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Sephardism: Spanish Jewish History and the Modern Literary Imagination ed. by Yael Halevi-Wise (review)

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Journal of Jewish Identities, Issue 6, Number 2, July 2013, pp. 100-102 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jji.2013.0020>



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Yael Halevi-Wise, ed., *Sephardism: Spanish Jewish History and the Modern Literary Imagination*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012. Pp. 360. Hardcover, \$45.00. ISBN-10: 0-8047-7746-2; ISBN-13: 978-0-8047-7746-9.

There are several noteworthy books written on the Jews of *Sepharad*, their history, identity and world of *convivencia* as it vanished with the expulsion from Spain in 1492. The cultural heritage and legacy of Sephardic Jews have been treasured and documented together with a steady interest in their historical and geographical trajectories following the expulsion. Identified, categorized and memorialized. However, as noted by Jordan Elgrably of the Levantine Center, "Until recently, we [Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews] have been taught to see ourselves as shadowy figures on the margins of Jewish society—the relics of a colorful history, excellent for classroom review but absolutely irrelevant today." Along comes *Sephardism: Spanish Jewish History and the Modern Literary Imagination*, edited by Yael Halevi-Wise, to shake things up and remind us just how relevant the Sephardi experience is and has been for writers since the nineteenth century. This is a much-welcome collection of eleven scholars of modern literary studies bringing a unique and fresh contribution to the burgeoning field of Sephardic Studies, inviting us to consider how the trope of Sepharad has been engaged in a dynamic literary dialogue which problematizes identity politics and perceived notions of nation building with its implication of border-crossing, boundary-breaking and (non-)belonging. As noted by the editor, the book proposes to examine how Sephardism has functioned as a politicized literary metaphor for a wide variety of authors in different ethnic, religious, and national contexts such as Germany, England, France, Spain, Israel, Latin America, and the United States, as well as in other transnational literary frameworks. These multiple and varied perspectives in place as well as time (from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first) yield a vigorous and timely exposé of the preoccupations around the many challenges posed by modernity, as well as with the status and depictions of minorities, those who exist in shifting spaces of in-betweenness.

The book is divided into four parts, eleven chapters, and a postscript. Part one deals with "The Problem of National Particularisms in German, English, and French Literature on the Jews of Spain." Here we find four illuminating chapters on topics as varied as the notion of "Sephardic supremacy" in Germany, or how British authors during Victorian times used the story of the Inquisition in their depiction of the birth of a nation based on racial and religious homogeneity. Another chapter discusses how a staged oppression of the Jews in the French opera *La Juive* tapped into the renewed significance of the Inquisition in contemporary political discourse under the July Monarchy, and the final chapter explores German Jewish writers in the period between emancipation and the Holocaust, repeatedly using the figure of Don Isaak Abarbanel to stress the analogy between what happened in Spain to what German Jews were experiencing, as they elaborated ideological positions on various points such as assimilation and religious liberalism vs. orthodoxy. Among them is the particularly enlightening essay on the obsession among

nineteenth century German Jews with Sephardic Jewry, using it as a tool to engage in a dialectic of rebellion and renewal toward what may be seen as modern German Jewry's legacy, namely, cultural openness, philosophic thinking, and an appreciation for the aesthetic.

In the second part, "Jews and Hispanics Meet Again: Latin American Revisions of Judeo-Spanish Relations," Edna Aizenberg elaborates on the complexities of literary Sephardism as she examines how Ashkenazi Latin American writers, or neo-Sephardim, create a Sephardic mythology for themselves as an acculturative (literary) tool. We may be surprised to learn that a whopping 80 to 85 percent of the approximately 550,000 Jews living south of the American border are Ashkenazim, and I found it particularly interesting to read about how they navigate feeling at home by adopting the Sephardic heritage. For the new generations of Sephardi writers, Sephardism "serves as an instrument to reconnect with submerged or fragmented Jewish identities." (136) Yael Halevi-Wise then considers three contemporary Latin American historical novels that entangle elements of the picaresque genre, where the picaro-converso, with his multiple allegiances, becomes a central figure in exposing the authors' multilayered cultural and historical contexts. By extension these literary historicizations of the Spanish picaro call for a change in attitudes toward minorities and dissenters, both by suggesting a corrective history of conversos as well as a reformation of the image of the Jew.

The third part, entitled "Between Israel and Spain," deals in two chapters with the modern Zionist Sephardic position of two of Israel's greats: Yehuda Burla (considered with Antonio Gala, a Spanish playwright, novelist, and journalist) and A.B. Yehoshua. Here, Bernard Horn underscores the latter's Sephardism as "an imaginative conceptual platform from which he promotes conversations across cultural barriers in ways that insist on sympathy for other ethnicities, religions, and nations." (3) In this part of the book we are made aware of the authors' measured use of their Sephardic heritage or history to foster a cultural vision meaningful to their own ethnicity as well as Yehoshua's "cosmopolitan approach to human interaction," (206) one committed to the concept of expanding sensitivities by enlarging the national conversation through a more flexible perspective.

Part four addresses "Postmodern Reimaginings of Sepharad in Francophone, Latina, and Other Transnational Literatures." Judith Roumani discusses how the use of Sepharad among colonial and postcolonial francophone Jewish writers has given them tools to deal with the various postmodern incongruities resulting from their unique modern history, including the more recent trauma of exile from various countries in the Levant. Dalia Kandiyoti examines how Sephardism bridges contemporary Jewish and Latina/o diaspora literature and criticism in the United States as they occur in narratives that blend in order to erase traditional distinctions between Jews, Catholics, Hispanics, and Native Americans. And finally Ephraim Sicher's essay on Salman Rushdie explicates how one of the most controversial writers of transnational literature today engages in postmodern constructs of Sepharad in his attempts to complicate an ideological discourse on race and nation through

reimagining history from a marginal, subaltern view and posting options for diaspora identities. Rushdie's project is to "offer alternate histories that break down ethnic divides and resist fundamentalism," (263) in order to challenge any presumed "master narrative."

This multifaceted collection, composed of twelve stimulating case studies focused around the central theme of Sepharad as a modern literary device, is brought together and highlighted in Halevi-Wise's postscript and poignant analysis of Rebecca Goldstein's *Betraying Spinoza*. In my judgment, each essay offers invaluable and often refreshing insight into the booming cross-disciplinary fields of inquiry in literature, history, gender, and minority studies, where issues of globalization and border-crossings, national and individual identity and belonging compel us to reassess the discourse with which we engage one another. By moving Sepharad from the stasis of history books to a dynamic place of engagement with literary texts and authorial contexts, Halevi-Wise compels us to imagine Spanish Jewish history not simply as "a relic" but rather as a prism of central importance through which we must continually negotiate ways in which to understand the Other and ourselves in the always shifting problematic of identity politics. Literature invites conversation, and with *Sephardism: Spanish Jewish History and the Modern Literary Imagination* we are invited to join one that is as relevant as ever. In this exchange, awareness of the Sephardic experience as a literary and discursive device plays a major role in expressing preoccupations about outsiders and minorities.

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Orit Bashkin, *New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012. 310 pages. Paperback, \$24.95. ISBN-10: 0-8047-7875-2.

Looking at Jewish lives in Iraq during the first half of the twentieth century provides seminal insights into how European and Middle Eastern societies have historically influenced each other. Orit Bashkin's *New Babylonians: The History of Jews in Modern Iraq* focuses on the crossroads of Jewish, Iraqi, and European cultures. Bashkin, a historian at the University of Chicago, investigates the role of secular Jewish intellectuals in the *Nahda* (renaissance), the Arab nationalistic literary and cultural renewal movement, starting in the second half of the nineteenth century in Iraq. Her study sheds new light on how the secular Arab national movement influenced the self-understanding and identity of Jewish intellectuals in Iraq under Hashemite rule between 1921 and 1958.

Like *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* (Syracuse University Press, 2009), Bashkin's earlier book on Iraq's political culture under Hashemite rule, *New Babylonians* challenges orientalist approaches to Middle Eastern and European history which often treat them as two discrete fields