

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Deborah Dash Moore, Nurith Gertz, eds. *The Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization: Volume 10, 1973-2005*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. 1,232 pp. \$150.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-13553-4.

Amos Oz, Fania Oz-Salzberger. *Jews and Words*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. xiv + 232 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-15647-8.

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Defining Jewish Culture

In 2012, the Posen Library published two smart books, one large and one small. *The Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization: Volume 10, 1973-2005* is a doorstopper of an anthology, fulfilling editor in chief of the Posen series James Young's goal of opening readers' eyes to the diversity of Jewish contributions to culture. More amenable to airplane travel and reading is its companion volume, *Jews and Words*, by Israeli novelist Amos Oz and his daughter, the historian Fania Oz-Salzberger. The wonder is that both volumes offer pleasurable reading.

Volume 10, which spans 1973-2005, is an inspiring beginning to the Posen series on culture and civilization. Organized thematically and chronologically, the volume's editors, Deborah Dash Moore and Nurith Gertz, took on the herculean task of researching "all that has been regarded as representative of Jewish culture over time." What counts as Jewish culture? The volume includes texts "produced by Jews but not always with explicit Jewish content" (p. xxix). Reaching a conclusion in the long-running debate over who is a Jew is clearly—and blessedly—not as important to this series as exposing the diversity of Jewish culture. The literature section is broken down into subsections of fiction, poetry, memoir, young adult literature, and drama, and includes such specimens as Erica Jong's 1973 *Fear of Fly-*

ing, Judy Blume's *Starring Sally J. Freedman as Herself* (1977), and Dahlia Ravikovitch's 1986 poem, "We Had an Understanding." Visual culture, popular culture, intellectual culture, and spiritual and religious culture are separate sections. It is a relief to find that Jewish cooking makes it into this volume; it is often neglected in studies of American Jewish culture, but readers will be surprised to find no selections from fashion, music, movies, and television, although these topics are covered in an excellent introduction by Moore and Nurith. The breadth of Jewish popular culture required limiting sections to "cartoons and comics, travel, and food" (p. 607). Biographical sketches of featured writers and artists are appropriately brief; these entries are intended as first stops for researchers and dabblers.

In an age when the Internet provides such a dazzling array of starting points for research, do we still need these encyclopedic volumes? Posen's *Culture and Civilization* provides a powerful answer in the affirmative. As discursive as Google searches can be, they rarely lead the seeker from the political scientist Daniel Elazar to the Hineni lecturer Esther Jungreis to the cartoonist Harvey Pekar and then on to literary critic Ruth Wisse and photographer Annie Leibovitz. There is something big-hearted about a book that embraces all of these culture creators within one spine. As a teacher, I love the idea of

students sitting down with this book and meeting such a diversity of Jewish artists and thinkers. I remember a similar experience, in college, with Moore and Paula Hyman's *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (1997).

This inclusivity is related to Posen's goals of offering "a model for defining 'national culture' as distinct from 'nationalist culture'" (p. xxx). The distinction here is that national cultures grow through their reciprocal exchanges with other cultures, rather than by ridding themselves of foreign elements. "Constant interrogation, debate, and disputation" is the process that creates Jewish culture, Young maintains (p. xxxi). It is in this vein that the volume invites those Jews "whose religious identities have lapsed" to find a cultural basis for renewing their Jewish identification through the book's expansive offerings. A reader need not feel comfortable in his or her Jewish identity to find meaning in this volume, the editors suggest; a reader should not leave the volume feeling too comfortable with a definition of Jewish culture.

It takes comparatively few pages for Oz and Oz-Salzberger to establish what lies at the heart of Jewish culture: the relationship between Jews and words. This is, perhaps, not the most surprising argument coming from a novelist and a historian, but it is an unusually elegantly written one. "Make books, not war," may be the Oz family slogan, but the authors (and the Posen Library) are clearly hoping to spread the word(s). "We are not about stones, clans, or chromosomes," father and daughter write. American writers have gone off track, this book suggests, in our obsession with race, ethnicity, and religion. "We are not into noses," the authors inform us (p. 52).

Their interest in Judaism is also limited. For the authors, religion is often wasted on the religious; the Bible is a text that too many Americans associate solely with priests, pastors, pulpits, and presidents. Oz and Oz-Salzberger's affection toward the entirety of Jewish tra-

dition prevents them from taking too strident an antireligious tone. Thus, they write that Marxists may call religion a tool of oppression, but in the case of Jewish religion, "the oppressors were, *nebbish*, no grander than a convoy of frail and tattered rabbis" (p. 43). It is far simpler for the authors to express affection for these frail and tattered rabbinic sages than the modern ultra-Orthodox, however, whom they find guilty of a grave sin: being poor readers, prone to plucking quotations out of context for their ideological purposes. Are Oz and Oz-Salzberger guilty of something similar in their selection of Jewish stories to fit their own purposes? Well, yes, but they are so disarmingly upfront about it, so encouraging of other interpretations, that readers will probably let them off the hook: "These are our preferences. Every reader is bound to have others, and probably contest ours, perhaps vehemently. But if you are such a reader, Jewish or not, you are already part of our family. And all functional families, we are told, depend on putting disagreement into words" (p. 56).

Here is a valentine to secular Israeli culture of yore—to a time of pervasive familiarity with Jewish texts. The writers concede that several decades have passed since the height of biblical literacy in Israeli society; "nevertheless, most of Israel's Hebrew speakers still have some *Tanach* in them. There are, to date, more Bible-wise atheists in Israel than anywhere else" (p. 42). The authors celebrate a culture of "atheists of the book." In the Land of Oz, secular Israelis enjoyed fluency with Jewish words and books. This will sound foreign to American readers. It may also read as a romantic essay, a bit shaky in foundation. That Jews share a common culture based on familiarity with Jewish texts, such as the *Tanach* and the Talmud, is a marvelous idea. But is it more than just words?

As the companion volume to *Jewish Culture and Civilization*, *Jews and Words* is a reminder of a bookish ideal of Jewish culture that bears a vague resemblance to the reality of the Posen anthology offerings.

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