



Robert Liberles. *Jews Welcome Coffee: Tradition and Innovation in Early Modern Germany.* Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2012. 216 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61168-245-8; \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-61168-246-5; \$29.99 (digital), ISBN 978-1-61168-247-2.

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A Strong Brew

In recent years, a growing number of scholars and historians have begun to explore the role of coffee and, in particular, coffeehouses in Central European Jewish life. This literature has largely, however, focused on the social and cultural aspects of coffee drinking, especially as it was carried out in public venues, and has also predominantly focused on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By contrast, Robert Liberles's volume, *Jews Welcome Coffee*, is not primarily about the social and sociable parameters of coffee drinking, but far more about the drink itself and what it "can teach us about early modern Jewish life" (p. xii). Liberles's book explores both the religious and social responses of Central European Jews to coffee in the early modern period, as well as the economic and everyday history of coffee's introduction into German Jewish life.

The seemingly modest volume offers a remarkable wealth of material, shedding light on the "economic life, social conditions, and halachic processes in adjusting to a new central element of daily life" (p. xii). Juxtaposing the more conservative and negative response to coffee among German Christians, especially the authorities, with the largely positive acceptance of coffee among Jews, Liberles claims that coffee served "an almost perfect symbol of the advent of new times" (p. viii). While, as Liberles insists, coffee did not change the world, it did reflect symbolically the changing social, cultural, religious, and economic landscape of German Jews and the larger society in which they found themselves.

The book is divided into six main chapters. The first chapter offers a survey of the early history of coffee, from its role in Islamic society to its introduction into Europe as a medication. Exploring the concerns regarding the new beverage among non-Jewish Europeans, the author points to central themes in the early debates on coffee: anxieties surrounding gender, authority, religion, and societies in change in the early modern age. For instance, Liberles contrasts the elite acceptance of coffee drinking with their worries regarding coffee consumption among the lower classes, which supposedly sat idly in the coffeehouses and "defamed the government" (p. 11). Importantly, the author concludes that coffee became a lightning rod in debates over "changes in daily life and to challenges to the reigning social structure" where coffee was seen as a metaphorical (and economic) rival to beer (p. 13). The chapter ends with a suggestive linking of the social and political changes facing the growing Jewish population in German lands with the debates over the introduction of this new, foreign drink. As a transition to the following chapter, Liberles insists that the coffee question was never seen as a metaphor for the Jewish question on a national level. Yet, he argues that both were nonetheless "independently illustrative of the dawn of modernity" (p. 18).

Chapter 2, "Coffee and Controversies in Germany," elaborates upon the controversies that emerged in the German lands upon the spread of coffee. The author notes that "the coffee debates superbly illustrate the

sense of social upheaval in Germany during the late eighteenth century, as many members of the educated and ruling elite balked at change that threatened established lines of social demarcation” (p. 19). Viewed with greater unease in German lands, coffee consumption among the lower classes was greatly feared by elites and authorities as a potential threat to the existing social order. This anxiety manifested itself in repeated attempts to legislate against the consumption of coffee among certain groups. According to one law enacted in Hessen-Kassel in 1773, “journeymen, day-laborers and those with much extra time on their hands will not be allowed the nonsense of coffee” (p. 28). Social concerns aside, legislation and royal decrees further attempted to take into account local economic, mercantilist, and national interests—from opposing “unfair” competition with local breweries to supporting the national patriotic act of beer drinking. Weighing in on the matter, intellectuals of the time, including those associated with the Enlightenment, frequently spoke out against coffee consumption, a position that contradicted their support of individual rights of choice in other matters. Though not a universal position, Liberles suggests that German Christian elite opposition to coffee consumption by the lower classes was emblematic of German society’s confrontation with the modern world, a confrontation that would dovetail with the matter of Jewish emancipation in unexpected ways.

Chapter 3, “The Rabbis Welcome Coffee,” plots out the rabbinic response to coffee consumption among the Jews of German lands. It begins with the challenges faced by rabbis who in the very early years of coffee’s distribution in Europe neither agreed upon its appropriate blessing nor knew the various manners by which it could be made. Nonetheless, the rabbinic response to coffee was far more positive than that of German Christian elites. Points of contention existed, of course, and arose out of several main issues: if and how one could prepare coffee on Shabbat; the use of additives in the coffee beans; and the acceptability of frequenting coffeehouses (which involved the use of non-kosher utensils, socializing with non-Jews, and being idle). Interestingly, Liberles states that the fear over socialization with non-Jews was the least of these concerns. Instead, kashrut and the moral weakening that supposedly accompanied spending time in coffeehouses were more important matters for the rabbis. At the same time, rabbis showed increased leniency regarding private consumption of coffee, especially on the Sabbath. Liberles thus distinguishes between debates on coffee as a commodity and debates on the consumption of coffee prepared by non-Jews. Unlike non-

Jewish society, the author insists that the rabbis relatively quickly “absorbed coffee very readily into their daily lives in numerous ways” (p. 59).

The fourth chapter, “Coffee in Everyday Life,” examines the patterns of coffee consumption among German Jews. Liberles notes that Jews began drinking coffee habitually at about the same time as middle-class German Christians. Yet he also notes that Jews, at least in the early eighteenth century, preferred to drink their coffee in coffeehouses, including those owned and run by non-Jews, because few knew how to prepare the beverage at home. Naturally this caused tensions with the rabbinic authorities who, as discussed in the previous chapter, had concerns of their own over the nature and use of this space. Taking the rabbinic statutes against coffeehouse attendance as signs of popular participation in local cafe life, Liberles concludes that “all of the rabbinic discussions on the question indicate that in practice, albeit generally without rabbinic approval, Jews—at least Jewish men—were certainly drinking in gentile coffeehouses by the second decade of the eighteenth century” (p. 65). In this regard, Liberles makes an important contribution to the larger discussion about the nature and timing of German-Jews’ transition to modernity, highlighting significant challenges to religious authority among “everyday” Jews through the seemingly simple act of drinking coffee. Controversies did not end there. Much of the chapter is dedicated to a discussion of petty trade in coffee in the Jewish *Gasse* in Frankfurt, particularly the practice of making and selling “Shabbos coffee.” Using a wealth of archival sources, including petitions and complaints to city authorities, Liberles notes the importance of coffee in the local economy and how this influenced daily life. Lower-class Jews of the region, especially widows, often supplemented their income by preparing coffee for the Sabbath. This practice, which could involve preparing as much as between thirty and fifty pounds of coffee over a larger fire on a Thursday evening, raised the ire and consternation of neighbors who feared that their homes might burn down. Beyond revealing fascinating details regarding struggles between authorities and coffee purveyors over who could sell coffee and when, this part of this chapter opens a window into the consumption patterns of the lower classes—those who were, according to the coffee makers who stood before the local authorities, “entitled to coffee” like everyone else but were unable to purchase it on the Sabbath when no Christian would provide them with credit.

The fifth chapter follows the debates over the coffee trade in Frankfurt, which included attempts to limit Jew-

ish participation therein. Interestingly, over the course of the eighteenth century the contentious coffee market became more fraught as Frankfurt magistrates served in the “broader attempt to quash Germany’s growing coffee consumption” (p. 106). Yet what began as debates about coffee as a commodity ended, by the 1780s and 90s, in struggles between rival merchants, between Jews and Christians. In this sense, the spread and growing popularity among coffee in Frankfurt, at the very least, reflected a larger change in the economic patterns of Jews, as they moved away from moneylending and increasingly began to engage in commerce. Liberles thus effectively argues that while those debating coffee trade in Frankfurt employed rhetoric of revolution and vast social change, it was not the social consequences of coffee or coffee drinking that so offended the existing order but the economic aspects of coffee, its trade, and who participated in this trade. In Frankfurt, the coffee question was indeed related to the Jewish question.

The final chapter in a sense tries to invert the previous chapter’s conceit and interrogate whether coffee played a role in larger debates on the Jewish question and the place of Jews in German society, examining “the fundamental conflicts that emerged when a regime sought to impose legal equality on a society where social tensions still reigned strong” (p. 113). “Jews, Coffeehouses and Social Integration” thus explores both how non-Jews viewed the coffeehouse visiting practices of Jews in Frankfurt, especially in the wake of the French Revolution and during the wars with Napoleonic France, and how Jews responded to changing legal conditions that permitted, at least on paper, their free entry to all public establishments. Again relying on previously untouched archival documents, Liberles spends much of the chapter examining the case of a local, Christian coffeehouse owner who repeatedly denied service to Jewish customers in 1806. Given the availability and proxim-

ity of Jewish-owned coffeehouses at the time, the issue was certainly not simply about getting a cup of coffee; instead it was about access to space that was supposed to be open and equally accessible. The affair, which continued for the better part of a year, involved attempts on the part of Jewish customers both to take legal action and to take up arms in defense of their right to drink coffee in such a public establishment. These two strategies also reveal, according to the author, different participants and goals among the Jews who attempted to gain access to Christian society more broadly. Liberles concludes that “educated and well-established Jews used influence and petitions to seek admission to an exclusive social circle, while lower-class and sometimes unkempt Jews used more rowdy methods as they demanded to be served in a regular coffeehouse” (pp. 130-131). In some ways, the lower classes were more successful because they sought equal access to a social space and not, as in the case of the upper class, social acceptance.

As this is the last book Prof. Liberles wrote before he passed away after a prolonged battle with cancer, it is hard to fault the author for its few minor flaws. In the final analysis, the work can only be praised for its impressive breadth, wealth of sources, and accessible style. The book provides an excellent narrative on the introduction of coffee into German Jewish life, offering sufficient background for someone new to the topic and yet a wealth of sources and accounts to engage those already familiar with aspects of this history. Engagingly written, it comes alive thanks to the author’s incorporation of vivid details from literature, autobiographical sources, and archival documents. Most enjoyably, the book takes us back to a time when drinking coffee was novel, when water was dangerous, and when a coffee novice would crunch on the beans, entirely unaware that this was not the intended manner of consumption.

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