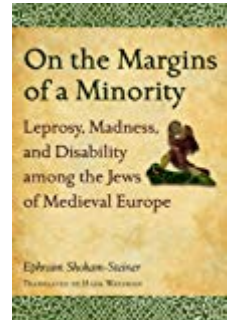


**Ephraim Shoham-Steiner.** *On the Margins of a Minority: Leprosy, Madness, and Disability among the Jews of Medieval Europe.* Translated by Haim Waltzman. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014. xiii + 275 pp. \$49.99, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8143-3931-2.



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**Published on** H-Judaic (July, 2015)

**Commissioned by** Matthew A. Kraus (University of Cincinnati)

Ephraim Shoham-Steiner's new book focuses on individuals he deems doubly marginalized within wider Christendom—Jews considered physically or psychologically disabled. This eminently readable English translation of the 2007 Hebrew original (based on Shoham-Steiner's dissertation) takes on three categories of disability which not only held social meaning and social implications in the broader medieval world, but which had specialized religio-legal (halakhic) ramifications as well. These are "leprosy" (various skin diseases), mental illness, and physical impairments including deformity, blindness, and deafness. Shoham-Steiner contributes to the small but growing corpus of medieval disability studies which has stimulated wider interest as a result of Irina Metzler's 2006 study, *Disability in Medieval Europe*. This innovative integration brings together disability studies with Jewish studies, while keeping a steady eye on intersections between Jewish and Christian attitudes toward the physically and mentally disabled.

The setting is high medieval Ashkenaz—Germany, northern France, and its wider sphere of influence, ca. 1000-1350 CE—though the book's discussion of wider rabbinic trends moves beyond Ashkenaz and to earlier periods. The study asks how rabbinic literature (an intentionally wide category) understood and related to disabled Jews, and asks what evidence from rabbinic sources can tell us about how these people were actually treated. Shoham-Steiner's overall argument is one of complexity: elite Jewish responses to disabled co-religionists fell along a broad spectrum between acceptance and rejection, which often intersected with, without necessarily mimicking, the approach of Christian society. Among his arguments, Shoham-Steiner suggests that Ashkenazi Jews' minority status, relatively small numbers, and ideological principles (such as the equation of embarrassing a Jew to killing him) caused the community to tolerate and shelter its disabled members in ways that the Christian majority did not.

Structurally, the book addresses each of its three categories of disability (leprosy, mental disability, physical impairments) in turn with a pair of chapters dedicated to each topic. The first chapter in the pair engages with theoretical categories and idealized classifications, while the second considers the implications on the ground, or as much of this quotidian reality as can be accessed through elite Hebrew texts. The first chapter in each pair tends toward the encyclopedic, engaging with terminology and the broad ways in which these terms and concepts were applied from biblical, early rabbinic, talmudic, and medieval contexts. The second offers test cases, typically from responsa and ethical literature, with an emphasis on the thirteenth-century German pietist work *Sefer Hasidim* (Book of the Pious), known for its asceticism, but which becomes an unexpected touchstone for compassion and moderation when seen through this author's lens. Comparisons with Christian attitudes can appear in either chapter of the pair. Shoham-Steiner himself admits that these two categories—the theoretical and the practical—cannot be neatly divided, nor can the three categories of disability be neatly disconnected. Physical and mental disabilities, and rabbinic approaches to them, often went together, and his third pair of chapters (on general physical impairment) weaves his categories together at points.

Although this is a work of social history, ostensibly concerned with “regular” Jews, the sources offer the voices of elite Jewish thinkers, whom Shoham-Steiner calls “shapers of Jewish consciousness” (p. 25). To be sure, extant sources make it virtually impossible to hear the voices of the disabled themselves. But this is also not the book's aim. Instead, it illustrates how a rabbinic class, developing its views over the course of many centuries, thought of disabled Jews through the lens of halakhah. Shoham-Steiner is aware of the limitations of the sources he uses to illustrate social attitudes, namely responsa literature and ethical treatises such as *Sefer Hasidim*. But con-

sidering how little this subject matter has been taken up by scholars of Jewish studies, such a top-down approach offers an important and useful overview, and begins a conversation worth having for scholars of medieval Jews and broader medieval society.

For those teaching introductory rabbinics courses, the second chapter's in-depth discussion of one of Rashi's best known responsa offers a useful step-by-step introduction to the construction of this type of rabbinic literature. The titillating case contained on pp. 47-58—a husband claims that his wife is a leper apparently as an excuse to have his marriage annulled (Rashi rejects this claim, sharply criticizing the husband's lack of compassion)—would make a nice standalone in a classroom setting, demonstrating medieval applications of biblical and rabbinic principles; connections to and awareness of broader non-Jewish surroundings; and the process of recension and transmission.

Throughout this work, discussion of disability yields fascinating findings about the intersection of illness and sexuality, both by considering the ways in which halakhic attention to disability often takes place in the context of questions of marriage and sex, and by engaging with the motifs of sexual sin often used to rationalize the cause of disability. Among a variety of concerns with sexual behavior, the study's discussions of leprosy and physical deformity highlight medieval attitudes—both Christian and Jewish—which associated conception during menstruation with the birth of disabled (leprous or monstrous) children (pp. 34-36, 55-56, 154-155, 176). The concern with sexual behavior also reappears in the realm of “madness,” as inappropriate sexual behavior becomes a marker of mental illness in rabbinic theory, while rabbinic responsa consider the ability of a madwoman to safely procreate and the ramifications of marital sex between a husband and a mad wife (pp. 106-122).

This continual engagement with sexual behavior highlights the fact that a marginalized population beyond the disabled appears throughout the study: Jewish women. Much of the responsa literature utilized here deals with questions of marriage, divorce, and sexual behavior, and thus this book offers a useful lens into female litigants before the *beit din*; women's roles and statuses within marriage; and rabbinic approaches to marriage, sex, and procreation. The book begins such sustained discussion when addressing social attitudes towards madness, but Shoham-Steiner's fascinating primary sources could also have lent themselves to further focused analyses of gendered differences in rabbinic understandings of disability and gendered implications of disability in both the halakhic and social realms. Perhaps this initial work will allow other scholars to build on Shoham-Steiner's fine foundation. This book will undoubtedly be useful for scholars and for classrooms alike.

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**Citation:** Rena Lauer. Review of Shoham-Steiner, Ephraim. *On the Margins of a Minority: Leprosy, Madness, and Disability among the Jews of Medieval Europe*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. July, 2015.

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