

Gavin Schaffer

**On Homes and Hearts:
A British Jewish Perspective**

Initially, the question set by this important volume struck me as strange, a little like Jewish children arguing about which of their mothers makes the best chicken soup. As the title of Morton Weinfeld's contribution makes clear, in the context of the horrors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the history under discussion here is a matter of comparative privilege. Has Canada offered the best home to Jews? Well, certainly a better one than Nazi Germany, Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, and once we get lost in the details there are perhaps only relatively minor differences between Canadian, British, Australian (etc.) experiences especially given that, as Weinfeld explains, "one person's rich Jewish life is another's ghetto,"

Nonetheless, the introduction argues that the tendency to ignore such histories has been "myopic," not least because understanding a country's treatment of Jews is likely to tell us something about attitudes towards other minorities, too. But above and beyond what these histories can tell us about states and minorities more broadly, there is also much to learn in terms of Jewish history itself. Diner's argument, that US scholars have not been terribly interested in Canada, dismissing it (and other countries such as Britain) as "corridor communities," is revealing. It reminds us that Jewish studies, so dominated by the strength of the United States, has allowed substantial holes to remain within the tapestry of our understanding of modern Jewish lives. While commendable steps have been taken in recent years to refocus scholarly attention on Mizrahi Jews, this book points out that much remains unknown about the (largely) Ashkenazi migrations too.

Such histories, when they have been given space to breathe, have grown within generally safe, but still insecure, Jewish communities, which have been keen to emphasise contribution and loyalty to their respective states. Richard Menkis's analysis of Canadian-Jewish exhibitions, with their focus on Jews who had "made it" and corresponding disinclination to wade into radical and criminal Jewish histories, really chimes with the British experience, too. "A brittle self-consciousness," in his words, indeed indicates communities that don't feel (at least fully) at home, a reality which has skewed the way Jews have historicized themselves over generations. On these terms, Jews have tended, as the introduction here makes clear, to write histories that emphasise "loyalty to the nation" in a way which has obscured a great deal both about the realities of Jewish experience and identification.

In this context, there is an obvious and urgent case to put Canadian Jewish histories under the spotlight, to tease out stories that earlier histories have missed or avoided, and to fill in the gaps left by an international Jewish Studies community that has tended to dig elsewhere. Reading this volume, my mind, perhaps unsurprisingly, drifted back to British Jewish histories, to how they compare and to the different ways in which we, as scholarly communities, may have approached them. Was it time, I wondered, to put down on paper that my mum's chicken soup was the best, that Britain had offered a home to Jews comparable (or even better) than Canada?

After all, some of the essays here seemed determined to do just that, notably Randal Schnoor's discussion of the state of Jewish education in these two countries.

But to a historian of Jewish Britain such questions don't come naturally. While some scholars (such as Bill Rubinstein) have emphasised the comparatively comfortable experience of British Jews, most of us, at least since the 1980s, have steered a different course.¹ Avoiding the pitfalls of the celebratory narratives described here by Menkis, historians such as Tony Kushner and Todd Endelman have very much gone for a "warts and all" approach, focusing extensively on state and public discrimination and prejudice, in which stories of happy Jews in a welcoming new home have receded.² On these terms, if I am being honest, I really can't imagine an equivalent volume on the British Jewish experience, or at least, such an endeavour would be undertaken amid a significantly different tone.

If this is the case, it seems important to ask why. Have British Jews been less happy, had a less good home, which has made our historians tell stories of woe more than tales of successful integration? At least part of the answer to this question may lie in David Weinfeld's observation concerning Canada's "thin culture": That Jews in Canada can "feel at home," he argues, amid a culture which has allowed them to construct themselves as "Jewish first, Canadian second" is a reality which stands in contrast to the desire and expectation that Jews in Britain should define themselves as British first and foremost. Jewish immigration to Britain took place across periods of fervent imperialism and patriotism, and immigrant Jews were cajoled, not least by pre-existing Jewish communities, to become British as quickly and fully as possible. Has this made British Jews less happy? Has it left less space for them to be Jews? Certainly, following the sociology scholarship highlighted by Morton Weinfeld, that "cultures and identities" and integration clash in a "zero-sum operation," one might be inclined to see things this way. Yet it merits observation that the ideologies of both Reform and Modern Orthodox Judaism in modern Europe developed amid the claim that this is absolutely not the case, that there was no conflict, and even a synergy, between being a good Jew and a good citizen. These theological claims, however, were made in the context of considerable external pressure and expectation to toe the line, in an atmosphere where Jews understood only too well the high cost of being seen as outsiders.

If Canada's "thin culture" removed some of this expectation it may in so doing have created a space for freer Jewish lives, but in the final reckoning I remain unconvinced. In the end, for Jews in comparatively safe countries such as Canada, the US and Britain, home was (and is) where the heart is. In all these cases, Jews have generally embraced the possibilities afforded by their nations, while to varying extents maintaining cultures and traditions, all amid a very clear memory of how much worse things could be. As for the directions of Jewish affiliation (to the US, Israel, to their "old countries") perhaps there is also a story of geography here, one which

might reveal a little more about the nodes of Jewish culture in a global sense, and one which might explain the different pull towards other Jewish cultures of British and Canadian Jews. As Canadian Jews were drawn by the light of the US, British Jews were pulled more towards Israel, and even back towards their old states in Eastern Europe. British Jews were also that much closer to the Holocaust, perhaps a trivial point, but perhaps not. On these terms, the Jewish cultures that have emerged in different places have been shaped by space, as well as by policy and ideology. Being a Jew in Britain has a different geography to being a Jew in the US and Canada, and that seems to matter.

In the end, *No Better Home?* raises important and interesting challenges about international Jewish experiences and champions an unexplored and vibrant Jewish history. In an academic climate where the paths less travelled have not perhaps received the attention they deserve, this volume offers a valuable corrective. For generations, Jews have carried home with them as they have travelled, as Daniel Boyarin, among many others, has pointed out.³ By highlighting the Canadian Jewish experience, the authors here help us to make sense of a less known part of this journey.

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1

See William and Hilary Rubinstein, *Philosemitism: Admiration and Support in the English-Speaking World for Jews, 1840-1939* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), William Rubinstein, *The Myth of Rescue: Why the Democracies Could Not Have Saved More Jews from the Nazis* (London: Routledge, 1997) and William Rubinstein, *A History of the Jews in the English Speaking World: Great Britain* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996).

2

One should consider here not only the extensive work of Kushner and Endelman, but also that of David Cesarani, David Feldman, Geoffrey Alderman, Louise London, and Lloyd Gartner.

3

See Daniel Boyarin, *A Travelling Homeland: The Babylonian Talmud as Diaspora* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).