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Amit, Gish. *Eḵs libris: hiṣṭoryah shel gezel, shimur ve-nikus ba-Sifriyah ha-le'umit bi-Yerushalayim (Ex Libris: Chronicles of Theft, Preservation, and Appropriating at the Jewish National Library)*. Yerushalayim: Mekhon Van Lir bi-Yerushalayim, 2014. 220 p., 79 New Israeli Shekel. ISBN 9789650207069. [Hebrew]

“There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism,” Walter Benjamin famously declared (Benjamin 1968 [1940], 262). Chronicling the looting, appropriation, and preservation of books and manuscripts that came to enrich Jerusalem’s Jewish National and University Library (JNUL) collections during pre-statehood and early statehood years, Gish Amit’s important, bold and deeply researched book, *Ex Libris*, provides an upsetting demonstration of Benjamin’s dictum. Originating as the author’s Ph.D. dissertation at the Department of Hebrew Literature at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev and based on extensive archival research and oral history, the book tells not one but three separate stories: the first chronicles the process by which heirless Jewish books and manuscripts, which had been confiscated by the Nazis and later recovered in postwar Germany by the Allies and various Jewish organizations, found their way to the stacks of the JNUL¹ (chapter 1); the second is the story of approximately 70,000 books looted from Palestinian homes and educational institutions during the 1948 War and its immediate aftermath (chapter 2); and the third is the story of the confiscation and theft of Torah scrolls, Judaica ornaments, rare books, and manuscripts belonging to Yemenite Jews in 1949–1950 (chapter 3).

It is noteworthy that some of the disquieting findings presented in chapter 2 provided the empirical foundation for the 2012 documentary *The Great Book Robbery* (Brunner 2012). The film, which drew relatively little attention outside Israel, sought to unearth the spine-chilling story concealed in the dozens of volumes marked to this day with the call number “AP”—a euphemistic acronym standing for “Absentee Property”—in Israel’s national library’s book catalog. Put together, the film and the book offer an indispensable and highly unflattering portrait of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and JNUL, the two main institutions invested in obfuscating the unlawful appropriation of cultural treasures in the guise of scientific research and preservation. Ultimately, they provide a fiery denunciation of the prejudices and practices involved in Israeli “nation-building”. But unlike the film, the book offers also two other stories, and it is in the tying of the three affairs together, I would argue, that *Ex Libris* makes a daring, yet by no means problem-free move. Amit’s book expounds the dialectical dynamic by which Zionism appropriated the cultural inheritance of the three cultures it sought to silence and negate, namely the “Galutish” tradition of Jewish life in the Diaspora, the indigenous Palestinian culture, and that of the “Oriental” Jews originating from Arab and Islamic countries (9–10, 20–25, and *passim*).

¹ The library was renamed in 2008 and is known today as the National Library of Israel (NLI).

Furthermore, it reveals how often looting, confiscation, unlawful appropriation, and crude theft were conducted under the guise of cultural rescue, relief, and preservation. Strikingly, but not coincidentally, all three cases took place almost simultaneously, often involving the same institutions and individuals. *Ex Libris* thus provides a stark reminder that when artifacts of cultural heritage are involved, binary dichotomies separating expropriation from preservation quickly collapse (p. 13). Yet at the same time, *Ex Libris* also blurs a crucial distinction separating appropriation achieved through the looting of cultural assets from successorship and, in particular, the *lex specialis* of restitution of heirless cultural property.

Amit is at his best in offering a meticulously researched analysis of the changing historical contexts in which Palestinian books and manuscripts were gathered and ultimately appropriated, sold, or destroyed. The collection phase took place between May 1948 and late February 1949, as JNUL staff were sent to rescue from plunder and destruction books and manuscripts left in schools, churches, and Palestinian houses in Western Jerusalem, primarily Kaṭamon and Talbiyeh, the neighborhoods which had attracted the educated, mainly Christian, Palestinian haute bourgeoisie. The operation resulted in a collection of about 30,000 books, newspapers, periodicals, and manuscripts, mostly in Arabic, though some are written in English, French, German, and Italian, testifying to the Europeanized high culture of the educated Palestinian elite prior to 1948. Another substantial batch, consisting of approximately 40,000 books, arrived in later months, assembled from various educational institutions spread around the country, primarily from the mixed cities of Haifa, Tiberias, and Jaffa. Amit's basic argument rests on a solid dialectic framework. The institutional plunder, he shows, saved the books from doom: had they not been collected, they would have most likely disappeared or been destroyed without leaving a trace (p. 92). Nor were these acts—dubbed in internal reports and memoranda as attempts to “rescue book for their own sake and for the sole purpose of saving cultural property from loss and oblivion” (p. 79)—concealed in any way. A report issued by the JNUL in March 1949 provided the details of sixty book owners (some were foreign citizens and institutes, most were Palestinians); the list, Amit speculates, may have had to do with the readiness of Israeli officials to compensate the rightful owners for their lost property (pp. 99–100). During these initial phases, Curt David Wormann, JNUL's director, alongside many members of his staff, considered the library a temporary custodian, providing shelter for the books until they were returned to their rightful owners (pp. 87–88, 122).

A decisive shift took place, however, sometime during the 1960s, when the names of the owners were removed from the print catalog and the books were marked as “AP” (p. 99). Concurrently, the Israeli press, which in 1948–1949 had very few reservations preventing it from discussing and condemning the looting of private property by soldiers and civilians, lost interest in the topic. The result, Amit shows, was a major transformation: the original owners of the books were erased from memory, turning the JNUL from a temporary custodian to a rightful owner of the treasures, and removing the possibility of future indemnity. Using oral testimonies, Amit reveals a tension between the perception and memory of individual staff members working at the library and the Israeli institutional narrative portraying the collection of the books as an act of grace and rescue from annihilation. He also follows the fate of the books that did not end up in the

JNUL stacks: more than 26,000 of them were shredded in 1957, nine years after their collection, following the order of the Custodian of Absentee Property (which found their contents objectionable and potentially detrimental); many others were sold as teaching materials to Israeli-Arab schools during the early 1950s. Reading this chapter one is reminded of Charles Tilly's famous description of state making as organized crime (Tilly 1985). As the state's legal mechanisms kicked in—institutionalizing the act of appropriation and providing the necessary aura of legitimacy—it became easier to disguise this kleptocracy. Correspondingly, the former discursive mechanism, justifying the appropriation as an act of “recovery”, “rescue”, and “preservation”, was tuned down; suppression of memory arose in its place (pp. 82–87).

Read against the backdrop of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the wars of memory and forgetfulness surrounding the 1948 War, there is something unique in the story of these books. After almost seven decades, most of the physical remains of war, conflict, and ideological struggle have been removed from the Israeli landscape, leaving the Palestinian *Nakba* (in Arabic: disaster) hidden from sight. Indeed, as Israeli scholars showed, collective amnesia was achieved by re-naming sites and producing a new, imagined Israeli sovereign geography, and through destruction of buildings and other physical traces of past inhabitants (Golan 2001; Benvenisti 2000; Weiss 2011). These means seemed to be not less effective than using evasive “official” historical narratives, using slippery phrasings and leaving out uncomfortable truths. Self-inflicted censorship—occasionally subverted by readings of S. Yizhar's *Hirbet Hiz'ah*, which reminded Israelis of the “burn-burst-capture-upload-and-transfer” operations of the 1948 War (Yizhar 2008 [1949], 34)—completed the process of removal from the collective memory. Amit deserves credit for revealing this case and reminding us that ivory tower institutes are not immune from the diseases common in the surrounding society. An attentive cultural anthropologist, he shows how the books, the physical objects marked as “AP” in the library stacks, become strange, unintended monuments of that Palestinian catastrophe.

No less staggering, yet far less complete, is Amit's account of the appropriation of the Judaica and Hebraica owned by Yemenite Jewish newcomers. Alarming complaints about theft and extortion of valuable cultural artifacts owned by immigrants began appearing in 1949, including reports of acts of extortion by Israeli emissaries sent to transit camps in Yemen to help in preparation for the mass exodus. The plundering, it seems, was not carried out systematically as in the case of Palestinian property, though firm evidence is all too scarce, and the entire affair, never investigated properly by the Israeli authorities, remains enigmatic to this day. Amit shares with his readers some of these fragments. Setting up book repositories in several locations in late 1950 under the auspices of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) does not seem to have put an end to the mysterious disappearance of the books, especially after unverified stories about a fire that supposedly broke out at one of the storage houses in Jaffa provided an excuse for not handing back valuable manuscripts and books to owners and representatives of the community. Once some of the books, allegedly destroyed by a fire, surfaced in a private Jerusalem bookstore, it was hard not to cast doubt on the motives and modes of conduct of the relief agency and its representatives. The sources from which the Ben Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East acquired numerous books and manuscripts originating in Yemen

between 1967 and 1980 remains equally opaque (pp. 139–140). The same applies to the JNUL’s “Eilat collection,” consisting of 430 assorted manuscripts (pp. 161–162). There is more than one smoking gun in the room, no doubt, but very little firm evidence allowing the detective to reconstruct the full sequence of events leading up to the crime. But such a framing of events bothers Amit, who writes empathically: “In a discourse that relies heavily on the legal paradigm—with its claim to objectivity and the decisive weight it places on evidence and its reliability—there remains no room for a language of pain and loss, for private and personal memories, for the intimate attachment of humans to the fruits of their creative and scholarly work” (p. 162). As with the controversial kidnapping of Yemenite children, the missing Yemenite books affair, he concludes, will forever remain an unresolved puzzle, especially given the fact that valuable archival material has been destroyed over the years, even during the 1990s, before the State Commission of Inquiry summoned to investigate the kidnapping allegations could examine it.

In a strikingly similar fashion, in this case again what remains are only the books themselves, functioning as cryptic artifacts of repressed memory. What saved these objects from oblivion, Amit argues, is the zeal of the close-knit, predominantly Ashkenazi intellectual circle of Zionist Orientalists, ethnographers, sociologists and historians who studied the diaspora life that Zionism itself sought (quite successfully) to negate. Much of the third chapter, then, is dedicated to a reconstruction of the underlying ideological and scientific premises that guided the investigations conducted by these scholars. Regrettably, however, this pushes Amit to adopt the very same quasi-legalistic, trial-like tone he himself finds so alienating. Renowned figures put on trial include Israel’s second President Itzhak Ben-Zvi, who devoted much time to studying ancient Jewish communities in the land of Israel, Asia and Africa; the sociologist Aryeh Tartakower, who envisaged the establishment of a research institute dedicated to the study of Diaspora Jews; and the father of Genizah scholarship, Shlomo Dov Goitein, who was fascinated by Yemenite Jews, whom he considered living specimens continuing ancient traditions that had been eradicated elsewhere. Relying on the recent work of Noah Gerber (2009), Amit shows how the Eurocentric scholarly zeal originating in the German *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, when combined with Zionist paternalism and a colonial prism, helped reify the Yemenites, who were asked to play the role of wild and exotic representatives of an ancient heritage preserved in a time capsule in the Diaspora (a theme further developed by Gerber in 2012). This outlook, Amit suggests, was a source of tragedy for the Yemenites as individuals but, at the same time, and paradoxically, the main drive behind the preservation of their books and manuscripts. We are back to dialectics, then. Adding a crucial synoptic perspective, he reminds us that the disappearance of valuable cultural assets in Israel during the early 1950s was in many ways but the sad concluding episode to a daunting, two centuries long tale of theft and unlawful confiscation of the cultural objects of the community by Western explorers and ethnographers, many of whom were Jews, who believed they were studying members of the passive and unresponsive East incapable of cherishing and appreciating the scientific value of the treasures they owned. The script played out in Israel in 1949–1952, in other words, was written elsewhere and much earlier.

In contrast to these two chapters, I found the first, dealing with the post-Holocaust restitution of books, to be the weakest in the book. Much has been said and written on the subject through-

out the years, especially in recent years, as a heterogeneous group of historians and librarians from Israel, Germany, the United States, and Canada have begun using new archival materials to reconstruct the convoluted story of the travel of Jewish knowledge after 1945. The legal and bureaucratic procedures established to manage the redistribution of immovable Jewish property after the war had to come to terms with a legally unprecedented case of heirless property and of communities demanding to be recognized as heirs, which makes this case categorically different from the other two. It would be naïve to suggest, of course, that such procedures were developed—nay, could be developed—in a legalistic vacuum, divorced from ideology and politics. Not surprisingly, the same applies to the heated controversies surrounding the question of what should be done with the thousands of heirless books, manuscripts, and archival materials looted by the German army or Nazi government that the Allies recovered in occupied Germany. The rescued materials were housed in various collecting points scattered outside the Russian Occupation zone (primarily in the American sector, alongside smaller caches of material in the French and British zones). As far as the American authorities were concerned, solving this problem was the assignment handed over to the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction Inc. (JCR), the cultural arm of The Jewish Restitution Successor Organization (JRSO), established in spring 1947 to coordinate this effort. The JCR was not the owner so much as an *ad hoc* custodian of cultural items the legal owners of which could not be located. In a bitter irony, what made the rescue and restitution of these cultural artifacts possible were the systematic efforts of infamous Nazi institutes—such as the *Institut zur Erforschung der Judenfrage* (Institute for Research of the Jewish Question) in Frankfurt—to collect and preserve the relics of what was deemed the soon-to-be-extinct Jewish culture. The Offenbach Archival Depot, set across the river from Frankfurt, became the main collection point, providing a temporary shelter to approximately two million books previously owned by Jews. Hannah Arendt, in charge of preparing detailed inventory lists of the remaining treasures, did not fail to acknowledge that in the gruesome Nazi imagination genocide and libricide were not incompatible with a museum-like yearning to preserve Jewish cultural artifacts for posterity. (This, by the way, did not prevent Arendt from citing the studies of Walter Frank, the anti-Semitic director of the notorious institute, in her *Origins of Totalitarianism* [1951].) Arendt was not the only famed name in the story. Indeed, part of what has drawn increasing scholarly attention to this affair are the names of high-profile individuals involved in the rescue operation, shedding light on a fascinating, yet, until recently, little known chapter in Jewish intellectual history. The distinguished list includes seminal scholars such as the Columbia historian Salo W. Baron, the JCR executive director who hired Arendt to serve as the organization’s executive secretary; the Oxford historian Cecil Roth, who tried (mostly in vain) to represent the interests of the Anglo-Jewish community in the proceedings; and the Kabbalah scholar Gershom (Gerhard) Scholem, who worked in conjunction with the JCR in Europe and functioned as a delegate of *Va’ad otsrot ha-golah* (literally: Treasures of Exile Committee; The Diaspora Treasures), a Hebrew University committee established as early as May 1945 by Scholem, S. H. Bergman, Martin Buber, Judah Leon Magnes, Ben-Zion Dinaburg (Dinur) and others, advocating for the transfer of books to the Hebrew University and the JNUL.

The recent publication of the Arendt-Scholem correspondence (Arendt and Scholem 2010) has allowed scholars to add a personal angle to the story. Indeed, unlike dry office memoranda and institutional dispatches, such “ego documents” reveal how emotionally charged were these de-

bates. No less important than the interpersonal ties and conflicts, the struggles over communal and institutional succession were inadvertently tied to the innovative juridical and political vocabulary that was developed to support the demand that the Jewish people as a whole would serve as successor to this heirless property. The emergence of the so-called “*Gemeinde* problem” (community problem)—i.e., how to bequeath property previously owned by individuals to successive communities—became much more than a legal problem (for discussion see Takei 2002; Diner 2015, 111–132). These probing dilemmas provide the subtext to much of the Arendt-Scholem exchanges, in which Scholem constantly insisted that Jerusalem should be given the prerogative to determine the fate of the books, in particular of items of which only one copy existed, and to archival material that was “of general Jewish historical significance.” Undoubtedly, underlying these demands was Scholem’s ardent belief in Jerusalem as the undisputed spiritual center of Jewish life.

Much of Amit’s discussion is built on this rich body of secondary literature, which he combines with limited new archival research. He provides an interesting account of *Va’ad otsrot ha-golah*’s activities from its inception up to 1952, though far less detailed than the account offered by Dov Schidorsky, who authored the semi-official history of the committee (Schidorsky 2008). Amit unveils the underlying, often unspoken assumptions that informed the Zionist vision of the *Va’ad* members, which, he argues, motivated them in working to prevent the rehabilitation of Jewish life in the Diaspora in general and Germany in particular. In a well-rehearsed and well-executed plan, they made Jerusalem’s academic elite the national custodian of Jewish life by actively preventing the possibility of reviving Jewish cultural life outside the Jewish state. Grippled by Scholem and Arendt’s powerful personalities, Amit does not miss the opportunity to craft a narrative of the ambivalent relationship between these two iconic German-Jewish thinkers—producing at times, it must be said, an overly dramatic and also overly long story that restates and reiterates well-known facts of only incidental relevance to his argument (pp. 59–72). Empirically, the chapter is also uneven. Amit has made very good use of archival collections unearthed in Jerusalem, in particular the JNUL archive, yet unfortunately did not consult any major archive outside Israel (e.g. The Jewish Restitution Successor Organization [JRSO] archive at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York, Hannah Arendt’s papers at the Library of Congress, and Salo W. Baron Papers at Stanford University, which includes the fullest account of the JCR’s office memoranda). Furthermore, Amit appears unfamiliar with, or at least does not make use of, the excellent studies produced by Dana Herman (2008) and Elisabeth Gallas (2013), who both studied the JCR’s activities in great detail, and the major recent anthologies tackling the myriad debates on restitution, robbery and memory, such as Dean, Goschler and Ther’s *Robbery and Restitution* (2007) and Diner and Wunberg’s *Restitution and Memory* (2007). Not surprisingly, perhaps, I was not fully convinced by all of Amit’s arguments at this point in his book: Arendt’s willingness to collaborate with Scholem and to sympathize with her Zionist colleagues’ demands, Amit states, provides a decisive indication that she had internalized similar “Aḥad Ha’amian” views (p. 70), an overstatement that seems to be at odds with her famous, oft-quoted rebuttal of political Zionism from a few years earlier. Ascribing a dogmatic “negation of exile” attitude to a Jewish thinker who not only decided to live in the Diaspora, but also worked closely with Baron, the arch-critic of the “lachrymose” reading of Jewish history, and sang hymns of praise to her new adopted home, the American republic, seems to require interpretive acrobatics that are more

impressive than convincing. Amit also argues that, their interpersonal enmity notwithstanding, ultimately both Arendt and Scholem were busy underscoring an image of themselves as “Western”, highlighting the demarcation lines separating them from the “Jews of the East”, a label signifying after 1948 not only the Jews of Eastern Europe but also the “masses” of “Oriental” and “Asiatic” Jews who immigrated to Israel from Arab lands (p. 71). This reading is interesting, and also plausible, yet insufficiently argued: the only textual evidence provided by Amit is based on a letter Arendt produced much later, during the weeks she attended the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, revealing that in addition to snubbing Gideon Hausner, the *Ostjude* prosecutor, Arendt was also utterly disgusted by Mizrahi Jews.

There is also a more fundamental problem with Amit’s discussion of the JCR’s activities. His eagerness to present the entire restitution effort as a project hijacked and monopolized by Zionists involves a somewhat selective use of the available data and a reliance on a highly problematic conceptual framework that ignores the crucial distinction between the succession and restitution of *heirless* books, on the one hand, and unlawful *appropriation and confiscation* of cultural objects from their rightful owners on the other. Empirical hairsplitting first: by the end of its operations in 1951–1952, the JCR had redistributed almost 440,000 books to major libraries and museums inside and outside Israel. A total of 85% of the property was sent to Israel *and* the United States and Canada, with a slight advantage to Jerusalem, which received 191,423 books (43% of the cultural property), in comparison to 169,013 books (38%) sent to the United States and Canada (p. 76). Next to JNUL and the Bezalel School (now Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design) in Jerusalem, the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, as well as many other North American institutes of higher learning were benefactors of the JCR’s redistribution project. It is inaccurate, therefore, to dub this a Zionist success story. The geographic redistribution of the books reflects the larger process of reorganization of Jewish intellectual life after 1945 in relation to two main geographical poles—the one English-speaking, the other Hebrew-speaking, with the great hollow between them reflecting the almost complete disappearance of viable Jewish cultural life in Eastern and Central Europe, the beating heart of prewar Jewish communal life. Was this a “fair and just” compensation? Given the fact that the rightful owners of these objects had been annihilated, the very question of restitution in this case becomes inextricably linked to larger moral, legal, and political questions, which Amit avoids discussing, and to the type of post-Holocaust “ambiguous semantics,” to borrow Dan Diner’s term, that emerged in order to justify and conceptualize modern Jewish politics (Diner 2008). Juxtaposing this whole affair with the unlawful appropriation of cultural goods belonging to Yemenites and Palestinians—living, known owners—reveals a fundamentally different dynamic that Amit prefers not to discuss. He divorces the entire affair from its larger European and American contexts and turns it into an intra-Zionist affair, controlled by a few authoritarian *Yekke* professors in Jerusalem. To be sure, like Harvard or Oxbridge-bashing, there is nothing intrinsically wrong in deflating the air of elitist institutes and their smug academics. Yet in this case, Amit’s argument stands on clay feet.

In conclusion, this just-noted conceptual deficiency notwithstanding, Amit deserves much praise for authoring a book that is both acute in observation and innovative in its exploration of archives.

It is a study that shows exceptionally well the link between two apparently opposite but actually interconnected discursive mechanisms involved in the bureaucratization of memory and inherent to the very type of “scientific” argument applied to justify the mandate given to institutes dealing with cultural objects of past communities. The first mechanism involves assigning the research institute the role of cultural inheritor, responsible not only for maintaining and studying cultural relics but also for carrying them forward into the future. The institute thereby either becomes a mausoleum of an extinct culture or, alternatively, the embodiment of an imagined historical continuation that is in charge of introducing this cultural legacy to the present. The other mechanism involves concealment and forgetfulness, marginalization of the “traumatic episodes”, blurring of the names and faces of the individuals who stood behind the physical objects, and silencing of the questionable activities involved in cultural appropriation and looting. It is the remarkable demonstration of Ernest Renan’s insightful comment that no less than collective memory, it is forgetting that provides an essential factor in the creation of a nation (Renan 1992 [1882]). What ultimately bothers Amit is this forgetfulness, which, he argues, was the price paid for Israeli “nation-building”. The story of the lost cultural treasures, he concludes, can only be properly told and understood when the parameters of discourse informed by what he sees as Zionist and Orientalist categories of knowledge are redefined.

For those accustomed to consume triumphalist accounts of the history of Zionism, this book will be a disturbing read. Prosecutorial narratives can be equally dogmatic, no doubt, and Amit could have been more nuanced at times. Yet his overall project, especially given the times of increasing censorship, silencing, and suppression of dissenting voices that we live in, is an urgent reminder of the importance and moral duty of historians to reconstruct the past, including the suppressed, uncomfortable episodes it conceals.

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