

Forum on

***No Better Home? Jews, Canada, and the Sense
of Belonging***

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***No Better Home?* Forum Introduction**

This section was inspired by the 2021 book *No Better Home? Jews, Canada, and the Sense of Belonging*, edited by David S. Koffman. The book is a collection of eighteen scholarly essays that explore topics relating to home, diaspora, and belonging within the context of Canadian Jewry. Wanting to further unpack some of the themes the book raised, we asked two groups of select scholars to read and reflect on ways these topics are manifested in their own research and fields of expertise. The first group is made of six scholars who specialize in the study of other minority groups in Canada, the other group consists of five scholars of Jewish diaspora communities in other countries.

We provided contributors little direction, other than asking them to write short, informal essays relating to any of the themes raised in *No Better Home?* Naturally, each scholar took this assignment in a different direction. Some chose to engage with a specific article, others took a more general approach to the volume. The result is a series of eleven short but insightful texts that weave together scholarly insights and personal reflections in a compelling way.

Respondents followed Koffman's suggestive lead, using the rhetorically provocative question in the book's title as a point of departure rather than as an analytic question demanding a direct answer. After all, and as Gavin Schaffer writes, trying to answer the question of which country is a better home is "a little like Jewish children arguing about which of their mothers makes the best chicken soup." Most responses highlight the inherent complexity of discussing "home" and "belonging" given these terms' highly subjective nature. Moreover, any analysis is further complicated by the tension between individual experiences and wider community interests or, as Koffman writes in his introduction to the book, "what seems to be good for individual Jews, might be bad for the community's health." Overall, both this forum and the book make clear that contemplating "home" proved to be a richer and more compelling topic to respondents than the question of which one is "better."

Essays by Scholars from Non-Jewish Canadian Minority Groups

One elemental concession of *No Better Home?* is that the Canadian Jewish experience was, and remains, a success story. Despite obvious challenges and setbacks, Jewish life and culture thrive in Canada, and Canadian Jews enjoy security, freedom to express and experiment with their religious and cultural character, and receive respect from their neighbors and their state. The responses we received from scholars of other minority groups in Canada provide us with some fascinating insights into ways other Canadian communities approach, frame, and experience similar questions of home and belonging, while relating to the Jewish case study.

Satwinder Bains, director of the South Asian Studies Institute at the University of the Fraser Valley, introduces the Canadian Punjabi diaspora perspective. Bains emphasizes the importance of understanding the Punjabi Canadian community from within the context of transnational Punjabi culture. Her response also touches on the challenges of cultural adaptability, inter-generational differences, and how strong community culture sometimes work to the detriment of individual members. Paul Gareau, associate professor and associate dean of graduate studies in the Faculty of Native Studies at the University of Alberta, addresses questions of reconciliation and relationship building between Jews and Indigenous peoples by highlighting colonial-settler history and its negative impact on both communities. He further recommends ways to make this land “a better home on Native land” for everyone through a call for reconciliation and relational ways of life.

Natalia Khanenko-Friesen, professor at the University of Alberta and director of the Canadian Institute for Ukrainian Studies, addresses the shared and often contested histories of Ukrainian Jews and non-Jews. She suggests that the two groups’ disparate transnational histories influenced the ways in which they imagined Canada as a home, especially given that neither community had a politically defined homeland for many years. In that regard, Khanenko-Friesen’s response complements Jeffrey Veidlinger’s article in *No Better Home?* regarding some of the intellectual undercurrents behind the celebrated Canadian version of multiculturalism.² Ben Nobbs-Thiessen, chair of Mennonite Studies and associate professor in History at the University of Winnipeg, reminds readers of the promise of religious freedom offered in the Mennonite Canadian context, and how for some Canada failed in that promise. Nobbs-Thiessen also provides us with some captivating comparisons to topics explored in *No Better Home?* such as the commitment to public and historical memory in both communities, as well as their relations with and attitudes towards Indigenous communities.

Roberto Perin, emeritus professor of history at York University, points to the many similarities between Italian and Jewish communal activities in their journey from “otherness” to mainstream in North America. He compares patterns of communal organizations, labor activism, and education as well as the effects of generational differences in reimagining and redefining what it means to be an Italian or a Jew within the North American context. David A. Wilson, professor in the Celtic Studies Program and the History Department at the University of Toronto, and general editor of the Dictionary of Canadian Biography, highlights the fact that although Irish immigrants faced their own struggles and discomforts upon arrival to Canada, they also actively created the standards of success and integration by which other migrant groups were judged. Wilson also touches on the fear of the “new world” as an assimilatory space and the challenges it posed for cultural continuation.

From a broader, comparative perspective, we also note that none of the communities represented in this section are members of the Anglo-Protestant majority, meaning that like the Jewish community, religion plays some role in their ongoing experiences. Moreover, each of the participating scholars was mindful of the fact that building a community home in Canada is an ongoing effort, especially in relation to twin diaspora communities in the United States and other competing immigration destinations. Many also noted that events in the homeland continue to affect and shape diaspora communities in Canada—a topic well worth further scholarly attention.

Naturally, given the scope of this section, there are many diasporic, religious, cultural, and other minority community groups that are not represented in this forum. We do hope, however, that this project could serve as a starting point to other worthwhile engagements, comparisons, and conversations.

Essays by Scholars of Jewish Communities Outside Canada

The second part of this project contains responses from five scholars who specialize in the study of Jewish communities in other countries. We chose not to solicit responses from scholars who specialize in American Jewry or in Israel studies. *No Better Home?* includes an article by Hasia Diner on American Jewry, to which many of the responses in this section refer.³ The much broader question of Israel as a Jewish home is thoroughly discussed in many other conversations, and thus seemed out of place given our project's context and scope.

Naturally, every scholar brought forward the unique historical and cultural context of what it means to be Jewish in the country about which they wrote. In comparison to the responses from other Canadian groups, we note that the Jewish responses are much more concerned with the themes of family, physical protection, and practical necessities than ideologies of belonging. The authors also highlight the importance of physical proximity (or lack thereof) to other countries with sizable Jewish populations, and the ways in which the Jewish collective imagination regarding specific countries plays a key role in assessing questions of home, security and belonging. Most respondents also emphasize the central place that the Second World War and the Holocaust have had on Jewish communities of the global diaspora. As a result, readers can note some of the underlining differences between ways Jewish communities in Europe and those in other continents conceptualize the notion of home.

Stanisław Krajewski, professor in the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Warsaw, addresses the difficulties associated with maintaining a Jewish identity and culture in Poland in the aftermath of the Holocaust. At the same time, he emphasizes the historical continuity and the sense of Jewish rootedness in Poland as a deep bond that points to an almost inherent sense of at-homeness compared to other younger and less-rooted diasporas. Nadia Malinovich, associate professor of American Stud-

ies, Université de Picardie, offers insights into the changing image that France has held in the Jewish imagination(s), and the difference between those images and the experiences of Jews living there. Her response emphasizes France's unique place in "the Jewish imagination the world over" given its pioneering role in granting emancipation to Jews side by side with the long, dark shadows of French antisemitism and the Holocaust. Gavin Schaffer, professor of Modern British History at the University of Birmingham, emphasizes the importance of context in how Jewish communities envision themselves. In the British case, this means the need to engage with the strong sense of imperialism and patriotism that defined the country during the time the Jewish community was formed.

Suzanne Rutland, professor emerita, Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies, University of Sydney, reflects on the balance of practicalities in migrants' choices of home, such as geographical distance and personal desires or goals, and how those affected the formation of the Australian Jewish community. Her response is a particularly relevant commentary on the book due to the many similarities between Canada and Australia as political entities, some of which were already explored in a 2022 roundtable that took place during the annual conference of the Association for Jewish Canadian Studies. Adriana Brodsky, professor of Latin American History at St. Mary's College of Maryland and co-president of the Latin American Jewish Studies Association, brings us back to the Americas. Brodsky provides readers important insights on Jewish communities in Latin America and raises the very promising, long overdue suggestion for a "hemispheric focus" in American Jewish studies.

We hope that this forum provides our readers with new and worthwhile perspectives for thinking about Jewish homes and about Canada as a home for Jews and for others. These texts reinforce the fact that although many diaspora communities are created in reaction to something, often negative economic or political realities, the communities are not passive as they shape their new homes. As scholars, we need to consider the many hows and whys associated with community building as well as the impact on other communities and on Indigenous people. These questions are not only ones of the past. In the face of global crises and wars, many people continue to migrate to Canada and other countries, seeing them as viable options for building new and better homes.

We wish to thank everyone who helped us bring this project to fruition: to the contributors who took time and effort to prepare their responses, to the scholars who contributed to the original book, to the employees of University of Toronto Press who sent out the physical or digital copies to all participants, and to our colleagues at *Canadian Jewish Studies / Études juives canadiennes* for their support and advice. This forum already led to a vibrant roundtable conversation among Canadian studies scholars at the 2023 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences at York University, for which we are grateful. We hope that this project will spark more scholarly engagements across the fields of both Canadian and Jewish studies.

Postscript

We are writing this short postscript on the seventh day following the horrific October 7 massacre in Israel, which led to the war between Israel and Hamas. The full scope of what will follow, in Israel and in other countries, remains to be seen.

Fuller studies of the ways in which Canadian Jewry is affected, perhaps reshaped, by these events, will come later. We are confident that many of these future studies will be published in the pages of this journal. For now, we would like to acknowledge that the current events (as big historical events tend to do) are bringing some of the broader themes highlighted in this section regarding home and diasporic identities into immediate visibility in the Jewish world. We note the Canadian Jewish community's immediate mobilization for Israel, the deep sense of unity and of shared destiny, and the anxiety that many Canadian Jews feel in relation to their personal security, even here on Canadian soil. These fears are not just a result of specific threats made against the Canadian Jewish community. They are also triggered by exposure to a kind of barbarity that many Jews worldwide believed would never be repeated after the Holocaust, and by the deeply rooted social psychology of modern Jewry, with its hallmark signs of collective trauma. The new levels of anxiety are also directly related to expectations from and responses by non-Jewish neighbors, public figures, and elected officials, including silence, support, victim blaming, and outright hostility. Canadian Jews today are much more worried about the rise of antisemitism in the country they call home.

A new layer of meaning and context surely would have been added to the texts we curated had we asked scholars to write these responses to *No Better Home?* after October 7. We recognize that the events of that day and in the immediate aftermath will inevitably change the ways most of us will read and interpret the texts we have gathered for this forum. Such is the nature of scholarship: meaning is made between the aims of the author and the response of the reader. Both are deeply shaped by context. Some of the themes that begin to unfold could be applied and compared to experiences of other communities in Canada. Others will only be relevant for comparisons to other Jewish communities across the world. The reaction of Jewish communities in Canada to the events of October 7 and the treatment of these communities by their fellow Canadians, demonstrate how multifaceted and sometimes changeable feelings of home and belonging can be.

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David S. Koffman, “Introduction: What Does It Mean to Ask the Question, ‘Has There Ever Been a Better Home for the Jews Than Canada?’” in *No Better Home? Jews, Canada, and the Sense of Belonging*, ed. David S. Koffman (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 14.

2

Jeffrey Veidlinger, “‘To Guarantee Their Own Self-Government in All Matters of Their National Life’: Ukrainians, Jews, and the Origins of Canadian Multiculturalism,” in *No Better Home?* 41-55.

3

Hasia R. Diner, “Destination World Jewry: The United States versus the World,” in *No Better Home?* 33-40.