

Book Reviews

crypto-Jewish women, who traditionally relayed beliefs, were almost nonexistent. The minimalist rites of isolated men in Peru thus contrast with the religious life of crypto-Jewish groups in Mexico, where the engagement of some women (whom the inquisitors called “dogmatists”) ensured the smooth running of Yom Kippur, Passover, fasts, the festival calendar and the initiations of children.

The men arrested in Peru lacked a crypto-Jewish family basis. Among them, ambiguity reigned and the spirit seemed reluctant. This is the case of one of the men condemned to be burned, Manuel Bautista Pérez, a successful merchant and the leader of the group of New Christian traders in Lima. Despite being tortured, Pérez never confessed any heretical practices, always asserting his good Catholic behavior. The charges against him are not conclusive. Concerning his heart of hearts, the mystery remains. Some historians even ask whether he was a Jewish or Christian martyr. Maybe both, if we admit a duality of beliefs (see Nathan Wachtel, *La foi du souvenir* [Paris: Seuil, 2001]).

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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. 288 pp.
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Today, it is almost a truism that medieval social history can be profitably reconstructed by taking a view “from the margins.” As foundational works by R. I. Moore, Michael Goodich, Shulamit Shahar and others have shown, the dominant values, norms, and mentalities of medieval society can be illuminated by focusing on marginalized Others, and by exploring how their perspectives and identities intersected with—or were constructed by—the dominant social and religious power structures. For historians of medieval Christendom, Jews in particular have come to function as Others par excellence, and a wealth of scholarship has explored the fraught role that Jews—both real and imagined—played in medieval society and in the process of Christian identity formation. Increasingly, these studies have drawn connections between the roles and representations of Jews and those of other paradigmatic marginal groups, including women, heretics, lepers, and “sodomites.”

But as Ephraim Shoham-Steiner reminds us in his important book, Jewish communities themselves were hardly homogeneous or socially undifferentiated. “Marginalized” Jewish communities had margins of their own, and it is the inhabitants of those margins that Shoham-Steiner brings into focus, with a particular emphasis on Jews suffering from leprosy, mental illness, and various physical disabilities. *On the Margins of a Minority* explores the ways in which these maladies were conceptualized by medieval Ashkenazic theologians, exegetes, and

halakhists, and is particularly interested in the “social attitudes” discernable in sources that ostensibly reflect the “facts on the ground,” such as responsa literature and moralistic tracts like *Sefer Hasidim*. Shoham-Steiner productively explores the extent to which marginal Jews were embraced or shunned by their broader communities, whether rabbinic dictates concerning marginal groups were followed in daily communal life, and how attitudes toward and regulation of marginality changed over the course of the Middle Ages. These questions are considered against the backdrop of contemporary western European Christian culture, which was simultaneously grappling with many of the same social and religious concerns.

The book is structured around three pairs of chapters devoted to the titular categories of marginality. The first chapter in each pairing deals with questions of terminology and classification, while the second seeks out “social attitudes” in representative test cases, mostly based on legal sources. As Shoham-Steiner shows, leprosy, mental illness, and disability were all fluid constructs, defined varyingly and often inconsistently by medieval authors. For instance, leprosy or *zara'at* (which could refer to a range of skin ailments and not solely Hansen’s disease) was seen as a mark of sinfulness and even danger, but lepers were also deemed worthy of compassion and inclusion within Jewish society; as Shoham-Steiner puts it, drawing on a rabbinic motif, “the left [hand] pushes away while the right draws close” (43). This abiding tension resulted in sometimes paradoxical policies: lepers were not quarantined in Jewish communities, a sign of their overall integration—but this in turn led some rabbis to urge that they be shunned (32). Similar ambiguities impacted the standing of “the mad” and the disabled. Mental illness and physical disabilities were often seen as signs of divine disfavor, linked to beastliness and viewed with trepidation. But although biblical and rabbinic precedents tended to exclude these individuals from communal life, at least some medieval rabbis sought to lower the legal boundaries so as to allow marginal individuals to marry, participate in synagogue services, and so on.

Rather than a single overarching argument, Shoham-Steiner makes a number of interrelated analytical claims. He recurrently points to instances in which Jews treated marginal members less repressively than did contemporary Christians, and argues, convincingly, that “they did so not only to prevent these marginal individuals from converting to Christianity ... but also to ensure that Jewish society not be seen from the outside as less compassionate than its Christian counterpart, and therefore less cohesive” (185). He further suggests that the Jews’ own collective identity as marginal led them to be more sympathetic to marginal figures in their own midst—a plausible but somewhat speculative claim, given that few of the sources he cites explicitly link these two phenomena. Significantly, even as he highlights substantial differences between Jewish and Christian communities, he consistently points to broad parallels between the attitudes and anxieties of medieval Ashkenazic Jews and those of their Christian neighbors, suggesting that rabbinic attempts to shore up the boundaries between Jews and Christians ironically point to the porousness of those very boundaries. Methodologically, the book’s comparative approach further buttresses the growing

scholarly consensus that medieval Ashkenazic social and spiritual life was profoundly embedded within the surrounding Christian culture.

On the Margins of a Minority concludes by laying out some possible avenues for further research. I was especially struck by the potential for an explicitly gendered analysis of many of the sources treated throughout the book, particularly the numerous responsa dealing with contracting and dissolving marriages. These sources raise the question of whether Jewish men and women were “marginalized” in equal measure, and of the extent to which categories such as “madness” or “disability” were intrinsically gendered, and manipulated and deployed strategically in order to advance specific social and economic agendas. The author gestures toward these theoretical questions (e.g. on pp. 121, 135), but does not delve into them in detail, and at times accepts uncritically the sources’ own claims that efforts to control women’s bodies and sexuality resulted from women’s “honored” and “protected” status.

Shoham-Steiner’s book is based on a “critical mass” (5) of heretofore neglected evidence, including both Hebrew rabbinic texts and Latin and vernacular sources, which he sensitively reads not only philologically, but also through sociological, anthropological, and psychological lenses. But the size and scope of this “critical mass” also constitutes the book’s one significant shortcoming. *On the Margins of a Minority* began life as *Harigim be’al korham: Meshuga’im u-mezora’im bi-hevrah ha-yehudit be-Europah bi-yeme ha-benayim* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar, 2008). The present English book is described as a translation of that work, but in his acknowledgments, Shoham-Steiner indicates that the original Hebrew text has in fact been “revised” (xii) and “adapted” (xi). It has also been quite dramatically abridged. The twelve chapters of the original Hebrew book are here condensed into eight (including the introduction and brief conclusion), and the selection criteria for which contents to translate and which to truncate or omit is not particularly clear. The original Hebrew version contains illustrations and discussion of visual evidence that do not appear in the English. Disappointingly, sections of the Hebrew book that reference and analyze important and provocative source texts have been left out as well. To provide just a few examples: *Harigim be’al korham* treats in detail a responsum of R. Eliezer b. Yoel of Bonn (Ravyah) regarding a man who sustained a degenerative injury to his genitals—a text that contains a direct and moving first-person narration of the lived experience of a disabled Jewish man (235–40 in the Hebrew version). This rich six-page discussion is shrunk down to a brief five-sentence digression in the present book’s conclusion (184). A lengthy discussion in the Hebrew original dealing with cases of suicide and their links to both “madness” and religious conversion (180 ff) is completely omitted in the English. As a result, a brief discussion of the link between “madness” and conversion (86–88) that could have been considerably strengthened through reference to the sources on suicide comes across as fragmentary. The English book’s introduction discusses the importance of utilizing unpublished and understudied medical texts and “folk remedies” (12–13)—but the sections of the Hebrew book (e.g. 243–44) that engaged in precisely that kind of analysis have been left out of the translation. These puzzling lacunae and elisions render the English version less comprehensive than it could have been. (Some of

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