

Cynthia M. Baker, *Jew*, (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2017), pp. xiii-190

by Michael Berkowitz

Jew hear dat? Nah, *Jew*? Regarding *Jew*

Toward the north end of London’s Brick Lane, in the heart of its historic (now ultra-hip) East End, are two bagel (“beigel”) bakeries. Every (non-strictly observant) Jewish person I’ve met, who has lived in London for more than a year, strongly favors one over the other—with gusto. I myself would never cross the threshold of the shop with the yellow sign, which boasts it is London’s “oldest and best.” I admit to scoffing at the Jewishness of those who insist that the store I choose not to frequent is “the best.” (For Jewish-ly inspired baked goods other than bagels, such as challah and cheesecake, Rinkoff’s is the best—in all of creation.) Of course the “best” bagelry in Brick Lane is *Beigel Bake*, with the white sign. And of course the proper “Jewish” football club in Britain is Tottenham Hotspur, a brief discussion of which appears in Baker’s fine book (p. 53).¹ One can dismiss this anecdote as simply another version of the tired joke about the proverbial Jew marooned on the desert island who erects two synagogues: the first for himself, and the second “he would never step foot in.” I relate these stories in the interest of adding a wrinkle to Cynthia Baker’s excellent rumination on the term *Jew*. Baker likes to tell stories, a mixture of her own and those of others (p. 1)—including a gem from Naomi Seidman about her father, Hillel, in post-Second World War Paris (54). Professor Baker, if you’re listening, and dear readers of this e-journal: a Jew is somebody who cares about this kind of thing. The genuine bagel shop. The *really* Jewish football team. The stories people tell about their mothers, fathers, and children that mark them as a Jew. Here’s one from my mother, Gloria, born as Goldie (z’l, 1929-2017). When my daughter, Rachel, mildly complained about not being able to afford a beach vacation, I reminded her what my mother told me about the advantage of being a Jew without means: “you’ve never got to worry about somebody loving you for your money.” My daughter responded: “I’m

¹ Of the hundreds of important references in Baker’s book, few are more enlightening than John Efron, “When is a Yid not a Jew? The Strange Case of Supporter Identity at Tottenham Hotspur, in *Emancipation through muscles: Jews and sports in Europe*, eds. Michael Brenner and Gideon Reuveni, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 235-56.

supposed to feel good about that?” Those who see themselves as stakeholders, who talk over, and argue about such things, are, well, Jewish. Baker, as will be explained, chooses to exclude the vexing matter of the “ish.” Exclusion looms large throughout. A *Jew*, we learn, is in large measure what an idealized Christian is not (p. 4).

Despite these lighthearted opening remarks, and the Woody Allen-ish reference in the title (examined, appropriately, by Baker [pp. 47-8]), it is crucial to state that this is a serious, deeply-learned study embedded in classic languages and literatures, including Aramaic (pp. 19-21) Among its chief well-reasoned contentions is that *Jew* as a descriptive term fluctuated along a spectrum between the ethnic-national and the religious (and back again) beginning in antiquity. (pp. 20, 26, 41-3) Baker is superlative on both the history and historiography of this issue. From an academic perspective, Baker reveals that the ways Jewish Studies scholars have forged their arguments about the historical characteristics and evolution of the term *Jew* is overwhelmingly determined by how Christians have perceived Jews and from non-Jewish frameworks of understanding (pp. 33). Even “recent academic studies of the origins of Jews are historicized narratives of cultural transformation that unselfconsciously replicate Christian supersessionist paradigms” (p. 25). For scholars of Christianity in the wake of the Holocaust, Baker notes “a sense of profound unease attached to the word *Jew*” (p. 22). I suspect that even the most seasoned Jewish Studies scholars stand to learn something from Baker’s brief but complicated and wide-ranging scrutiny of Jew (or *Jew*?) (p. xiii).

As a second means of introduction, I wish to apply the “two synagogues” yarn to a problematic interpretation, presented as a truism in *Jew*. Baker claims that the controversial figure of Vladimir Jabotinsky was not “marginal” but integral to the Zionist movement (p. 101). Although his program did become mainstream under Menahem Begin and his Likud successors--and even earlier, in various compromises between the left, center, and right, in the development of the *yishuv*’s politics (as initially illuminated in Mitchell Cohen’s *Zion and State*)²—Baker underestimates the extent to which Jabotinsky was reviled by

² Mitchell Cohen, *Zion and state: nation, class, and the shaping of modern Israel*, (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987); edition with new preface (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

the majority in the movement.³ (She knows a lot about the discussion of its history, but her control over the movement's history *per se* is less grounded). In any event, this is understandable, certainly forgivable, because it's not her field of expertise. To this very day, and since Jabotinsky's time, there are Zionists who define themselves as over and against everything Jabotinsky represented. This is not to say that he was marginal. But he was contested in such a way as to render poisonous his self-proclaimed heirs in the eyes of those whose Zionism was antithetical to right-wing "Revisionism." Where is the spotlight on 'what is a Jew?' in this plaint? A *Jew* of the Zionist variety is not necessarily a partial Jabotinskian, as Baker claims. A *Jew* is somebody who, again, cares about this kind of distinction.

I already have committed a cardinal sin, in the context of the rules of the game as defined by Baker's *Jew*. *Jewish* is not in the toolkit for this book. She exclusively selects those who use the term *Jew* in their titles. Herein lies a persistent problem: many scholars, artists, and commentators have grappled with the meaning of the term *Jew* but it is not reflected in the title. It seems a particular shame that Milton Steinberg, whose works such as the *Basic Judaism* (1947)⁴ and the novel *As a Driven Leaf* (1939)⁵ played a leading role in guiding how modern Jews think of themselves, and how they came to be that way, makes no appearance in *Jew*.⁶

³ While the Zionist movement in Europe and the United States strove to present itself as unified and in harmony with the *yishuv*, it was, in fact, highly fragmented with bitterly opposed components. The development of politics in the *yishuv* overlaps to some degree with so-called diaspora Zionism, but in important respects they develop as separate entities. The Nazis and other opponents of Zionism, and antisemites generally, always emphasized the solidarity and coordination of all varieties of Zionism, even when they were aware this was not true. See Michael Berkowitz, *The Crime of My Very Existence: Nazism and the Myth of Jewish Criminality*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 128-31. Only in isolated instances during the Second World War—such as in the united partisan groups of Kovno and Vilna—but largely in the aftermath of the Holocaust, was there a firm consensus between Revisionists and other mainstream factions. Even then, however, Zionists were split along generational lines, with the younger generation taking the lead; see Avinoam Patt, *Finding Home and Homeland: Jewish Youth and Zionism in the Aftermath of the Holocaust*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009).

⁴ Milton Steinberg, *Basic Judaism*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1947).

⁵ Milton Steinberg, *As a Driven Leaf*, (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1939).

⁶ Jonathan Steinberg, "Milton Steinberg, American rabbi: thoughts on his centenary," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 95/3 (2005): 570-600.

Perhaps it is ungenerous to quibble in reviewing an exceptionally clever book, especially one that tackles a notoriously challenging subject. *Jew* was, after all, conceived for a very specific purpose: to fulfil one of the preeminent spaces in a series of Rutgers University Press called “Key Words in Jewish Studies.” While on the one hand Baker’s text is fabulously expansive, revealing familiarity with a huge range of books and articles, it also is somewhat narrow in the privileging the most theoretically oriented and self-consciously politicized work in Jewish Studies. As much as I respect Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Francois Lyotard, in my opinion they have contributed less, overall, to the evolution of the meaning of “Jew” than has, say, Ezra Mendelsohn, Jonathan Frankel, Marion Kaplan, George L. Mosse, and Steven Aschheim⁷ (pp. 47-51, 82-5). For a certain kind of Jewish Studies scholar, though, Butler is far more important. I fear that facility with ‘theory’ in this case takes precedence over a more sophisticated understanding of modern Jewish history, and how the concept of the *Jew* has been worked out in that history. But even given the limitations of this book, it is indeed a highly worthwhile text, especially for graduate students and early-career scholars who wish to be better-versed in the field of Jewish Studies, and to have some sense of the contours of debates in the field. As Baker herself notes—without boasting—those outside of Jewish Studies and explicitly Jewish fields also would be enriched by this work.

Approaching the author’s choice of a laser-beam focus on the *Jew* from a different angle: herein lies a difficulty that she does not consider. Especially for first-time authors, the choice of a title isn’t always her or his own. We will never know how many books would have had “Jew” in the title if the publisher had not insisted otherwise. Titles and covers are the kinds of things over which

⁷ Among the numerous highly significant works of these scholars, see Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983); Mendelsohn, *Zionism in Poland: the formative years, 1915-1926*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981); Mendelsohn, *On modern Jewish politics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and politics: socialism, nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862-1917*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Marion Kaplan, *The Jewish feminist movement: the campaigns of the Jüdischer Frauenbund, 1904-1938*, (London: Greenwood Press, 1979); Id., *The making of the Jewish middle class: women, family, and identity in imperial Germany*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); George L. Mosse, *Germans and Jews: the Right, the Left, and the search for a “Third Force” in pre-Nazi Germany*, (New York: Howard Fertig, 1970); Steven Aschheim, *Brothers and strangers: the East European Jew in German and German Jewish consciousness, 1800-1923*, (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982); Id., *Culture and catastrophe: German and Jewish confrontations with National Socialism and other crises*, (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

new authors are not always able to exercise control. At least two recent books (along with those mentioned previously) would have substantially enhanced her analysis: Sharon Gillerman’s *Germans into Jews: remaking the Jewish social body in the Weimar Republic* (2009)⁸ and Lisa Silverman’s *Becoming Austrians: Jews and culture between the world war* (2014).⁹ But because “Jew” is missing from the titles, Baker does not consider them. Although literary critic Judith Butler may have greater impact on the discourse surrounding Jewish Studies, she has not contributed nearly as much as has Gillerman and Silverman to our understanding of Jewish history, and how the concept of “the Jew” evolved, historically, in Central Europe.

Although it certainly was not Baker’s intention, the quotes she selects from Butler, Derrida, and other oracles reveal why the endless chatter about “the Jew” often descends into a black hole, or into a loop of repetition and response. Some may find this epigraph of Butler’s to be muddy:

“The expectation of self-determination that self-naming arouses is paradoxically contested by the historicity of the name itself by the history of the usages that one never controlled, but that constrain the very usage that now emblemizes autonomy: by the future efforts to deploy the term against the grain of the current ones, and that we will exceed the control of those who seek to set the course of the terms in the present.” (p. 47)

Even more troubling than the murky exposition is Baker’s discussion of the trend toward genetic or biological thinking about the *Jew*. A great deal of ink and web pages are devoted to such questions. I hope that this will be seen as passing fad, and an embarrassing one at that. Little of it is surprising, or terribly informative, because (as we well know) Jews tended to marry Jews—therefore hereditary traits have been passed on, to a greater extent for Jews, than for those who don’t privilege endogamy. Had Baker availed herself of John Efron’s pathbreaking book, *Defenders of the race: Jewish doctors and race*

⁸ Sharon Gillerman, *Germans into Jews: remaking the Jewish social body in the Weimar Republic*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

⁹ Lisa Silverman, *Becoming Austrians: Jews and culture between the world war*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)

science in fin-de-siecle Europe,¹⁰ perhaps we would have been spared the verbiage on “genomic Jews” (pp. 104-10), stressing blood (sic!) and genes. A glimpse at the current wave of historiography on Jewish consumer culture, as practiced by scholars such as Paul Lerner, Gideon Reuveni, and Hizky Shoham would have been more fruitful.¹¹ Relatedly, she does not address the extent to which the *Jew* has been interwoven with things economic, as detailed by Derek Penslar, and most recently—and brilliantly, by Julie Mell.¹² Baker is certainly wise, though, to conclude that “the genomic *Jews*—like all other *Jews*—raise far more questions than they are able to answer” (p. 144). Jews are indeed “a motley crew,” in terms of how they are constituted, which influences how they engage in the task of nailing jelly to the wall, that is, attempting to define *Jew*. Jelly--globular, runny stuff--exists. It tastes good, adding flavor. It can be sweet, sour, or in-between. Plain or *fensy-shmensy*. It defies being affixed to a wall so it can be viewed eye-level, or framed for posterity in any kind of elegant way. Despite this, Baker’s smart book is well worth the effort.

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¹⁰ John Efron, *Defenders of the race: Jewish doctors and race science in fin-de-siecle Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

¹¹ Paul Lerner, *The Consuming Temple: Jews, department stores, and the consumer revolution in Germany, 1880-1940*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); Gideon Reuveni, *Consumer culture and the making of modern Jewish identity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Hizky Shoham, “‘Buy local’ or ‘buy Jewish’? Separatist consumption in interwar Palestine,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45/3 (2013): 469-89.

¹² Derek Penslar, *Shylock’s children: economics and Jewish identity in modern Europe*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Julie Mell, *The myth of the medieval Jewish moneylender*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Id., *The myth of the medieval Jewish moneylender: Volume II*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).