

Schwartz, Dov. *Messianism in Medieval Jewish Thought*. Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2017. 277 pp. \$82.00. (9781618115690).

An English translation of a book published in 1997 by Bar-Ilan University where Dov Schwartz is on the faculty, this work is “an attempt to outline the basic characteristics of rationalist messianic approaches in the Middle Ages, and particularly the conceptual tensions between them. Specifically, it focuses on ... two messianic approaches, the apocalyptic and the naturalistic.” The first one sees destruction and rebuilding of the cosmos, the second anticipates only minimal changes to the natural order when messianic times happen. The author reviews Jewish philosophers from the Geonic period until Isaac Abravanel. Very chronologically, he establishes along the way how each thinker fits into one of the two categories, the apocalyptic or the naturalistic.

Instead of focusing on one or two thinkers, this book claims to “describe currents of thought developing and resonating in the teachings of dozen of thinkers,” but concentrates on the Sephardic mysticism. Recommended only for large academic libraries.

Roger S. Kohn, Silver Spring, MD

Steir-Livny, Liat. *Is It OK to Laugh about it?: Holocaust Humour, Satire, and Parody in Israeli Culture*. London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2017. 208 pp. \$72.95. (9781910383353).

The answer to the titular question is that, much like any group who were persecuted and discriminated against, it is often healthy and therapeutic to be able to laugh at oneself (in a way that others cannot). After a chapter that defines Jewish humor, and its historic part in dealing with persecution and anti-Semitism, a discussion of how and why the Holocaust is such an integral and ubiquitous part of Israeli culture follows, including the handing down of the trauma from survivors to their children, to grandchildren, and to the general population. Much of the humor and satire developed organically as a mechanism to deal with the pain. The book “analyzes alternative ceremonies, films, TV shows, art, books, poetry, jokes and internet videos and memes” and looks at them “through theories of humor, and of individual and collective post-trauma.” Steir-Livny brings examples from alternative Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremonies in Israel, satire, and parody to show that while the horrors of the *Shoah* are never diminished or made light of, the way they are memorialized or passed on to future generations is fertile ground for humor. The Holocaust has also played a prominent role in political conflicts between the left and the right, and in cultural differences between Ashkenazim and Sephardim.

The author has done a great deal of research, which is evidenced by detailed footnotes at the end of each chapter, and an extensive bibliography and succinct index at the end of the book. The material can get repetitive because the conclusion after analyzing all the different components of humor remains the same: that humor is a release, a defense mechanism, and a social commentary on or against conventional presentations of the Holocaust. A few trips in the language and style, but otherwise an engaging exploration of the subject and a solid choice for libraries with large Holocaust and/or humor collections.

Chava Pinchuck, Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel

Weinstein, David. *The Eddie Cantor Story: a Jewish life in Performance and Politics*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2018. 303 pp. \$29.95. (9781512600483).

Though he was one of America’s most famous entertainers during the 1920s and ‘30s, Eddie Cantor has been practically forgotten. David Weinstein’s biography reminds readers how important Cantor was, both as an actor/comedian and in wider circles.

Cantor grew up on the streets of the Lower East Side. He began performing in Vaudeville, and worked for Ziegfeld (and the Schuberts). After starring on Broadway and touring the country through the 1920s, he became one of the biggest Hollywood talking movie stars. In the 30s he was one of the nation’s most successful radio hosts, using his broadcasts to promote optimism and recovery. In the early 1950s he headlined briefly on television, where he championed African American entertainers.

Alongside Cantor's entertainment career, the book comments extensively on his involvement in social and political issues. This includes his participation in the labor movement (as an early leader of the Screen Actors Guild); his promotion of charitable causes (he helped launch the March of Dimes); his warnings about the evils of Nazi Germany during the 1930s and his later support for WWII efforts; his many activities in support of Jewish causes, especially Youth Aliyah, Hadassah, and the post-war Displaced Persons; and his support of Israel. Though his popularity waned after World War II, he continued to sponsor causes – particularly Jewish ones – that he believed in.

Cantor has been overlooked over the half-century since his death. But this useful book restores him to prominence. The tone is positive, though there are indications of less-lovable traits. The story is sprinkled with wonderful photographs, and there are extensive notes with useful information. Regrettably, the index is woefully incomplete, with many significant topics missing. Overall, though, the book is recommended for all levels of Judaica library.

Fred Isaac, Temple Sinai, Oakland, CA

Weiss, Judith (trans). על איחוד הטבע והחסד (*On the Conciliation of Nature and Grace: A Latin Translation and Commentary on the Zohar by Guillaume Postel (1510-1581)*), Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2017. 373 pp. \$33.00. (9789657759288).

Postel, a French orientalist, mathematician, and mystic visionary, was unique among Christian Hebraists. While the 16th century is marked by Christian interest in Jewish mysticism, all these Christian Hebraists understood the importance of learning biblical and rabbinic Hebrew in their search for the meaning of the Hebrew Bible. Many of these Christian Hebraists had immense respect for Hebraic learning and were defenders of Hebrew books.

In 1547, in Venice, Guillaume Postel, purchased a Zohar manuscript from Daniel Bomberg. That copy was the one he studied together with Mother Johanna and the one he used as the source for his Latin translation of this treatise. Judith Weiss' work makes a most positive contribution to the scholarly treatment of Postel's work by focusing on Postel's commentaries on the Zohar, which are presented in the original Latin together with her Hebrew translation. Weiss also provides introductions and notes, elucidating Postel's unique perception of the Zohar and the mysticism. Postel's Latin translation and commentary on the Zohar is within the context of his elaborate messianic theological understanding which he based on his interpretation of Kabbalistic concepts. Postel produced the first comprehensive though not complete Latin translation of the Zohar. Weiss had done an excellent job in bringing this work to the attention of the scholarly community. Highly recommended for all academic libraries, particularly classicist and theological collections.

David B Levy, Touro College, NYC

Wimpfheimer, Barry Scott. *The Talmud: a Biography*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018. 320 pp. \$26.95. (9780691161846).

The Talmud, over 1500 years old, is the primary rabbinic text of Rabbinic Judaism and comprises both the Mishna and the Gemara. The Talmud consists of 63 individual books, or tractates and in standard print runs nearly 6,200 pages long. Although primarily a legal text, and to this very day the ultimate source of Jewish religious law, it contains so much more.

Wimpfheimer does a brilliant job telling the story of the Talmud and embraces a unique method of doing so, namely, writing a biography of a 'book.' As Wimpfheimer explains: "for as long as the Talmud has been a canonical work, it has serviced as a symbol of Judaism, Jewishness, and Jews. It is this Talmudic personification in the emblematic register that most entitles the Talmud to a biography."

The Talmud: A Biography is divided into three conceptual categories: (i) Essential Talmud, (ii) Enhanced Talmud, and (iii) Emblematic Talmud. The essential Talmud (discussed in chapters 1 and 2) focuses on the history, creation, form, and structure of the Talmud. The enhanced Talmud (chapter 3) centers on how the Talmud became canonical and central as religious literature. The emblematic