Editor's reflections: at the end of a quarter-century

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As the editor of *Jewish History* during the past quarter of a century I have been extraordinarily privileged. It has been a second career. I have taught history and written history, but *Jewish History* has allowed me to help establish the directions in which the field would move. The journal has published the work of distinguished scholars and graduate students alike, and the articles appearing in it have asked fundamental, often novel, questions, as well as they have virtually created topics and themes. Having had the opportunity not only to read these articles but to participate in perfecting them, having been given the opportunity time and again to show an author where an excellent article could become an outstanding one, has also benefited me personally with respect to the way I edit my own work, both the content and the prose.

The world has changed since *Jewish History*'s first issue in 1986. We were barely writing on computers in those days, everybody was using different word processing programs, and the big technical question was how to edit on a diskette written with a program not your own. Today, this is laughable, just as nobody would ask whether to submit a hardcopy rather than only an electronic one. I remember too, in 1995, only sixteen years ago, sitting at a meeting of editors of historical journals at a major conference, the meeting chaired by David Ransell, then editor of the flagship *American Historical Review*. The subject was electronic publishing and our common horror at even contemplating it. Who, today, would think of not having online editions—*Jewish History* is online beginning with volume 1—although I confess to being still attached to the printed version when it arrives? There has been a similar revolution, on which more below, in the topics we investigate and in the ways we confront them.

Some things have not changed, in particular, guaranteeing a flow of sufficiently excellent historical writing. The sad story is that over 8 of 10 unsolicited submissions to the journal (often, however, by writers who are not professional historians) have been rejected after a first editorial reading. At the same time, historical offerings at major conferences, a prime first step toward publishable materials, are not abundant. Nonetheless, especially with the help of Guest Editors, *Jewish History* has appeared regularly, four times

a year, and on schedule. Indeed, there are now so many more scholars of Judaica, including historians, than when I began studying for the Ph.D. in the late 1960s. The numbers then were limited. Many of us could be found together in the seminar of the late Gershon D. Cohen; others had been there just a year or two before. This situation will never repeat. Future scholars are now scattered among the Jewish Studies programs in tens of universities, which is highly beneficially. The result has been differing approaches and modes of sophistication, although it pleases me to say that in the main, the basic historical skills that *Jewish History* has tried to reinforce are still being cultivated.

Permit me to note these skills within the context of what I have learned while editing. First and foremost is the precise reading of texts—each word in context—as I myself was taught by H.L. Ginzberg, who protested the mispronunciation of even a diacritical that might change an entire sentence's meaning. H.L., as he was called, was complemented by Gershon Cohen, who asked insistently how the properly read sentence, with no word or expression ignored, fit into the whole—and with an eye to broad social and cultural reinterpretation, for instance, of the kind introduced to me by Nahum Sarna. Like H.L., too, for that matter, Sarna portrayed the Jews as part of a larger Near Eastern world with a fluid cultural heritage, parts of which the separate entities within this wider world particularized and made their distinctive own. With this as my personal intellectual baggage, one may image how pleased I was when one referee hailed the analytical discussion of new texts and the innovative rereading of those already known as one of *Jewish History's* hallmarks.

To be sure, scholars these days often struggle to unearth new texts and documents.¹ Not everyone has the freedom—or the means—to luxuriate in the endless troves of European archives, the special collections, like that of Judaica in the Library of Congress, or the marvels of a great university library. Nor are the mysteries that lie hidden in the National Library in Jerusalem or the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People with their manuscript and filmed manuscript holdings so readily accessible. Of course, more and more texts and documents, and especially their discussion, have become available online. And, in the same vein, how many of us who once haunted libraries daily for secondary literature, thanks to digitization, visit them in person only on the rare occasion? But the libraries are there and even more so the archives. We must not let ourselves be lured exclusively to the internet and its riches. They only go so far. But as funds become harder to acquire, so, too, do the sources. The question before us, as *Jewish History* pursues its fortunes in a new quarter century, is whether scholars will be able to finance the sojourns into the archival world that will result in the kind of article we seek to print.

At stake is not only the quality, and even the quantity, of production, but the kind of endeavor in which historians will be engaging. When the late Robert Cohen and I, urged on by David Goodblatt, decided to found *Jewish History* in the early 1980s—it took two years till we made it into print in 1986, no little thanks to the tireless devotion of Miriam Zaidan of the University of Haifa Press and the constant support given by Ruth Leopold—our idea was catholicity. Our subject matter would encompass anything that dealt with Jews in and over time: real Jews or Jews as objects of imagination, Jewish action and actions touching Jews, Jewish art and art about Jews, Jewish thought in its historic setting, and Jews who were no longer Jews, or others who chose to enter the Jewish fold. Our authors would be anybody writing on these subjects, and the pool of those authors, close to three hundred in number, has widened over the years. The subjects of our nearly four hundred essays, not counting book reviews, could be political, social, anthropological, and psychological. *Jewish History*'s authors have been beginning scholars, some yet to complete the Ph.D., and senior scholars whose works are read with respect, authors of diverse backgrounds, hailing from Israel, Europe, the United States, and South America.² Thanks to Springer, *Jewish History*'s publisher and owner, and during our ten-year relationship to date, great efforts have been made to sustain the journal and widen its audience: first, and for many years, under Floor Oosting, then Maja de Keijzer, and now Anita Fei van der Linden, each of whom always gave me full academic reign. Published, as Springer calls it, "Online First," and then in hardcopy, we are read worldwide. Last year, there were over 60,000 visits and 13,000 downloads, a notable percentage of them in China and Korea, not to mention Germany, the United Kingdom, and, of course, Israel, the United States, and Canada; and this despite our not being the *American Historical Review* or like periodicals whose distribution is linked directly to membership in an organization. The imperative of expanding the field of Jewish history has motivated us over the years, and I believe with success.

We are especially proud of having achieved the dream of Robert Cohen. His tragic death nearly two decades ago age 44 left me without a true partner and robbed me of one of those few treasured friendships we are privileged to have in our lifetimes. Robert's dream was to have mainly thematic issues, devoted to a single subject. My fears that production in the field was insufficient to achieve this end have proved blessedly wrong, and how content Robert would be today. I know, too, that he would participate in my own satisfaction as tutelage over *Jewish History* passes from my hands to those of Jay Berkovitz and Francesca Trivellato, with the assistance of J.H. Chajes and Federica Francesconi as Book Review editors. As of volume 26, they will be taking over, charting their own course, which I augur to be both new and exciting

Jewish History's thematic issues, as most now are, have been highly varied. They have dealt with the impact of the Crusades, the massacres of 1648–1649 in the Ukraine, the architecture of synagogues, the impact of Isaac Abravanel and Maimonides, themes in the lives of Iberian *conversos*, matched by the identity of extra-Iberian *conversos*, patterns of early modern Jewish devolution, the Jews in medieval, non-Jewish systems of law, Jews as seen in modern literature, Jews in Argentina, Jews as international agricultural colonizers, trends in European Emancipation, Jews in the colonial Atlantic—and many more. Each of these issues has offered a body of materials useful in both the classroom and to scholars. They have also put pegs on the board of new historical fields of research.

Notably, however—this has been a matter of authorial choice and not of guidance from above—at the core of virtually all the articles *Jewish History* has published has been the study of people and their doings. The questions asked have been diverse, and our authors have demonstrated themselves well versed in economics, sociology, anthropology, and other ancillary disciplines, including art and literature—ancillary, that is, because in the context of the essays appearing in *Jewish History*, it has been history which at all times has sat at the head of the table. Uniformly, our authors have avoided, again by their own election, the trends that allow privileging social science terms and theories over the direct observation of people in action. They have understood that which has been well phrased as “the recognition that analytical categories provide neither natural nor neutral frameworks of inquiry and that they can distort Jewish historical experience as much as illuminate it.”³

Yet opting to *begin with* the categories of social science is, I suspect, related to more than an urge to achieve theoretical sophistication or to take part in new, so-called historiographical “turns.” It stems, too, from the increasing difficulty noted above to secure the funds that make archival work and, hence, the discovery of new materials possible. Young scholars no doubt also sense an urgency to publish as much as they can in the shortest time, pushed along as they have been by the “counters,” who have been victorious over the “weighers” (of quality), in setting the criteria for tenure. They surely also feel the weight of the unwelcome, but all too evident, push “to industrialize” even our best schools, with the watchword being greater productivity. No wonder that in the absence of previously unexplored texts and, I confess, sometimes the training to read them correctly, the temptation to prioritize readily available theory is all too great.

This is not a call, let it be clear, to return to writing the history of events, certainly not *per se*, for even that branch of history today labors in the shadow of the search for complex motivations beyond the outwardly political. It is, however, a caution that however much we should be, indeed, must be, immersed in, and draw on, what I just called the ancillary fields and the enriching and theoretical breadth of scope they afford, it would be unwise to allow

the writing of history to be driven primarily by the pursuit of newly-minted categories like hybridity, multiculturalism, and essentialist and constructed identities. Useful themes, such as the trans-national and material culture must also be kept in proportion; pre-modern Jewish history, for one, cannot be re-constructed without considering both, but this we have always known.

Nor should historians be pursuing an elusive—non-existent might be the better term—meta-history or master narrative, terms which, to me at least, ring as a euphemistic disguise that permits resurrecting ideas like Yitzhak Baer's noted *Kenesset Israel*, the eternal (Platonic) idea of the Jewish people. Just as that idea existed only in the mind of the thinker, so, too, does any attempt integrally to unite all of Jewish history rely on negating the "real." There are continuities, commonalities, a language, an attachment in fact or spirit to a strip of eastern Mediterranean land, a religion (I use the term guardedly), even a halakhah, with local but essentially minor variants, alongside customs, of a basically unified Jewish culture. But there is nothing "integral" or "organic," to use Baer's terms, to unitize the entire Jewish past, whatever the name that imagined unity is given. By contrast, going in the other, post-modern, direction, to deny fundamental links and to speak of multiple, parallel Jewish "cultures," as opposed to a single core Jewish culture (with a capital C), may allow making helpful distinctions on many levels, but this route has pitfalls of its own, including, as has been observed, the possibility of viewing Jews in the Land of Israel as colonial(ist) adventurers.⁴

My personal feeling is that *Jewish History's* authors have been aware of these issues and the debates they have created. One can sense very current questions, topics, and categories underlying what they have to say. Nonetheless, their writing has remained faithful to the tradition of evidential and human centrism, no matter how innovative their enquiries. However knowingly, *Jewish History's* authors have been followers of Johan Huizinga, the author of what I consider the sole enduring essay on historiography that we should all read and retain as "sacred scripture," and this is Huizinga's essay on historical conceptualization readily found in Fritz Stern's enduring *Varieties of History*, essays by great historians on historical writing. Humbling us, Huizinga writes that there is no way to prove cause and effect in history with scientific precision. Nor are there *a priori* ideas, in the Platonic sense, as German historicists once held dear. There are no leading nations, as Leopold van Ranke thought he could discern, and there is no hope that through atomism, the building of detail on detail, as J.B. Bury opined, we can attain historical truth or inclusivity. The lure of materialism fades upon perceiving that its structures are rigidly axiologic and fixed in an unalterably sequential dialectic. As Charles Beard put it, there are "interpretations," indeed, "histories." What is left, says Huizinga, is man and his, or her, evolving condition. The historian may, as the anthropologically biased Huizinga himself sought to do,

search out patterns, ones that are multi-generational. And he or she may look for structures. But in the end, and at the end of the day, the only thing that counts is man (read mankind) himself.

As historians, then, we must follow real men, women—and children, too. We must know their actions and what they experience in time and as they themselves change. We must not, in particular, begin with a theory and then substantiate it by arraying events accordingly. Rather, events, subjects, objects, and, of course, the actors (whatever is found in our brief of documentation) must be free, first to tell their own story. Only afterward, and only after the historian has evaluated that story in its immediate terms, may he or she draw on other disciplines to help unravel and better explain causal or structural chains. Besides, does not privileging theory over story encourage violating that prime rule of historical analogy, which is that perfect analogies rarely if ever exist? With rare exceptions, analogies are partial; and it is only in espying differences, or their absence when contrasting the disparate, that we may see the exceptional, or the commonalities, which, as historians, it is our duty to seek out.

At the heart of the editor's task, as I have seen it, has been the maintenance of interpretative precision. This includes asking authors to take a position on the proper use of words and terms, which even in modern texts can be problematic. For instance, what does "regeneration" mean with respect to late eighteenth-century Jewish Emancipation? Does it refer only to social renewal, or, as two centuries earlier, is the meaning still the religious "re-birth" that was said, by legists and theologians alike, alone to confer full civic rights? It is, however, medieval texts that have raised the greatest problems, not only of words and their meaning, but of documents taken as a whole. How, I have asked authors, is it possible to find true accounts of events and their explanations in materials that were never intended to convey the historical record as we conceive that concept today. Though tempting, it is, I am convinced, misleading, to attribute to actors, such as those who perished in 1096 or were converted, the very actions or the specific thoughts that the Hebrew Crusade chronicles composed years later attribute to them. These chronicles, whose authors were intrigued by the past only insofar as it could be made to illustrate idealized contemporary behavior, as well as to validate theological verity and its enemies, inevitably have no interest in distinguishing past from present, a point that Gabrielle Spiegel and Karl Morrison have made more than once. Moreover, these chronicles are principally literary, at least by the rules of what distinguishes fiction from accurate retelling. Whatever their virtues, they are not, and cannot be read as accurate guides to original events themselves. We must take a page from Jean-Claude Schmitt and

his work on the convert to Christianity Hermann of Cologne, whose autobiography, Schmitt demonstrates, paints a literary portrait of Premonstratensian yearnings.⁵

Another crux has been the term “the Jewish people.” I have seen the expression *ha’am hayehudi* used already in the later eighteenth century. But the intention is surely not the modern “nation.” Rather, *‘am* almost certainly derives from and translates *natio* as the word was used regularly in the later Middle Ages to indicate, as the Latin itself suggests, place of birth. *Natio* is not to be confused with its current English cognate. At the famous fourteenth-century Church councils, hence, well before nation-states existed, attendees organized themselves by *nationes*. Even the famous *nação* of Portuguese Jews in Amsterdam, to me, at least, seems to privilege those belonging to a community in which membership is determined by one’s group of birth and faith. The term becomes the modern nation only at the end of the eighteenth century, when the criteria of belonging became citizenship in a defined geographical region with no confessional overtones; I note again the transformation of “regeneration.” To speak of the “Jewish people” in nationalistic terms before this time is therefore misleading. It is much safer to speak simply of Jews or “Jewish communities.”

I have digressed; or have I. The question examples like these last two raise is one of editorial intervention and its limits. Thankfully, most authors were responsive as I pressed them to exploit their sources fully, which most often meant not stopping in *medias res* or to draw maximum conclusions. There were also papers that ended where they should have begun, and vice versa, or ones that simply meandered. Very few of us are so gifted that we can present a series of unrelated ideas and then tie them into a neat package; the late Norman Cantor called this “the fruitcake approach to writing.” It is far better to state the problem at the beginning, tell the reader where the essay is headed, have it do just that following a point by point structure, and, finally, make it clear when the train has arrived at its terminus. My personal preference is also not to end an essay with a section marked “Conclusions.” Essays should finish as the product of a cohesive, sequential development. Conclusions, especially ones that merely, and often repetitiously, sum up, suggest that the reader has been left to wander or, worse, that the ending is not—as it should be—self-evident.

Style must be clear and compact. Rhetoric, good rhetoric, is welcome, but it should not be confused with verbosity. The rules of grammar and syntax have to be carefully observed. I admit to a certain linguistic conservatism. “While” must bear its proper sense, of time, not since or although. “Whether,” which means both yes or no, stands alone, never appearing, as it ubiquitously does, as “whether or not.” Infinitives are not split, and sentences do not end with prepositions. “Impact” is a noun, never the neologistic pseudo-verb “to

impact.” “Thus” means because, not the erroneous thus far, which too often has shunted aside the correct “so far” or “this far.” “Myself” is a reflexive that does not replace me or I. Noun modifiers (the term itself is a violation of its own rule) are illegal, although we admittedly live comfortably with “bus stop,” light bulb,” and the like; where unavoidable, a hyphen ties the two nouns together.

I could go on at length about punctuation. Were I to ask when does one use single or double quotation marks, ten writers would no doubt supply ten answers. The latter are the norm, the former exclusively for quotations within a quotation, but to complicate things, the British and Canadians have opted for the reverse. While I am at it, quote is a verb, not a noun; commas precede “and” only in true compound sentences with both a new noun (especially the noun) and a verb; again the British reverse this. The great labyrinth of commas is one I will avoid, but I must mention indirect questions. These are *subordinate* to main clauses; expository sentences containing them end with a period, not a question mark.

Some might accuse me of making a mountain out of a molehill, but this is the only way to combat sloppy prose, especially that encouraged by word processors. The text is always beautifully clean. Does it need to be correct as well? I will not tire the reader with an answer. The point is historiographic, beyond stylistic precision. One of the reasons so much fine historical writing exists in English is because of the rigor of the English language. Romance languages with their long sentences encourage imprecision: does anybody ever know what a two hundred word long sentence has really said. A fifteen-word sentence is transparently good or bad. This is English. That plus the need for authors to reread their material and revise a minimum of twenty or twenty five times, a number I choose deliberately in order to say one can never reread and revise too much.

And, oh, yes, footnotes. One paper arrived with five different footnoting styles, including one that was an invention of its own. *Jewish History* uses the annotation form of the *Chicago Manual of Style*, the same used by the *American Historical Review* and the *AJS Review*. This is about the simplest footnoting style possible and was selected for just that reason. To be sloppy here suggests sloppiness in scholarship. Footnotes are the cement slab on which the essay is built. If that “slab” is cracked . . . I needn’t say more.

Thankfully, as I said, authors have responded positively to my requests. My hope is that in doing so they were agreeing that my editing had clarified ideas, avoided internal contradictions, even errors, and sharpened prose. Being an editor has also given me the special vantage point of coming to know so many authors. Of a group of seven scholars I was asked to discuss as part of a recent tenure review, I had edited five. The greatest satisfaction, though, has been to guide young scholars, aiding them to perfect their essays or even to turn papers about which referees had doubts into respectable

published work. These young scholars I like to think of as my “post-docs,” and, to my delight, the feeling has often been mutual. I have maintained contacts with many of our authors over the years, whom I have also been able to ask to serve as referees, a task that brings little glory, but which is critical for the continuity of a peer-reviewed journal. I cannot thank the Guest Editors enough, who labored so hard to produce the “special” topical issues mentioned above.

A closing word on the mixed blessing known as Book Reviews. A very senior historian and close friend—wholly outside the world of research on Jews—wrote recently lamenting that the author of a negative review had not read the book. To be sure, there are times when a reviewer has read the book better than the author him or herself. But not always, and it also happens that reviewers too readily forget that respect to authors is always due. As Rudolph Binion once wrote me, the constant challenge is to be a scholar among scholars. He was not objecting to disagreement with ideas and theses, which is fair and proper. His concern was that disagreement be packaged in insult, arrogance, and their unpleasant companion, error on the part of the reviewer, who must be certain that the error condemned is the author’s, not his or her own. In this spirit, responsible reviewers often submit their drafts to trusted colleagues, asking them to winnow out the chaff that is invariably present, even in the most unintentional remarks. It is satisfying to say that all the reviews in *Jewish History*, even the highly critical, have been vetted for improprieties. Reviewers have also been chosen based on demonstrated expertise in the field the book explores.

As much, then, as I am proud that *Jewish History* has helped set the agenda for Jewish historical research in the last quarter century, I am no less proud of its staunch defense of scholarly standards. It is not easy to leave after all these years. But in the journal’s maturity, now is the time to let go. It is my firm conviction that however Jay Berkovitz and Francesca Trivellato carry on the work, they will take what has been done so far and move it that much farther ahead.

I am very pleased that this last issue of *Jewish History* for which I take responsibility contains an essay by Julius Kirshner and Osvaldo Cavallar that exemplifies the standards *Jewish History* has sought to maintain. Kirshner and Cavallar have brought to bear nearly fifty years of study of medieval canon and Roman law to ask how one reads a complex late medieval legal text. They have sought to answer the thorny question of medieval Jews as *cives*, citizens, which most historians have avoided or dealt with speculatively. The texts they analyze are exceedingly difficult and often inaccessible, and deciphering the notarial handwriting is a major challenge. To help

readers, the authors have lucidly defined the technical terms. In the end, we learn a very important lesson that helps us understand the Emancipation that would come only centuries later, namely, that forms of membership in the modern state were wholly contingent on how states defined citizenship and designated its holders. When did the word citizen come to mean, as it does today, a person with full rights that are never predicated on religious affiliation or membership in a social or legal class? What we see in Kirshner and Cavallar's essay is an intermediate step toward this end, one, however, that exposes reality in its complexity and eschews simplified molds. This includes the loose ends so inherent in the human nature with which we must live.

To complement this essay, I offer one of my own, which endeavors to carry the story of the Jew as *cives* up through the time of Emancipation itself, in which Emancipation is viewed as a function of massive Western European legal change rather than the result of theorizing directly by and about Jews. This issue of *Jewish History* also contains two outstanding review essays of important books, where once again, finely honed scholarly qualities are on display, and whose authors, Shaya Gafni and Reuven Kipperwasser, contribute not only to our understanding of a book but to our grasp of the field to which the book/s reviewed contribute. A final essay, by Dmitry Shumsky, offers a novel view of Zionist thought about minority rights in the Land of Israel in the period before the Shoah and its relationship to the ideology of Jewish national autonomy in Europe.

Notes

1. Though the written text remains the bread and butter of historical research, material objects, too, like food and clothing, have become primary sources, for instance, in the recent issue on the architecture of synagogues (vol. 25.1). Authors used the styles and forms of the structures and plastic representations to shape their arguments. Nonetheless, even here, the arguments were augmented by drawing on the written exchanges between those who would pray in the completed buildings and their architects. And it was only in the correct reading of the correspondence between the written word and the finished structure that the authors were able to achieve a proper understanding of what the forms of the buildings actually meant, or were intended to mean.
2. Note the cumulative index prepared after volumes 1–20.
3. Ra'anan S. Boustan, Oren Kosansky, and Marina Rustow, "Anthropology, History, and the Remaking of Jewish Studies," in ed. Boustan, Kosansky, and Rustow, *Jewish Studies at the Crossroads of Anthropology and History* (Philadelphia, 2011), p. 1.
4. Bed P. Giri, "Diasporic Postcolonialism and Its Antinomies," *Diaspora*, 14/2–3 (2005): 215–235.
5. Jean-Claude Schmitt, *The Conversion of Herman the Jew: Autobiography, History, and Fiction in the Twelfth Century*, Alex J. Novikoff (Philadelphia, 2010).