

this missing material has appeared in English-language articles that Shoham-Steiner has published in other forums—but the book’s notes and bibliography do not always reference these studies.) To be fair, decisions about what to include or exclude from the translation were no doubt impacted at least in part by the Wayne State University Press’s desire to produce a more concise and streamlined volume. But the result of these editorial decisions is that the original Hebrew version of Shoham-Steiner’s book remains indispensable, and readers who are able to will want to consult it alongside the present volume.

These issues aside, the English translation (by Haim Waltzman) is clear and readable overall, and makes an important Hebrew study accessible to a wider Anglophone audience. Shoham-Steiner’s careful historical spadework and fine-grained readings of relevant texts and contexts render *On the Margins of a Minority* a significant contribution, one that will open up previously inaccessible sources and neglected figures to further research and analysis.

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Jeffrey R. Woolf. *The Fabric of Religious Life in Medieval Ashkenaz (1000–1300): Creating Sacred Communities*. Études sur le Judaïsme Médiéval 30. Leiden: Brill, 2015. 246 pp.  
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The medieval Jewish community has been compared to a sacred space and the Ashkenazic synagogue to the Jerusalem temple. In this study, Jeffrey Woolf works out some of the implications of these similes. Others have taken on aspects of the subject, as in Simcha Goldin’s sociologically informed *Yihud ve-ha-yahad: Hīdat ha-hisardut shel ha-kevuzot ha-yehudiyot bi-ymei ha-benayim* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ha-me’uḥad, 1997), on the medieval Jewish community, or especially in Alick Isaacs’s anthropologically innovative unpublished doctoral dissertation, “An Anthropological and Historical Study of the Role of the Synagogue in Ashkenazi Jewish Life in the Middle Ages” (Hebrew University, 2002), written in Hebrew under the direction of Robert Bonfil.

By his own reckoning, Woolf has produced “a methodological introduction” and “four interdependent monographs” rather than one unified treatment (xi), his goal being “to identify consistent ideals and values that unify that community” (xii) and to “characterize central defining values, aspirations, ideals and religious sensitivities that informed Jewish life during the heyday of medieval Franco-Germany (Ashkenaz)” (1).

Following a methodological introduction (see below), chapter 2, on “The Community,” unpacks the term “holy community” (*kehillah kedoshah*) that was often attached to Ashkenazic town Jewries. Their presumed pious behavior informed rabbinic views about labor, religious study, and communal prayer and

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as a result, custom became of central importance, sometimes trumping written texts.

Chapter 3 focuses on “The Synagogue” as an institution that was central especially to German Jewry and treated as a quasi temple of Jerusalem. This association led to the introduction of liturgical customs and practices that once were part of ancient temple Judaism into the medieval Ashkenazic synagogue experience.

Chapter 4 is an extension of the temple analogy and deals with “Purity and Impurity” as highly developed categories of personal religiosity. This conception leads to the requirement of men and women to eliminate a perceived state of ritual impurity by immersions in ritual baths to reacquire ritual purity before approaching the sancta of the holy synagogue, or rejoining the holy community.

Finally, chapter 5, “Martyrdom,” takes up how such holy communities concerned with purity and impurity behaved when threatened by coerced conversion to Christianity, perceived as the ultimate source of impurity, in the anti-Jewish riots in the spring and summer of 1096 in the Rhineland. Though aware of the historiographical range of explanations for why some German Jews killed their own families and then committed suicide rather than be forced to convert to Christianity, Woolf’s view follows from his analysis of the German Jewish communities as temple-like holy communities: he argues that avoidance of Christian pollution was a form of boundary maintenance of the holy community. He offers this reasonable explanation for the unimaginable “with all due trepidation” (207), though none is needed, since this interpretation follows from the earlier chapters of the book as well as from the work of other scholars who followed a similar line of reasoning (181 n. 37).

Woolf’s methodological concerns are worth rethinking because they go to the heart of how Ashkenazic studies should be written today, and this book is one of only a few broad studies available in English. Other works available in English that study different aspects of the culture from a historical perspective include Ephraim Kanarfogel, *The Intellectual History and Rabbinic Culture of Medieval Ashkenaz* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013); Elisheva Baumgarten, *Practicing Piety in Medieval Ashkenaz: Men, Women, and Everyday Religious Observance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); and Ephraim Shoham-Steiner, *On the Margins of a Minority: Leprosy, Madness and Disability among the Jews of Medieval Europe* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014).

Some of Woolf’s methodological assumptions tend to limit his study, however. For example, Woolf writes that he intends to write a book about “Ashkenaz *per se*,” without extensive attention to the Christian background, to earlier Jewish sources, or to other contemporary medieval Jewish subcultures (xii). Thankfully, he in fact does appeal throughout the book to all three matrices of comparison, but his self-restraint makes the results less illuminating than they might have been.

Another assumption that limits Woolf’s approach is his adopting the theologically grounded premise that Jewish law (Halakhah) exists as an objective reality and that historians require a method that takes this assumption into

account. This premise is inconsistent with his expressed desire to use an anthropological perspective (xiii) and his goal of studying the “community” (xii) and “Jewish life” (1), even though his notes and bibliography refer to important anthropological scholarship. Instead, he appeals to how rabbinic authors made decisions, thereby making Jewish legal theory the focus of his investigation: “The task of the historian is to follow and evaluate the manner in which rabbis navigated their path between competing judicial considerations” (10). In this pursuit, Woolf follows the school of the late Jacob Katz and the influential essay by Haym Soloveitchik (“Can Halakhic Texts Talk History?,” *AJS Review* 3 [1978]: 152–96). Most cultural Jewish historians, however, and some legal scholars, do not share this approach, because it imposes theological restrictions on more empirical historical methodologies.

Woolf’s further assumption that the subject of medieval Ashkenaz applies to northern French as well as German Jewries, despite some differences, is also questionable. It is not true that “they shared the same cultural heritage” since German Ashkenaz was more indebted to Palestinian Jewish culture than was northern French rabbinic culture, even leaving aside their legal traditions. Nor did they share “the same historical experience, historical memories, communal awareness, and religious/pietist sensibilities” (4), since only German Ashkenaz experienced the First Crusade riot of 1096, institutionalized the martyrs there in liturgical poetry and chronicles, and expressed a new form of heightened ascetic religious zeal in the small circle (not movement) of Judah ben Samuel the Pietist, known as the Pietists of Germany (Hasidei Ashkenaz). Northern French Jews did not experience any of this and, after their expulsions, were so lacking in “communal awareness” that they disappeared, melting into neighboring Jewish Diaspora communities from the Netherlands to the Kingdom of Aragon.

Although the book generally reads well, there sometimes is a quirky tendency to capitalize common nouns for no apparent reason, such as “Laws of Ritual Purity” (ix), “Anthropological and Sociological” (xiii), “Jewish Ceremonial Art and Illuminations” (13), “Apostasy or Death” (208). There are some typos: “Treachtenberg” for “Trachtenberg” (20 n. 84), “wil” for “well” (32 n. 48), “Qedumahh” for “Qedumah” (43 n. 103), “Haker” for “Hacker” (187 n. 69), among others.

Although this study is broader and more unified than Woolf himself would have us believe, it lacks the deployment of material culture in addition to rabbinic sources mentioned in the introduction (5, 13) and so its promise for an anthropologically informed medieval Jewish history of the synagogue is partly unfulfilled. Isaacs’s dissertation does discuss the physical spaces in which the medieval Ashkenazic synagogue operated. Nonetheless, this book is important because it raises basic methodological issues that affect the way Ashkenazic studies can develop in the future.

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