs in Mandatory Palestine by Abigail Jacobson and Moshe Naor (review)

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and a meticulously detailed one, and readers can benefit from the footnotes, index, bibliography, and chronology added in the end of the book. In sum, Holtzman, together with Scharf, created a reading experience that exceeds both the academic and the popular. *Hayim Nahman Bialik* is read with emotional involvement, with excitement and thrill produced by the affinity of the author to his subject of research, which re-creates intimacy in the process of reading as well.

This review of such an excellent biography cannot be complete without a word on “Jewish Lives,” the biography series in which the book was published, a partnership of Yale University Press and the Leon D. Black Foundation. The series includes over thirty titles devoted to influential Jewish figures from antiquity to the present. The aim of the series, according to its website, is “to illuminate the imprint of Jewish figures upon literature, religion, philosophy, politics, cultural and economic life, and the arts and sciences.” There is no question about the importance of the figures that were chosen to be included in the series (Albert Einstein, Leonard Bernstein, Rav Kook, Sarah, Primo Levi, to name just a few); also, as is understood from the rave review above, this is not a criticism on the quality of the biographies. However, the complete absence of Jewish figures from non-European, non-Ashkenazic descent is rather surprising. One can expect contemporary publishers and intellectuals, and literary and cultural agents, to be aware of the systematic erasure of non-Ashkenazic experiences and texts from what is called “the Jewish experience,” “the Hebrew republic of letters,” and overall from what is seen as “Jewish History.” “Jewish Lives,” though having the means to change this and thereby to effect Jewish culture and identity, perpetuates the view of Jewish culture as Ashkenazic culture. And while it does so elegantly—through deep, serious research, and fluent writing, it excludes the experience of non-Ashkenazic Jews—among them thinkers, religious figures, authors (Maimonides, Jacqueline Kahanoff, Jacques Derrida)—from, as put by “Jewish Lives,”: “the range and depth of Jewish experience.”

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Abigail Jacobson and Moshe Naor. *Oriental Neighbors: Middle East Jews and Arabs in Mandatory Palestine*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2016. Xiv+286 pp. Cloth \$95.00, paper \$22.57, e-book \$21.44. ISBN: 978-1512600063.

The diverse Arabic-speaking Jews in the Middle East and North Africa, called Sephardim, Mizrahim, or Oriental Jews, depending on context, have often been presented as external to the Zionist project, victims of that

project, or as its principle internal critics. In Palestine, Oriental Jewish perceptions of European Zionists as foreign and lacking appropriate regional knowledge and themselves as locally embedded allies of Palestinian urbanites and peasants alike have at times provoked nostalgia among scholars. Abigail Jacobson and Moshe Naor, in their book *Oriental Neighbors*, share some of that nostalgia for figures who continually engaged with, travelled within, and wrote for broader Middle Eastern audiences as they “lived in a Levantine space and belonged to an intellectual community that encouraged a debate on the nature of past and future relations between Arabs and Jews.” (4) *Oriental Neighbors* is not a wistful reflection, but rather an exploration of the difficulty—and ultimately the impossibility—of maintaining a strong commitment to the brotherhood of all native Middle Easterners, *Bene ha-Aretz*, while promoting the Zionist aims of Jewish immigration and settlement.

Oriental Neighbors focuses on the British Mandate Period, defined both by Sephardi loss of prestige and influence within the Jewish community and by new communal and organizational attempts at self-definition vis-à-vis the newly configured Arab Middle East and the ascendant Zionist movement. While insisting in organizational and literary forums that they were natives who could and should constitute a bridge between Arabs and European Jews, they repeatedly rebuffed suggestions, both by Arabs and by Ashkenazi Jews, that they were outside of or resistant to the Zionist project. They asserted that Zionism could be a force for good, though they insisted that this could only occur if the project were implemented with sensitivity to and out of an affinity with its Eastern setting.

Using Jewish organizational documents and the Hebrew periodical press, and occasionally Arabic sources written by non-Jewish Palestinians, *Oriental Neighbors* explores modes of engagement between Sephardi/Oriental Jews and Arabs, and between Oriental and European Jews, on two levels: elite and popular. The first three chapters offer a history of circles of Sephardi Jews who created organizational, institutional, and journalistic structures to communicate their affinities to the East both to Ashkenazi audiences and to Arabs. As they articulated their stances in a variety of forums, they reiterated their belief that “they could be both loyal Zionists and mediators between Jews and Arabs.” (23) The Jewish Agency’s Arab Bureau and the Arab Department of the Histadrut employed Oriental Jews as leaders and mediators to strengthen ties to Arab activists, undertake diplomatic contacts, and encourage Arabic study. Zionist Arabic newspapers like *Al-Akhabar*, *Al-Salam*, *Itihad al-Umal*, and *Haqiqat al-Amr* not only promoted Zionism but sought to mediate between Jews and Arabs and connect the Jews of Palestine to the broader Middle East. Pushing back against scholars who have emphasized the Zionist goals of these papers, they emphasize the writers’ engagement with the regional Arab press and claim that the Sephardi writers “used newspapers as much more than a propaganda tool.” These papers sat alongside efforts to promote Arabic study, write textbooks, and arrange for teacher visits to the Middle East as expressions of an “Arab-Jewish cultural hybrid identity.” (89)

The later chapters shift to the popular level with a cultural history of life in the Jewish-Arab mixed “frontier neighborhoods” or “Oriental Ghettos” in Tel Aviv–Jaffa, Jerusalem, and Haifa. These spaces were characterized by coexistence and cooperation, but also the sort of conflict borne of proximity. As Jews and Arabs played at the same playgrounds, shopped in the same markets, and employed one another, they defied broader trends in the Yishuv toward Jewish–Arab separation. This chapter is a fascinating work of cultural and working-class history, but unfortunately, is rather short and not entirely integrated—it is not clear in what ways these communities were practically or ideologically linked to the elite communities described earlier. In any case, as they lived cheek by jowl with Arabs, Jacobson and Naor argue, Oriental Jews came to see themselves as bridging figures in broader symbolic and strategic ways as well.

But despite the reality and consistent self-image of these residents as border crossers, the eventually upshot of this proximity was not harmony; it was the application of local knowledge to Zionist and eventually Israeli security purposes. As chapter 5 shows, Sephardi and Oriental youth often joined the Revisionist Zionist organizations of Lehi and Etzel, participated in bombing operations, and did intelligence work. Even as this security and proto-military work helped integrate them into the Zionist movement, its Oriental Jewish practitioners never lost the sense that they were doing it as mediators: “While crossing physical and identity boundaries in their security missions, they simultaneously mediated between Arab and Jewish identities and between Jewish immigrants and the native population.” (151) While the sources suggest that this self-image was indeed real, the authors do not fully grapple with the irony that the security work that followed from these feelings of nativeness ultimately greased the wheels for the definitive apparatus of Jewish–Arab separation, the Israeli military.

Repeatedly, *Oriental Neighbors* presents an apparent paradox. While speaking in terms of “Sons of the Land” and affinity with the East, Palestine’s Sephardi and Oriental Jews increasingly allied themselves not with not with binationalist groups like the German-Jewish-run Brit Shalom, or with the organizing efforts of Labor Zionists, but with the movement’s non-Labor center and right. The Mizrahi affinity with right-wing parties since the 1970s has been described as a response to mistreatment at the hands of the Labor government post-1948. This orientation, moreover, is often regarded as a perversion of earlier Jewish-Arab coexistence in the Middle East. But *Oriental Neighbors* implicitly questions that assumption, suggesting much earlier affinities between Sephardi and Oriental Jews and the Zionist center-right. Though Sephardi elites decried the participation of mainly poorer Oriental youths in Revisionist Militia groups, they tended to represent bourgeois interests, oppose the Hebrew Labor program, and thus find common cause with—and be increasingly seen as aligned with—the Civic Circles (bourgeois and middle-class figures) or Revisionists. These alliances destabilize what we might assume to be the Zionist left–right political map and indeed point to an often-ignored form of coexistence discourse in certain bourgeois segments of the Zionist center-right. In fact, in not seeing any

inherent opposition between Jewish settlement and Arab well-being, Sephardi Jews saw little reason not to promote Jewish settlement and seek sovereignty; they only recommended—insistently, and in many forums over multiple decades—that this settlement program be coupled with concerted efforts for Jewish-Arab cultural closeness and economic cooperation. *Oriental Neighbors*, in presenting a group often regarded as being outside the history of Zionism, presents them as a central component in the making of that movement and the internal negotiation of that movement's role within the Middle East.

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Rachel Kranson. *Ambivalent Embrace: Jewish Upward Mobility in Postwar America*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. Xiv+232 pp. Cloth \$90.00, paper \$25.47, e-book \$9.99. ISBN: 978-1469635439.

Jewish upward economic mobility in the postwar United States is the stuff of legends. It is the story of a how a demographic group once largely immigrant, working class, and socialist, became over the course of a few decades mostly upper middle-class, professional, and liberal. Familiar as this historical narrative is, Rachel Kranson's *Ambivalent Embrace* does not expend much energy in retelling it, exactly; instead this sharp, readable book chronicles and analyzes the discomfort American Jews, both individuals and authority figures, felt about that transformation as it happened.

Sympathetically, Kranson reads a variety of familiar phenomena through the specific lens of Jews' adjustment to a new economic situation in the postwar United States. Her first chapter, for example, notes that the three sites onto which American Jews projected the Jewish authenticity they felt was missing from their lives in the 1950s and 1960s—namely, the shtetl, the Lower East Side, and the nascent State of Israel—were all sites of extreme poverty; in ascribing value to these places, American Jews demonstrated discomfort with their community's growing wealth. Similarly, Kranson's fourth and fifth chapters understand the complexities of postwar Jewish gender politics—the disdain of male intellectuals and rabbis for “the pressures on American Jewish men to choose high-income careers” (112) and “the vilification of affluent Jewish housewives” (119), among other phenomena—as reflecting anxiety about the economic transformation of the community as a whole.

One of the book's most compelling chapters, the third, presents a case study of an Illinois Reform congregation, Solel, that in the late 1950s and early 1960s struggled against the trends in American Jewish religious life.

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