French Philoso-Jews and Meta-Rabbis

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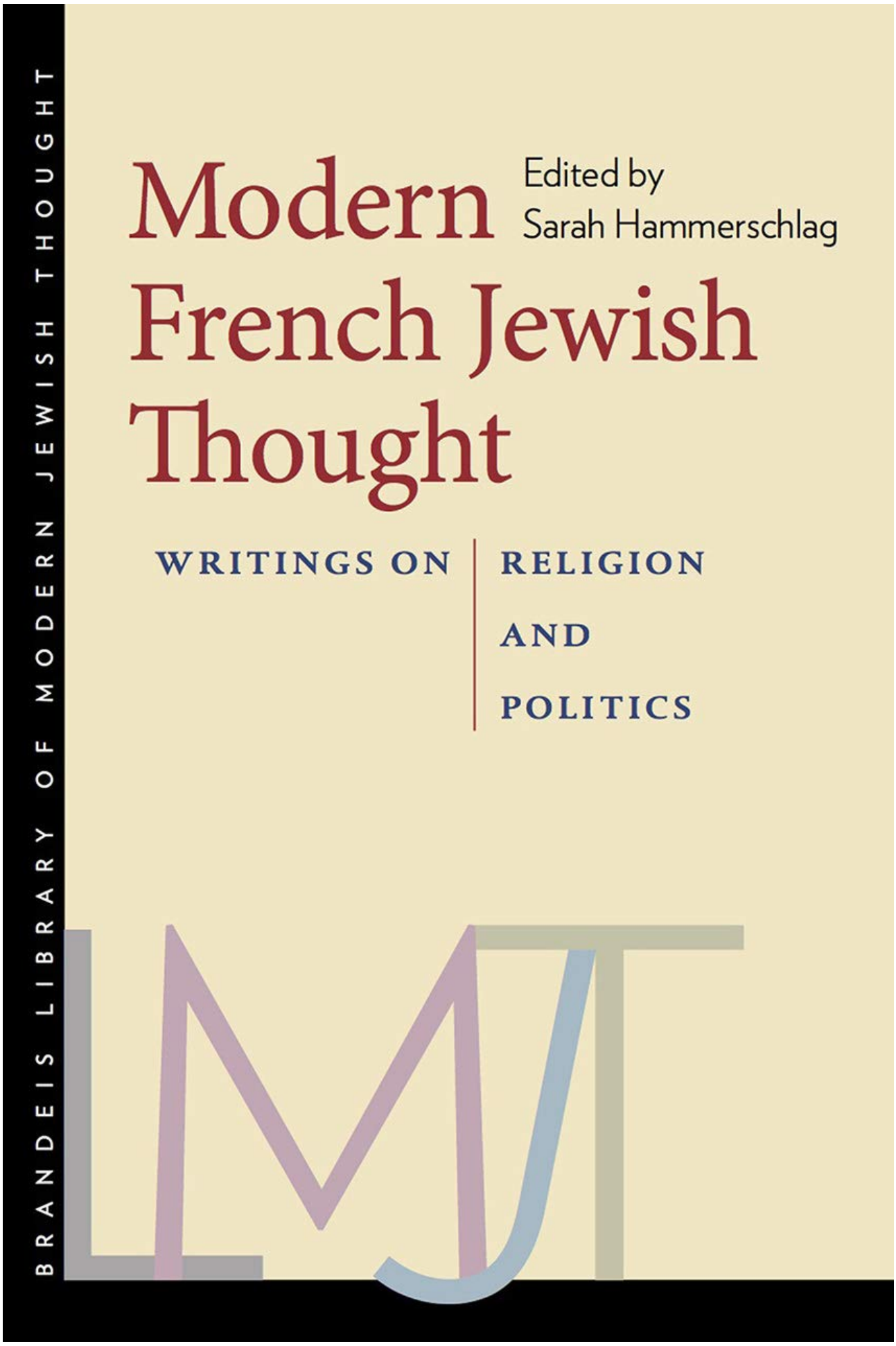
Sarah Hammerschlag, ed.: Modern French Jewish Thought: Writings on Religion and Politics.Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2018. xxvii + 268 pp. $26.00 (paper)



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In this anthology, Sarah Hammerschlag offers readers a dive into the deep reservoir of modern French Jewish thought. Her brilliantly curated book is presented in roughly chronological order, exploring Jewish philosophy and theology as a response to shifting contexts. For French Jews, these were shaped by the legacy of the French Revolution's emancipation of its Jewish citizens and the terms of the Napoleonic social contract established by the Assembly of Notables (1806), the convening of the "Sanhedrin" (1807), and Napoleon's new edicts in 1808, most importantly, the establishment of a central consistory that regulated French Judaism. This emancipation social contract traded equal rights as citizens in return for acculturation, "regeneration," or even complete assimilation. Two profound convulsions challenged the terms of Jewish equality: the Dreyfus affair and more perniciously the Vichy regime's racial laws. In the postwar period—the central focus of Hammerschlag's compilation—French Jewry was transformed by the memory of the Shoah; the decolonization of North Africa that led to a demographic transformation as a result of Jews migrating to the metropole from the Maghreb (often alongside Muslims); and events in Israel, especially the Six Day War and its aftermath. The ramifications of these processes continue to shape French Jewry and influence French Jewish thought.

Hammerschlag's short introduction sketches this history and sets up the anthology by setting out the two key themes that structure the texts she has chosen: the universal and the particular and identification and disidentification. In the first part of the book, "The *Israélite* of the Republic," a set of texts from 1860 to 1928 wrestle primarily with the terms of French identity as constituted by the legacy of the French Revolution. The *Israélite* of her section title refers to those Jews who accepted the stipulations of French acculturation, even as they insisted on the universal values of Jewish thought. The excerpts in the second section, "The Cataclysm and the Aftermath," were penned during the Holocaust or directly in response to it, indicating a rupture in the provisos of the French social contract. The third part, "Universal and Particular: The Jew and the Political Realm," is a neatly ordered but fraught dialogue about the significance of Zionism and the State of Israel. The last part, "Identification, Disidentification," contains a set of considerations on the meaning of community and belonging for Jewish philosophers in the post-Holocaust and in a postcolonial world.

The anthology's first contribution is to supplement the Germano-centrism of modern Jewish thought. The canon is often framed around German-speaking thinkers from Moses Mendelssohn to Franz Rosenzweig. In recent years Emmanuel Levinas has served as a postscript and continuation of this tradition. But the brilliant array of French Jewish thinkers assembled—often translated for the first time by Hammerschlag, regularly teaming with Beatrice Bourgogne—make evident that a parallel stream existed in France from the nineteenth century. Clearly influenced by their German counterparts engaged in the academic study of Judaism—the *Wissenschaft des Judentums—La science du judaïsme* emerged in France in the 1830s, led by leading Orientalists like Adolphe Franck and Salomon Munk. The volume begins with two excerpts by Joseph Salvador (chapter 1) and James Darmesteter (chapter 2) who were part of this pioneering cohort. I wish that Hammerschlag would have taught us more about this early history, since we are only offered a glimpse into developments in the nineteenth century. The other vanguard voices in part 1 include Bernard Lazare (chapter 4), the paragon of the conscious pariah so beautifully rendered by Hannah Arendt, and André Spire (chapter 5), along with Edmond Fleg (chapter 7).[1]

Not only are the individual thinkers that Hammerschlag's anthology elevates a deep and wide counterpoint to the German tradition, but she also has a historical plot to her tale. The Dark Years, as the French often refer to the period of collaboration with the Nazis, tore apart the identification of Jews with the French state. "There can be no doubt," writes Hammerschlag, "that the Second World War altered the terms of French Judaism, the self-understanding of French Jews, and the project and mission of the nation's Jewish organizations" (p. xv). A revival of Judaism ensued, she explains: "Already during the war a reorientation of Jewish life and identity began to take place at farm schools, in study circles, and in children's homes. In the spring of 1941, the Jewish poet Edmond Fleg and the leader of the Jewish scouting movement Robert Gamzon" were working to

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educate a new generation of Jewish thinkers to take on the mantle of vitalizing Judaism (p. xvi). Hammerschlag includes selections from some of these lesser-known figures like Gamzon (chapter 9) and Jacob Gordin (chapter 10). Their project influenced the postwar generation, alongside the well-known work of Levinas (chapter 11), as did the insights of thinkers like Vladimir Jankélévitch (chapter 12), who has received some recognition even by English-language scholars.[2] In short, Hammerschlag's story is that if the Jewish renaissance was pioneered in Germany in the interwar years, a blossoming across the Rhine took place in post-Holocaust Paris. *Tout court*, Paris was the continuation of Frankfurt and Berlin.

The problem with this story is that there was a Jewish renaissance in Paris in the interwar years in which a diasporic cultural Zionism played a central role. This is wholly underplayed by Hammerschlag. She alludes to it in her introduction to the excerpt on Fleg when she writes, "Along with André Spire, Jean-Richard Bloch, and Armand Lunel, he [Fleg] was part of a Jewish literary revival that blossomed in the decades between the Dreyfus Affair and the Second World War" (p. 54). This Jewish cultural efflorescence profoundly reshaped Jewish intellectual life before the rise of the Nazis. As Nadia Malinovich documents in her important study of this era: "French Jews began to question how they should define Jewishness in a society where Jews enjoyed full political equality. Writers who had previously given little thought to their Jewish identity began to explore biblical themes, traditional Jewish folklore, and issues of identity and assimilation in their novels, plays, and poetry. A plethora of journals focusing on Jewish religion, history, and culture came into being in France between 1900-1932, when a multitude of associations that emphasized Jewish distinctiveness—literary societies, youth groups, religious organizations—also formed. This blossoming of Jewish cultural life, which contemporaries referred to as a 'renaissance' or 'awakening', provides a particularly interesting vantage-point from which to explore the complex ways in which both 'Jewishness' and 'Frenchness' were renegotiated in the early twentieth century."[3] The French Jewish cultural renaissance of the early twentieth century is an area of exciting new work by Sally Charnow, building on the earlier studies of Malinovich and others, and deserves more attention.[4]

The failure to give full credence to the cultural revival already at work before the Holocaust perhaps results in some of Hammerschlag's errors. Fleg, for example, was not "born into an assimilated family in Geneva" as Hammerschlag notes (p. 54). Religious observance was an important part of his upbringing. In *Why I Am a Jew*, in an earlier part of the book from which she takes her excerpt from Fleg, he writes, "It seemed natural that my father should, in the morning, wrap himself in a shawl of white wool with black stripes, and should bind lengths of leather on his forehead and left arm, while he murmured words which were not words. I thought grace after a meal as necessary as the meal itself; and I felt no surprise when, on Friday evening, my mother stretched forth her fingers over the Sabbath candles, which shone through them and made them transparent."[5]
In *Why I Am a Jew*, Fleg narrates how his immersion into French culture led to his drift away from his Jewishness, until the anti-Semitism of the Dreyfus affair reawakened his return to Judaism, spurring his cultural Zionism, resulting in the key role he would come to play in helping to revive Jewish culture in France. This was all at work before the Holocaust.

The same is true for Albert Memmi, who Hammerschlag likewise suggests was awakened to his Jewish identity by the Vichy racial laws: "For some, like the writer Albert Memmi, the [Vichy racial] statutes motivated a reassertion of Jewish identity, if not in religious terms, then at least in political ones" (p. xv). Again, this narrative does not fit the facts. Memmi was raised on the Jewish cultural traditions of Tunis, went to study in a traditional religious school as a young boy, and became an avid member of Hashomer Hatzair as a young man. He never had to rediscover his Jewish identity provoked by the Vichy collaboration with the Nazis because his was a Jewish itinerary from the beginning. Suggesting otherwise would intimate a notion of Jewish identity as static, which is clearly belied by Hammerschlag's selections. In making these claims about the hard break occasioned by the rise of Hitlerism, Hammerschlag seems to generalize a narrative advanced by Samuel Moyn about Levinas that I have tried to show does not hold in his case either.[6]

There is no doubt that the Holocaust was a caesura in Jewish life that irrevocably altered how Jews came to understand themselves in its wake. But perhaps this was never more the case than in the argument that the Holocaust left a deeper imprint on individuals' lives than their early upbringing, which obviously was a formative lens through which many Jewish intellectuals made sense of the Shoah. A case that makes the point is Sarah Kofman. Hammerschlag includes an anguished excerpt from *Smothered Words* (1987) (chapter 13), Kofman's philosophical meditation on what it means to write and think after the disaster, including about being Jewish. It is layered by her own experience of coming to terms with the death of her father, Rabbi Berek Kofman, who was beaten unconscious and buried alive by a kapo in Auschwitz for refusing to work on Shabbat. Kofman offers more extended biographical reflections in *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* (1994), her tortured, short memoir of survival in hiding after her father was deported. She recounts how she survived living with a Christian woman, whom she calls Mémé, who clearly harbored anti-Jewish stereotypes but who nonetheless risked her own life to save Sarah and her mother, even as she introduced Sarah to all the temptations of forbidden French food and culture. *Rue Ordender, Rue Labat* reflects a young child wretched apart by her Jewishness and her desire to acculturate, which her survival depended on, even as she considers through suffocated words what her parents meant to her, and by extension the significance of her being Jewish.

It is fitting that the passages from Kofman close the set of selections included in part 2, "The Cataclysm and the Aftermath," which is opened by a letter from Simone Weil, "What Is a Jew" (chapter 8). Unlike Kofman, Weil did not even learn she was Jewish until she was ten, so assimilated were her parents and afraid that their children would suffer from anti-Semitism. One month after the Vichy racial laws were passed in October 1940, Weil wrote to Xavier Vallat, then Commissioner for Jewish Affairs, about why her teaching position was not renewed. Certainly Weil was aware of Vallat's anti-Semitism, evident in a notorious speech he gave in the Chamber of Deputies in June 1936 when socialist Léon Blum became France's first Jewish prime minister: "Your assumption of power, Mr. Prime Minister," Vallat bleated, "is unquestionably an historic event. For the first time, this old Gallo-Roman land will be governed by a Jew.... I must say out loud what everyone else is thinking to themselves—that in order to govern this peasant nation that is France, it is preferable to have someone whose origins, no matter how modest, disappear into the bowels of our soil, rather than a subtle Talmudist." After skeptically interrogating what it means to be a Jew in her epistle to Vallat, Weil insists that she should not be excluded from her teaching position, since "mine is the Christian, French, Greek tradition. The Hebraic tradition is alien to me, and no Statute can make it otherwise" (p. 65). It is little wonder then that her journey would take her ever deeper into Christian mysticism, even as the Nazi genocide unfolded across Europe.

Hammerschlag includes a penetrating musing on "the lost children of Judaism" (the title of chapter 19) like Weil by Jacqueline Mesnil-Amar. She writes beautifully and movingly about "those vagabonds, lost from Judaism, who, voluntarily or by circumstance have abandoned Israel, turned away: the rebels against the law, those ignorant of tradition" (p. 182). These lost children with their "extremely subtle and mixed message" represent "another sort of Judaism" exemplified by writers like Marcel Proust and Max Jacob (p. 183). Their inclusion highlights another contribution of the anthology: the capacious set of voices that the volume consciously includes, broadening the contours of modern Jewish thought.

The section titled "Identification, Disidentification" which opens with Mesnil-Amar closes with an excerpt from an article by Stéphane Mosès, "Normative Modernity and Critical Modernity" (chapter 24). Mosès was an innovative interpreter of Rosenzweig and Walter Benjamin among other Weimar-period German Jewish thinkers and "an important participant in its postwar French sequel: *l'école juive de Paris*, as Emmanuel Levinas dubbed it" (p. 245). The underlined descriptor clearly indicates another important contribution of this volume—spotlighting as it does the depth of post-Holocaust French Jewish thought as a continuation of the highpoint of German Jewish philosophy.

Mosès's essay, which closes the book, brings together the various contributions of the volume. In it, he argues for a normative modern tradition that includes "Emmanuel Levinas but also Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig" (p. 246). Mosès then sketches the contours of a "*critical modernity*" that is "represented by authors such as Benjamin, Kafka, Celan, Arendt, Jabès and in a certain measure, Scholem, and much later Jacques Derrida." For Mosès, these Jewish thinkers, in Arendt's words, believe "the thread of tradition is broken," and "we cannot reconnect it." Mosès continues: there is only "a *shattered* past that is no longer capable of inspiring in us judgments of evident value. In this broken time that expresses the discontinuity of the past, the contents of faith—I speak now of the Jewish faith—are no longer audible for us; they no longer correspond to any experience today" (p. 247). In addition to the selection from Derrida (chapter 23), the longest in the book, one could also include the snippets from Hélène Cixous (chapter 22), along with Alain Finkielkraut's agonized wrestling with the possibility of an authentic Jewishness after the Shoah in the excerpt from *The Imaginary Jew* (chapter 21), as a part of this critical tradition that Hammerschlag clearly wants to add to the canon of modern Jewish thought. Léon Ashkénazi in "Tradition and Modernity" (chapter 20), on the other hand, provides an argument linking normative modernity back to "the Bible as the identity card of Hebrews.... We study it to know what we believe in.... afterward, one studies the books that speak about it. This is the Jewish tradition as it has been for centuries" (p. 196).

The gamut of debate in *Modern French Jewish Thought* is not only about the ramifications of Jewish thought across time but also about the meaning of space, specifically about Zionism. Memmi lays the groundwork for an argument that Zionism emerges from the experience of Jews as a colonized people (chapter 14). He writes, "We are, in short, the forsaken as far as history is concerned. We would like to go our way unnoticed: but history in doing without us, also frequently acts against us. Everything happens as though the Jew offered himself as an expiatory victim, specially marked out for the meager imagination of executioners, dictators and politicians" (p. 136). For Memmi, the State of Israel is consequently necessary as a safe haven but also as a crucible for forging new highpoints in Jewish culture.

Richard Marienstras in "The Jews of the Diaspora, or the Vocation of a Minority" (chapter 15) demurs. Not only does the Jewish diaspora show that "there are many ways of assuming and creating the Jewish destiny," but diasporism is also necessary as part of a struggle against "the State as it exists today ... a State that transforms citizens into subjects, producers into cogwheels, public servants into agents of power, and the majority culture into an instrument of propaganda and domination" (pp. 145, 150). With the two furthest points on the spectrum charted, there is also a chapter titled "The Jewish Dimension of Space: Zionism" (chapter 16) by André Neher and another titled "Jerusalem" (chapter 17) by Henri Atlan. Finally, there is also a complicated critique of universalism by Shmuel Trigano (chapter 18). Along the way, Trigano manages to slam the neo-Pauline Judeophobia of Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben, while still affirming "the unity of humanity" our "infinite and irreducible plurality" and the "ingathering in a unique place," all in a few pages (p. 178).

While Hammerschlag promises that the anthology is no documentary reader, there are selections that do not meet the yardstick of what might be included in a course on modern Jewish thought except to provide context. Zadoc Kahn's "Speech on the Acceptance of His Position as Chief Rabbi of France" (chapter 3) or Sylvain Levi's essay "Alliance Israélite Universelle" (chapter 6) would be examples. But these are quibbles with a fabulously rendered anthology that can launch readers into the brilliance of modern French Jewish thought, where a captivating universe of new thinkers remains to be discovered for many English readers, students, and more seasoned scholars alike.

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