

Review of Jewish Libya: Memory & Identity in Text & Image, edited by Jacques Roumani, David Meghnagi, & Judith Roumani (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2018)

MIDDLE EASTERN AND NORTH AFRICAN RELIGIOUS MINORITIES, in particular Jewish communities, have attracted distinguished scholarly interest in the last several years. The Jews of Libya have been on the margins of this interest compared to other Jewish communities in the region, and remain absent in several anthologies on North African and Middle Eastern Jews.¹ Nevertheless, a few works on Jewish Libyans in particular have been published in the last few decades, including Italian historian Renzo De Felice's *Jews in Arab Land, Libya: 1835-1970*,² Rachael Simon's specialized studies of Jewish Libyan women such as *Change within Tradition among Jewish Women in Libya*,³ or Harvey Goldberg's *Jewish Life in Muslim Libya: Rivals and Relatives*.⁴ Other works have focused on the distinctive Arabic dialect of the Jews in Tripoli.⁵

¹ Compare, for example, Reeva Spector Simon, Michael Menachem Laskier, and Sara Reguer (eds.), *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) or Emily Gottreich and Daniel J. Schroeter (eds.), *Jewish Culture and Society in North Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

² Renzo De Felice, *Ebrei in un paese arabo: Gli ebrei nella Libia contemporanea tra colonialismo, nazionalismo arabo e sionismo (1835-1970)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1978). Translated by Judith Roumani as *Jews in Arab Land, Libya: 1835-1970* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).

³ Rachel Simon, *Change within Tradition among Jewish Women in Libya* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992).

⁴ Harvey Goldberg, *Jewish Life in Muslim Libya: Rivals and Relatives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

⁵ Sumikazu Yoda, *The Arabic Dialect of the Jews of Tripoli (Libya): Grammar*,

Despite these important works, the presence of Libya's Jews in scholarship and in the consciousness of scholars of the Arab and Islamic worlds is far less than that of the Jewish communities in Egypt or Morocco. It is within this context of scholarship that the importance of the volume under review is made clear and offers an important voice for Libyan Jews, marking a beginning to the end of their absence in existing scholarship.

Jewish Libya: Memory & Identity in Text & Image is interdisciplinary and comprehensive. The edited volume offers a very good overview of Libyan Jewish history, contemporary life, customs, food/culinary arts, and literature. In addition, there is a specific part devoted to the discussion of women, which is not common in many works discussing Middle Eastern and North African Jewish communities. In particular, the chapters on culinary arts, food, and wedding traditions, alongside the personal interviews demonstrate how the Jewish community was interwoven with larger Libyan society; Jewish traditions were an integral part of everyday life in Libya.

The volume is composed of thirteen contributions written by eleven scholars, the majority of whom possess a Libyan background, which offers an added authenticity of the work. Others, like Japanese linguist Sumikazu Yoda, are specialists in their field and present unique work pertaining to Jews of Libya. The volume is an anthology that is conceptualized for non-specialist readers to have a contextual understanding, as the editors write in the introduction. This work is a reflection of the complex and diverse structures and multiple identities of North African societies, where one-dimensional or nationalist perspectives are not able to grasp this diversity.

The book addresses well the impact of colonial and postcolonial history for Jewish communities in Libya. The Italian colonial era had contradictory influences on the Jewish community. The era fostered education for the community at the beginning of the century and integration with Italian Jews, which influenced the community to depart from the intellectual and physical walls of the *hāra*, the Jewish quarter. In 1943, however, Italian colonial rule was responsible for detaining 2600 members of the Jewish community—of whom 562 died—in Jadu (Italian spelling Giado) on Mussolini's orders, under the

suspicion of sympathizing with the enemy. Furthermore, fascist Italian authorities deported 300 Jews to Germany and it was British passports that rescued them from death in the German concentration camps.

Those who influenced the modernizing of the community at the beginning of the century were also those who detained them during the war and turned the anger of the Muslim majority against Libyan Jews in 1945 and 1948. The masses that were mobilized against their Jewish compatriots connected them to the colonial power, the war and, later in 1948, to Israel. This reflects the transition that Libyan society, and those of neighboring countries, underwent throughout the twenty-five-year period between 1943 and 1967, influenced by World War II, anti-colonial movements, the establishment of Israel, and the rise of nationalism. Europe continues to reflect on its own experience of World War II, particularly the Holocaust, and its Jewish communities in Europe, often overlooking the direct and indirect influence of these events on the Jewish communities south of the Mediterranean.⁶ The strength of this edited volume, among many others, is its focus on this particular aspect of European history during World War II in connection to Libyan Jewish communities.

Another distinctive feature of this anthology is its dedicated discussion of literature, which is unique compared to other comprehensive works on the Jews of North Africa or the Middle East. Literature and autobiographies, not classical historical sources, have a cardinal role—much more than is regularly acknowledged—in being an important source of micro-history and insight into daily life, including the emotions associated with, and context of, political events impacting Jewish communities in Libya.

Jewish Libya represents a scholarly enrichment to existing studies of pre-1948 Jewish history in North Africa and the Middle East. These strengths notwithstanding, a critique needs to be addressed: the contributions in some chapters are anecdotal and the descriptive style sometimes lacks a solid research and theoretical framework. Other chapters are primarily summaries of other works. This is useful for interested readers but not necessary for specialized scholars. In addition, the authors emphasize in the introduction the rejection

⁶ See Aomar Boum and Sarah Abrevaya Stein (eds.), *The Holocaust and North Africa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

of the “Arabness” of Libya and the “non-Arabness” of its Jews. This focus neglects a debate, though not as wide, about pan-Arabism and Arab nationalism in the histories of North Africa. Going into a more detailed discussion about these approaches and debating them would have given the work more solid theoretical ground.⁷ A final comment concerns the use of terminology in parts of the work. In Part One, on the history of the first centuries, the author uses the term “Eretz Yisrael,” not only a Biblical term but one associated with a particular ideology—one would expect the use of terms that reflect a modern political, and less ideological, understanding.

⁷ See the work of Israeli sociologist and critical theorist Yehouda Shenhav, mainly *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), in which he rejects the one-dimensional analysis of the history of the Jews in pre-1948 Middle East and North Africa and criticizes the official Israeli narrative and handling of this history. Shenhav is part of a wider approach among Jewish and non-Jewish scholars on this question.