



PROJECT MUSE®

Yeshiva Days: Learning on the Lower East Side by Jonathan Boyarin (review)

Schneur Zalman Newfield

AJS Review: The Journal of the Association for Jewish Studies, Volume 46, Number 1, April 2022, pp. 200-202 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/851724>

Book Reviews

community protective politics, he stresses the importance of not allowing hatred to dictate the terms of social discourse. In this regard, *Unsettling* joins a new chorus of voices that reject the pressure placed on scholars to avoid nuance under coercion to present a particular communal image in the best possible light (whether as precaution or defense). Current interest in Jewish racial politics, antisemitism, popular culture, and Jewish philanthropy offers an inviting context for scholars to expand upon Bromberg's pioneering work, investigating Jewish community protective politics in greater detail and more broadly across the diverse landscape of Jewish American life and culture, including among Jews of color. Given the study's focus on the later twentieth century, future work would also do well to further consider how, during the #MeToo era, Jewish communities began to openly condemn sexual misconduct by powerful Jewish leaders.

Ultimately, *Unsettling* is a timely and theoretically sophisticated contribution to studies in Jewish social politics, popular culture, and critical race studies. It shines a bold light on the ways in which Jewish vulnerability to sexual antisemitism, rooted in centuries of anti-Jewish belief, has continued to enable and reward complacency with the demands of racist and patriarchal power structures as a requisite for American Jews' own conditional inclusion within the paradox of "universalist," white-dominated American culture. It furthers contemplation about the predicaments of Jewish identity in a context that awards conditional privileges to those whose security is easily dismantled by underlying prejudice and who are thus compelled to reinforce existing power structures in the name of self-defense.

Golan Moskowitz
Tulane University

• • •

Jonathan Boyarin. *Yeshiva Days: Learning on the Lower East Side*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020. xv + 185 pp.

In *Yeshiva Days: Learning on the Lower East Side*, anthropologist Jonathan Boyarin offers readers a rare glimpse into the daily life of an all-male Orthodox yeshiva. This book is based on a year Boyarin spent at Mesivtha Tifereth Jerusalem (MTJ) in 2012 studying Talmud and simultaneously conducting ethnographic research on the institution and its members. MTJ is located on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, a neighborhood that once was the heart of Jewish life in America but has since the mid-twentieth century witnessed the shuttering of most of its Jewish institutions and a rapid decline of its Jewish population. The ethos of MTJ is uncommon; it straddles the boundary between Orthodoxy and ultra-Orthodoxy, incorporating elements of both.

The structure of MTJ is unlike typical ultra-Orthodox yeshivas. Its members tend to be married and much older than your average yeshiva students and they are granted much greater freedom in their studies. Each student can choose which

tractate of the Talmud to study. The Rosh or head of the yeshiva, the late Rabbi Dovid Feinstein, son of the famed Jewish legal expert Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, stressed to his disciples that they cannot simply accept the rulings of talmudic authorities, but must understand them. At the same time, Boyarin was aware that some of his questions on the Talmud, “might take a step beyond the bounds of acceptable discourse” in the yeshiva (116).

Boyarin is a gifted storyteller, and through vivid details of daily conversations and acute social observations, he manages to bring to life the members of MTJ. We learn that MTJ members are more worldly than typical yeshiva students. They are aware of and feel comfortable openly discussing popular American culture—such as the classic film *The Third Man* and the cartoon strip *Dennis the Menace*—something unimaginable in other yeshivas. MTJ students are also less committed to rigid adherence to religious stringencies than other ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students, such as only eating *cholov yisroel* (dairy products produced under the supervision of an Orthodox Jew) and insisting on gender-segregated seating at public communal events. MTJ students generally oppose Hasidic *segulos*, amulets or rituals intended to bring good fortune, and see themselves as embodying a “reasonable Orthodoxy” (77), which they associate with the Litvak, or non-Hasidic form of Orthodox Judaism.

Although the location and membership of MTJ are atypical, its daily routine and character will be familiar to anyone who has spent time in any ultra-Orthodox yeshiva: much of the day is devoted to *chavrusa*, partnered learning, and several times a week the Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Dovid Feinstein, delivers a *shi‘ur*, a lecture, on a portion of the Talmud, elucidating the complexities of the text. Boyarin correctly notes that in the intense exchanges that develop among regular study partners over the precise meaning of the Talmud and its voluminous arcane commentaries, discussions can be “vociferous without hostility” (17).

In an earlier study, Boyarin coined the term “observant participation”¹—playing on the use of “observant” to refer to an Orthodox Jew—and in his current work, he is clearly operating as an observant participant. Boyarin’s personal status as an Orthodox male is essential for gaining access to his yeshiva contacts and maintaining a relationship with them. Boyarin mentions the all-male feature of the setting, but neither condemns it nor apologizes for it. He states the facts and moves on. What is more, Boyarin states at the outset that there are “profound limits” on what he will disclose to readers about the yeshiva world he observed. He employs an “ethnographic refusal,” which he describes as “the right and sometimes the responsibility of both ethnographers and those about whom they write not to tell everything that might be of interest to the academy as presently constituted” (13). Boyarin doesn’t ask his interlocutors about their political orientation, nor does he ever press them to discover if they “really believed” (162) the various miracle stories that are mentioned in the passages they study together because he didn’t want to “appear or to be ultimately the ‘outsider’ ethnographer” (163).

1. Jonathan Boyarin, “Observant Participation: The Ethnography of Jews on the Lower East Side,” *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* (1990): 233–54.

Book Reviews

That is, throughout his time in the yeshiva, he occupied two identities, that of “professor” and that of “yeshiva student,” without a clear delineation, for himself and for those around him, of where the boundaries of one ended and the other began. It is out of this ambiguity that the insights of the book emerge. It is therefore not surprising that the book itself contains several seemingly incongruous strands. It is an ethnographic work with extensive quotations from its subjects and social observations based on field notes, but by design it contains “a minimum of the kind of analysis and commentary that usually mark professional anthropology” studies (131). There are passages in this book, especially those where one anecdote is embedded in another anecdote, that are redolent of a passage of Talmud. This book also contains Hasidic legends and stories of more recent mysterious events that would be appropriate for publication in contemporary ultra-Orthodox forums.

Some readers may feel that Boyarin’s view of MTJ is too idyllic. He does not talk much about the financial repercussions of a yeshiva system where married men devote much, if not all, of their day to Torah study, or the moral repercussions of students dedicating their lives to remaining “in yeshiva” largely isolated from the outside world. But that is not Boyarin’s focus, and scholars have a right to decide the parameters of their projects. And Boyarin is perfectly clear about the parameters of his, which is to focus largely on the dynamics within the four walls of the yeshiva study hall, and not on what happens outside of it.

Boyarin explores the concept of learning Torah “*leshma*,” “for its own sake,” and argues that this kind of noninstrumental learning can be an act of resistance to neoliberalism and market forces that so pervade American society. One can read Boyarin’s book both *lishmah*, for its own sake, for the pleasure of getting to know the eclectic souls that populate MTJ and to eavesdrop on their engrossing talmudic conversations. One can also read this book for its insights regarding Orthodox male study habits and as a window onto a surviving outpost of Jewish life that is resistant to the dominant contemporary trend towards ever-greater stringency among the Orthodox. Or one can read it for both purposes.

Schneur Zalman Newfield
Borough of Manhattan Community College, CUNY

• • •

Amelia M. Glaser. *Songs in Dark Times: Yiddish Poetry of Struggle from Scottsboro to Palestine*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020. 353 pp.

The Yiddish poet Zishe Landau is famously said to have quipped that the New York sweatshop poets were merely “the rhyme department of the Jewish labor movement.” He and the avant-garde group known as *di yunge* argued that Yiddish poetry was too ideological, too removed from individual experience, from lyricism, and from modern European and American literary experimentations with form. Amelia Glaser’s book challenges the prevalent view of ideologically