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Ephraim Kanarfogel. *The Intellectual History and Rabbinic Culture of Medieval Ashkenaz.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013. 600 pp. $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8143-3024-1.

Reviewed by Susan Einbinder (University of Connecticut)
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Challenging the Ashkenazic Myth

Scholars have been making a persuasive case for the right of medieval Ashkenazic Jewry to bask in what was long considered a purely Andalusian sun. Ephraim Kanarfogel's newest monograph continues this wave of Ashkenaz revisionism, addressing two misconceptions. One traditional distortion refers "Ashkenaz" to an undifferentiated cultural landscape stretching from the Rhine to Paris, Normandy, London, and York. According to a second category of errors, and in contrast to the dazzling rebirth of Hebrew letters on the Iberian Peninsula, Ashkenazi cultural production remained constrained by its pietism to Talmudic dialectic. Kanarfogel has dedicated years to dismantling these tropes in measured pieces; *The Intellectual History* now aims a wrecking ball at the entire edifice of the "Ashkenazic myth."

After an overview of "regnant perceptions," the book begins with the distinctive ways in which French and German Tosafists–those astounding scholars who "revolutionized and forever changed the study of Talmud and formation of halakhah"–were embedded in their respective social worlds (p. 37). Kanarfogel examines the role of French and German Tosafists as judges, concluding that German rabbis played an active role in local rabbinic courts, while their French counterparts acted as appeals judges who preferred to write books based on theoretical rather than real-life examples. It is a difference that illuminates contrasting models of "leadership"–the French elite distinguished by study and publication, the German shaping daily ritual, commercial, and domestic life.

Chapters 2 through 4 treat Tosafist engagement with the biblical text. The paucity of published texts–specifically Tosafist compilations–has contributed to the modern assumption that they were interested only in legal passages of "Torah" or those with legal implications. Chapter 2 asks, "Where and how did Tosafists study *miqra*?" (p. 116). Kanarfogel reduces this question to the fate of *pshat* exegesis in French Tosafist circles over the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. He claims evidence for a "middle phase" of exegetes, identified in comments attributed to Joseph Bekhor Shor, Jacob of Orleans, and Yom Tov Joigny. Kanarfogel works his way through the compilations, where the relevant remarks effectively constitute a super-commentary to Rashi, reversing a trend toward stricter *pshat* reading in favor of Rashi's blend of "*pshat* and *drash*" (pp. 122-123). Chapter 3 repeats this process with the German Tosafists, focusing on Judah the Pious, whom Kanarfogel links to the missing bridge generation of his hypothesis and credits with a "form of *pshat*" exegesis (p. 210). Chapter 4 turns to Moses of Coucy, Yehiel of Paris, and a group Kanarfogel has explored elsewhere, the so-called academy of Evreux, presented as a "point of interface between … Tosafist exegetes of the mid-twelfth and early thirteenth centuries and the midrashic expansion that comes to dominate" later thirteenth-century compilations (pp. 347-348). The Evreux texts demonstrate a preference for reconciling *pshat* and *aggadah* on the side of *aggadah*, that is, the final defeat of the strict adherence to *pshat* associated with Joseph Qara and the Rashbam in favor of Rashi and Bekhor Shor.

These chapters constitute the heart of this book. They are extremely learned, and the author's command of the manuscript sources as well as his exhaustive secondary citations offer readers a rich resource for contemplation and future study. I am not personally equipped to handle their claims of attribution, which may be open to challenge. Overall, the most significant complaint I can make about this section is that it should have been seriously pruned; the unending waves of examples distract from the author's overarching claims. Likewise, the abundant reliance on acronyms, biblical citation in Hebrew, and Hebrew terminology will deter readers who do not have facility with classical Jewish texts.

Chapter 5 treats liturgical poetry. The author de-

serves enormous credit for repeatedly underlining, in conference after conference and publication after publication, the importance of *piyyut* composition in Tosafist circles. If much of this book is a kind of dialogue with Efraim Urbach's classic work *Ba'alei haTosafot* (1955), Kanarfogel does not have to convince me that Urbach's relative disinterest in poetic activity was a big mistake. However, I am not happy with Kanarfogel's methodological decision to redress this lacuna by indexing the "nature and patterns of [Tosafist] *piyyutim*" and comparing them to the compositions of pre-Crusade Ashkenaz (p. 377). Having identified more than forty Tosafists who composed liturgical verse, Kanarfogel proceeds to list what may be each one of them, the genres of their extant compositions, and the presence or absence of select formal features such as quantitative prosody (the "Spanish style") or the use of various rhyme or strophic patterns. He claims that the relative abundance or scarcity of various genres reflects a combination of "liturgical opportunity and personal interest rather than … a curricular or ideological statement" (pp. 442-443). Much of this chapter's argument, precisely because it is statistical, relies on the assumption that the relative presence or absence of liturgical verse types now extant is an accurate reflection of their original frequency and use. Given the randomness that characterizes survival of this corpus, this assumption is shaky. Likewise, a summation of formal elements tells us nothing about *meaning* in Tosafist *piyyut*, which might be better elicited in an exploration of motifs, temporality, voice, or language. Arguably, too, a comparison of pre- and post-Crusade hymns is less useful than comparison of Tosafist and non-Tosafist *piyyut* from the same region and period, or Tosafist and Christian hymnology.

Chapter 6 treats the magical and mystical interests of the Tosafists, observing that while the Rashbam's generation (twelfth-century men) delicately avoided this arena, the students of R. Tam demonstrate a "more engaged" interest in mysticism similar to that of pre-Crusade Ashkenaz rabbis. Kanarfogel cites a wide range of practices as evidence of mystical engagement, from dream interpretation to numerology (*gematria*) and a belief in demons. With such a broad spectrum, he unsurprisingly finds a lot of rabbis with mystical proclivities. While Kanarfogel claims that it is unclear whether northern French interests in esoterica developed autonomously or as a result of Pietist contacts, he is emphatic that a "sustained interest" in esoteric and magical practices among the Tosafists intensified in the later thirteenth century (p. 486). Chapter 7 treats Tosafist attitudes toward belief and "popular culture." It is a "misconception" to depict the Tosafists as men who did not think about "belief or the nature of the Divine" (p. 490), a misconception Kanarfogel refutes by examining Tosafist attitudes toward anthropomorphism. Joseph Bekhor Shor again looms large in his examples, but so does Solomon Simhah, a comparatively eccentric *paytan* and theologian. The Ashkenaz Pietists also denounce anthropomorphism while nonetheless invoking it in mystical writings; other writers demonstrate a more eclectic approach. A small section on Isaiah Trani mentions his apparent familiarity with some of Maimonides' writings, which leads Kanarfogel to the Maimunist controversy and medieval Jewish debates on literal versus allegorical reading; he rejects as exaggerated the claim that the northern French rabbis were pro-anthropomorphic. Kanarfogel disagrees with a number of contemporary scholars throughout this chapter, and his ample notes enable interested readers to elucidate independently the points of disagreement. The chapter concludes that the Tosafists and German Pietists, "without benefit of a sustained philosophical tradition" were able to respond creatively to the important theological issues of their day (p. 527). The book's conclusion recapitulates the author's major points. Kanarfogel emphasizes the role he believes was played by Tosafist exegesis in bridging the classical period of *pshat* and the thirteenth-century compilations characterized by use of "*pshat* and *drash*" (*aggadah*). He hypothesizes an audience for these works in the form of a "second-level intelligentsia" and reiterates that lack of formal philosophical training did not inhibit intellectual inquiry (p. 537). The importance of *piyyut* composition and *piyyut* commentaries (not otherwise treated), the differences between French and German Tosafists, the awareness of literary and intellectual trends in the Christian world, and the possible north-south transmission of genres and ideas are restated. All this is very good, as the sheer size of this volume and its luxuriant detail may make it hard for readers to keep track of the forest as they proceed ever deeper among its trees.

In sum, there are ways in which this is a great book– it is the erudite work of an impeccable scholar, who has generously and joyously gathered the fruits of his labors and offered them to readers. This is also, despite its voluminous detail, a book about important ideas that will provoke other scholars to think harder and reach higher to the kinds of questions we should be asking about medieval Jewish learning and the men who represent it. This is also a passionate book, because its author cares deeply about his topic and wants us to care about it, too. That said, *The Intellectual History* is also an unwieldy book, its prose a wild blend of English and technical Hebrew, its terminology arcane to anyone unfamiliar with Jewish re-

ligious texts. While Kanarfogel clearly envisioned a seasoned scholar of Judaic studies as his target reader, this deprives the book of the wide-ranging audience it truly deserves. I imagine also that some of the living scholars cited in defense of Kanarfogel's propositions may have alternative readings of their own work as well as of the past. That, however, could be an important conversation. No one will disagree with Kanarfogel's core claim that the intellectual world of medieval Ashkenaz was rich, complex, and exciting. And as he demonstrates, thinking about that world is pretty exciting, too.

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