

Moshe Bar-Asher and **Steven D. Fraade** (Eds.) 2015. *Studies in the Culture of North African Jewry: Collection of the Lectures Presented in the Workshop at Yale University October 15–24, 2012*. Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press. Pp. 242. ISBN 9789654810562 (Hardcover) \$US28.66.

This edited volume, the second of two based upon a workshop centred on North African manuscripts in Yale University Library's Judaic Collection (for the first volume, see Bar-Asher and Fraade 2011), opens and enlarges windows on a range of topics concerning Jewish life in the Maghreb. There is no unifying focus, but all papers are based on research informed by extensive and detailed linguistic knowledge, entailing both Hebrew and Judaeo-Arabic. While some papers utilise

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such knowledge mainly to illuminate a particular cultural or historical phenomenon, most of them also engage with issues of method regarding linguistic, semantic, or sociolinguistic questions that also bear relevance to situations elsewhere.

The study of Jewish culture in the Maghreb has taken major strides since the 1970s, when the first concerted effort to give it prominence took place in the Israeli context.¹ At the same time, the number of researchers (in Israel and elsewhere) who mastered the linguistic skills required to achieve the analytic refinement reflected in the present volume has remained limited. It is worth reviewing the elements of the challenge entailed in such an enterprise, particularly with regard to Judaeo-Arabic: learning Arabic, being able to read it in Hebrew characters and grasping the Hebrew-Aramaic influence upon the language, and confronting a variety of local scripts along with sensitivity to variation in spoken dialects that are expressed in the texts available. Some of the papers in the present collection are also based upon fieldwork carried out among speakers of the Jewish dialects, whose numbers continue to dwindle. A major general contribution of this volume is to make this overall research orientation accessible, in both format and style, without compromising the intricacies and depth of the scholarly effort.

Within the diversity of the papers it is possible to identify several thrusts. Several contributions seek to gain insights into phenomena with deep roots in the past, which appear puzzling or seem to lie beyond the reach of systematic investigation. The opening chapter by Moshe Bar-Asher looks into a phenomenon that he remembers from his childhood in South-Eastern Morocco, and regarding which other bits of evidence accumulated over time: that several families in the region were considered to be descendants of those who worshipped the “golden calf.” What is the meaning of this claim when it is clear that it cannot be understood as a plain historical statement? Based upon interviews of people from the region, the gradual discovery of written documents that seemed relevant to the issue, and a grasp of the dynamics of Jewish life in the region along with mechanics and subtleties of rabbinic interpretation, we are offered a plausible explanation that also constitutes a model of how such “mysterious” phenomena might be approached in other contexts.

In the subsequent chapter, Nathalie Akun focuses on certain phonetic features of how the Mishna is read among Jews from Morocco. Her precise recordings, combined with historical records and field data gathered in other studies, lead to a well-based argument that an ancient

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tradition from Palestine, rather than from Babylonia, went into shaping the standardised vocal form of the reading of the Mishna in Morocco. Also in the category of uncovering that which is hidden is Avishai Bar-Asher's explorations into the late fourteenth-century work *Aron ha-'Eduv* by Yehuda b. Yoseph Al-Carasani, who then resided in Fes. Most of this work is still unpublished while it is the main source of knowledge about contemporary Jewish thought in the region. It becomes apparent that understanding *how* the book (manuscript) was compiled is critical in penetrating the significance of its contents.

Other papers might be listed under the rough rubric of "gaining appreciation of Jewish languages" while they present different aspects of this field. Yaakov Bentolila shows the value of a communal record-book that served Jews in Tangier in compiling a dictionary of the Hebrew elements in the local version of Judaeo-Spanish—*Haketia*. Ofra Tirosh-Becker addresses a range of sociolinguistic settings among the Jews in Constantine and shows how different registers of Judaeo-Arabic are called upon in the various sections of a book designed to accompany the New Year liturgy. In the realm of semantics, Aharon Mamman identifies and elaborates upon the mechanism of "textual metonymy" as it appears in several dialects of Judaeo-Arabic and makes clear its implications for how Hebrew/Aramaic influences leave an imprint within Jewish languages more generally.

A number of papers provide diverse illustrations of how refined linguistic and cultural knowledge may illuminate historical events and the sociocultural processes embedded within them. Relations between the Jews and Greek Orthodox community in Alexandria in the seventeenth century are reflected in a letter sent from that city to Constantinople, that is analysed by Nahem Ilan. Jessica Marglin draws attention to the Moroccan Jewish practice of notarising documents both in Muslim and Jewish courts. In addition to pointing out aspects of the place of Jews in Moroccan Muslim society, her analysis raises productive questions about the processes whereby Jews were bound to their own traditions and structures of authority. The in-depth discussion and broad contextualisation—by Joseph Tedghi—of a single *responsum* by Rabbi Yoseph Messas, who was born and educated in Meknes and served many years in Tlemcen, examines the stress on rabbis and ordinary Jews engendered by the difference in marriage rules anchored in the regimes of modern states and the requirements of rabbinic law. This issue had echoes throughout North Africa and beyond.

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The collection also points to the wider echoes that emerge from the study of liturgy. In addition to the chapter by Tirosh-Becker already mentioned, Ephraim Hazan and Rachel Hitin-Mashiah provide a broad historical-cultural view of the significance of *piyyutim* that celebrate instances of local deliverance from danger and persecution, and a survey by Ariel Shaveh indicates different ideologies and practices through which Sephardi leaders and communities in Israel make decisions when printing what they consider to be authentic and correct versions of the liturgy. This latter study, along with the chapter by Yehudit Henshke on Judaeo-Arabic influences upon contemporary Israeli idioms and proverbs, show that the in-depth study of earlier linguistic and cultural forms can bear relevance for current social realities. The Hazan / Hitin-Mashiah paper also makes observations in this direction, underlining the potential contribution of research in this vein to social science research on trends in Israeli society and culture.

Endnote

1. See Volume 1 (1979) of the journal *Pe`amim*, published by the Ben-Zvi Institute in Jerusalem. [In Hebrew]

Reference

- M. Bar-Asher and S. D. Fraade (Eds.) 2012. *Studies in the Traditions and the Culture of North African Jewry: Edited and Interpreted Texts. Proceedings of the Symposium at Yale University April 25, 2010*. Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press.