

4-15-2014

Encyclopaedia Judaica. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, editors. 2nd edition. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. 22 vols. (18,015 pp.). ISBN 978-0-02-865928-2. \$2,263. Electronic version published by Gale Cengage Learning (Gale Virtual Reference Library). ISBN 978-0-02-866097-4.

Faith Jones

New Westminster Public Library, Vancouver, BC, faithjones@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ajlpublishing.org/jl>

 Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Information Literacy Commons](#), [Jewish Studies Commons](#), [Other German Language and Literature Commons](#), [Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jones, Faith. 2009. "Encyclopaedia Judaica. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, editors. 2nd edition. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. 22 vols. (18,015 pp.). ISBN 978-0-02-865928-2. \$2,263. Electronic version published by Gale Cengage Learning (Gale Virtual Reference Library). ISBN 978-0-02-866097-4.." *Judaica Librarianship* 15: 41-45. doi:[10.14263/2330-2976.1041](https://doi.org/10.14263/2330-2976.1041).

One begins to recognize the true breadth of the encyclopedia while browsing through these long, topically arranged lists of articles. The editors did not skimp on a reasonably good depth in major articles, nor did they compromise on a maximum variety of topics.

The more I read in this encyclopedia, the more I appreciate the quality and wide range of material, as well as the careful editorial work. The editor, Gershon Hundert (professor of history and Jewish Studies at McGill University, in Montreal), deserves special praise for the outstanding quality of the editing. I have already mentioned the thoroughness of coverage and the quality of writing and translating. The overall consistency that results is quite unusual for an encyclopedia of such scope and size. It is difficult to even imagine the amount of work that must have been involved in the editing.

This encyclopedia belongs in the library of any university that teaches Jewish Studies or European history and culture. It also belongs in any synagogue and day school library.

Encyclopaedia Judaica. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, editors. 2nd edition. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. 22 vols. (18,015 pp.). ISBN 978-0-02-865928-2. \$2,263.00.*

Electronic version published by Gale Cengage Learning (Gale Virtual Reference Library). ISBN 978-0-02-866097-4. From the Gale Cengage website: "Pricing for eBooks depends upon your account type and population served" (<http://www.gale.cengage.com/servlet/ItemDetailServlet?region=9&imprint=000&cf=e&titleCode=&type=4&id=227970>; accessed September 20, 2009).

Reviewed by Faith Jones, New Westminster Public Library, Vancouver, BC

WOMEN

I wanted to approach the coverage of women in the new *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (EJ2) from several angles. Most obviously, I wondered which specific women are included and whether the criteria for their inclusion are the same as those for men. For

example, what is the fame threshold? Do minor men rate entries while women have to be much better known to be included? Are the entries for women as long and thorough as those for men? Are their achievements fairly judged and included, whether they occur in realms of importance to men or not? Another consideration is whether entries on groups of women and phenomena related to women are included, and how thoroughly. For example, do the traditions specific to women's religious observance merit entries? We must also ask whether entries not specific to women have succeeded in incorporating women's experiences, concerns, achievements, innovations, disruptions, and other specific interventions in Jewish culture and the world at large.

I have concluded that in some of these areas the revisions and new material are superb, while in others the material is mired in the past. Where women are concerned, the encyclopedia has almost a split personality.

I was favorably impressed by the inclusion of many more women than previously and by the broadening of criteria to acknowledge women's areas of expertise as equally worthy of consideration. I found many women whom I did not expect to see. Historical female figures have been added to very good effect, and there are new entries for contemporary women artists, writers, scientists, intellectuals, and public figures. But there are some strange tendencies even here. Rebecca Margolis, a professor at the University of Ottawa, mentioned to me recently that she had looked up several women writers and found that their relationships to famous men were always mentioned, but the same does not apply to famous men and their relationships to women. I tried it myself. Sometimes there were two-way cross-references (see, for example, the Yiddish authors Esther Shumiatcher-Hirschbein and Peretz Hirschbein). But more often, I found, Dr. Margolis was right. Looking at Rose Schneiderman (an American labor leader) I read that she was the sister of Harry Schneiderman. I had never heard of him. His entry does not mention his relationship to Rose. Again, I found Anna Margolin's relationship with Reuben Iceland/Ayzland (both were American Yiddish authors) is mentioned, but his entry does not mention her. What is particularly galling in both these cases is that the woman involved is more significant than the man. Yet, the idea that a man could be influenced by a woman, that his relationship to her might be germane to an

* Editor's note: We are pleased to present the first in a projected series of reviews of topics that are treated in the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.

understanding of his ideas and social milieu, still seems to be difficult to grasp.

I should also mention that the entry on Margolin misleadingly describes her as married to Iceland. This attitude needs to be overcome. Women in earlier eras were not uniformly respectable matrons. This particular woman was a complete Bohemian and probably never married two of the three men she lived with for extended periods. Iceland remained married to another woman throughout his thirty-year relationship with Margolin. Making earlier generations of women into prim representatives of normative family relationships is a distortion of the historical record. The choices of historical Jewish women should be given the same recognition and respect as our own today.

There is no doubt that the coverage of individual women is greatly expanded and improved from the previous edition. There are hundreds of new entries, although many of them are very brief. This can in some cases be attributed to the lack of information on many historical women. There is still much work to be done uncovering these histories. But it also seemed to me that women of some significance are given short shrift. Regina Jonas, who since the last edition of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* has been rediscovered as likely the world's first woman rabbi, should merit more than a few hundred words. And some important women did not make the cut. I had hoped to find Yiddish writer Fradl Shtok, if only to recall her story—for years she was thought to be dead, but then she sent in some stories to the *Forverts*, if memory serves—but she's not there.

In the realm of the culture of women, I found much to my liking. There is a delightful new entry for cookbooks. Sadly, the women who wrote the great Jewish cookbooks do not rate entries of their own. I cannot think of a male-authored genre in which the author is considered so insignificant. In other areas, women fare somewhat better. An exciting new entry on *firzogerins* (prayer leaders) references several specific women who are separately described. There are wonderful new entries on birth, *tkhines*, and the rebbetzin, and a very necessary article on domestic violence. I was particularly pleased to see an entry on lesbianism. Not only are the religious strictures surrounding lesbians quite different from those for gay men, but the lesbian movement is an area in which Jewish women have been extremely active and prominent in the non-Jewish world.

Oddly, the entry on the family is unchanged since the previous edition. This might explain why

it only covers the most traditional forms of family organization, and includes such oddball statements as “The powerful bond which united parents and children in one bond with mutual responsibilities and mutual consideration made it a bulwark of Judaism able to withstand all stresses from without and from within.” Oh, indeed? And what about the entry on domestic violence? But the entry on domestic violence is not even cross-referenced from the entry on the family; neither is it cross-referenced from the entry on marriage. There is no separate entry for weddings: that information is stuck in the marriage entry. But as anyone who has actually been married can tell you, a marriage is not the same as a wedding: sometimes they bear no relationship to each other. The entry on parent and child has been updated to include recent Israeli law, but with no apparent indication that Jewish women may have something to contribute to the debates on both rabbinic and social norms regarding the rights of children and mothers. Of the entries on family relationships, only the entry on the Jewish American family seems to have been thoroughly rethought in the light of feminist scholarship.

In fact, this last issue seems to me to be the cause of the biggest disappointment with regard to the revisions to the encyclopedia. There are numerous entries where women have been shoehorned in, usually given a separate sub-entry, as if they are irrelevant to the topic in general. Meanwhile, the rest of the entry remains unchanged, or at least unaffected by the new information about women. This has at times bizarre results. Consider the entry on rabbis and the rabbinate. A fair way through this long entry we read, “The modern rabbi tends to model himself after the paradigm (and often the founders) of his rabbinical seminary. . . .” Two paragraphs later, we come to a section about women, which begins: “The ordination of women as rabbis has transformed the rabbinate in North America.” It seems that women may have transformed the rabbinate, but not the *EJ2*'s use of pronouns. This kind of entry—written with a very clear male bias at the time of the first edition—should have been completely revised in the light of women's contributions and experiences. As it stands, women are often appended to a male-centered text, there but not able to affect their surroundings, like the statues of women representing justice that were placed in courthouses at a time when women couldn't be lawyers or judges. These women are symbolic; they are not actors and doers in the real world.

Another major disappointment was finding no entry on sexism. In fact, the word sexism seems to occur in only one entry in the entire encyclopedia: in the excellent entry on feminism. Why are we still unable to discuss this very common form of discrimination? A search for anti-Semitism in the online version of the encyclopedia not only yields an appropriately lengthy article on this topic, but also hundreds of other hits for entries in which anti-Semitism are discussed. In fact, the search maxes out at 500, so there may even be thousands of mentions of it throughout the encyclopedia. This is as it should be: oppression is intertwined with so many other facets of life. But even in the entry on the *agunah*, to which sexism is most relevant, it goes unmentioned. This makes me very sad. For all the advances in the status of women in Judaism, there is little recognition of the role Jewish men have played, and do play, in the oppression of Jewish women.

In the final analysis, if women are as important as men, then every entry should have been revised from a feminist perspective. The editor for women's issues in *EJ2*, Judith Baskin, seems to have written scores of entries herself and overseen hundreds more, making every effort to make women visible. Her work is heroic. But by itself it is not enough. Now that it is an electronic book, it would be hoped that the *EJ2* becomes an updating resource that is constantly undergoing revision. This is not unprecedented. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, one of the most highly-regarded reference works in its field today, includes a transparent process by which entries currently being written and those under consideration are listed for public perusal. Fixed quarterly editions allow for accurate citation, and revisions are referred. While the new *Encyclopaedia Judaica* includes many wonderful new entries and many improvements to older entries with respect to women, there is still a fair way to go before it sheds its mid-twentieth-century—may I say it?—sexism.

YIDDISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

To say that Yiddish-related content in the new edition of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* represents a vast improvement over the previous edition is to damn with faint praise. The first edition presented an incoherent, scattershot assortment of Yiddish topics, and the level of the articles varied greatly. But the new edition's Yiddish coverage is much better than just an improvement. Virtually all entries retained from the first edition are significantly re-

written, correcting errors and introducing new scholarship; more importantly, new topics are included that were previously ignored. There appear to be about 200 Yiddish writers included, along with numerous actors and theatrical groups, literary and political movements, periodicals, and organizations. (The divisional editor for Yiddish literature was Jerold C. Frakes, of the University of Buffalo.) The overall scope of Yiddish is shown to be much more wide-ranging, diverse, complicated, and connected to other aspects of Jewish life than it was in the earlier edition. And—though not usually much of a *davener*—I found myself wondering what *brokhe* should be said over a publication that has belatedly embraced YIVO standard transliteration.

Findability is also improved by regulation of the sometimes erratic titling and cross-referencing conventions of the previous edition. If you looked up *Forverts* in the index of the old edition, you were told to see *Der Proletarisher Gedank*—which was inexplicably filed under the letter D, and wasn't the one you were most likely looking for anyway. To find the more famous *Forverts*, you had to look under *Forward* or *Jewish Daily Forward*. The current edition has *Forverts* as a link to *Jewish Daily Forward*—I would have preferred it the other way around, but this is an improvement.

Entries that were revised from the previous edition are improvements, sometimes on a mammoth scale. In cases where entries were left unrevised, I tended to be comfortable with the choice not to revise. I generally find the choice to retain Uriel Weinreich's entry on the Yiddish language a sound one. This entry, as you would expect from a scholar of his stature, "ain't broke," so there is no need to fix it. I would have preferred that a small coda be added to the end that would add have brought the entry up to date. For example, I would have appreciated some figures on the number of current Yiddish speakers, even if these were only educated guesses. This seems to be a perennial question asked about Yiddish, and while I realize that there is no reliable statistical source for this information, a ballpark estimate would be preferable to nothing at all. I would have also liked some recognition of post-Soviet Yiddish, and of the recent blossoming of research into Hasidic Yiddish.

In fact, a certain amount of linguistic summary ended up in the entry on Yiddish literature. This article, a satisfying 35 pages long, was written in sections by various scholars. Some of these sections drew from the older article, while some appear to be entirely new additions. Among the

many excellent choices made here was to divide the treatment of Yiddish literature by literary period: pre-World War I, World War I to 1970, and post-1970. This avoids the common pitfall of allowing Yiddish literature to be defined by the Holocaust. Another wonderful feature is the extensive “Bibliographic Survey” which makes up its final section, thoroughly updated and extended by the late Leonard Prager. The entirely new section on Hasidic literature in Yiddish, contributed by Miriam Isaacs, is a welcome summary of that complex and easily-misunderstood phenomenon.

I was less happy with the discussion of the *Groyser verterbukh fun der yidisher shprakh* [*Great Dictionary of the Yiddish Language*], which should have been appended to the Yiddish language entry. The discussion of it here was too uncritical: even the length of the entries is praised! For those not familiar with the *Groyser verterbukh*, it is a mammoth, still-unfinished dictionary¹ and an essential tool in Yiddish studies; but is hampered by the extended definitions. Each word is broken down into so many meanings that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish even a hint of a shade of a nuance of difference between the different definitions provided. At times the editors entered an ironic or metaphorical use of a word as a separate meaning, rather than seeing a metaphorical usage as an extension of one or more of the primary meanings of a word—and ignoring the fact that every word can be used ironically and metaphorically. Many times, as a Yiddish student struggling through a multi-page entry on a word, I cursed the editors’ enthusiasm for discerning these non-existent gradations in meaning; and if there is any hope of seeing the remaining two-thirds of the words in the Yiddish language appear in the remaining volumes of the *Verterbukh*, editorial control of the size of the entries will have to be imposed. This topic should have been dealt with by a linguist rather than a literary critic, and in a more appropriate entry.

A more significant problem with the Yiddish literature entry is the tendency to belittle the later Soviet writers, who contributed to the literary journal *Sovetish heymland*. The entry says:

Despite the obvious talent of some of the contributors to this periodical who survived the “liquidations,” there does not seem to be a single writer among them of the stature of their masters and colleagues who met their death during Stalin’s last years.

The implication is that the glory days of Soviet Yiddish literature ended with the Stalinist purges; the survivors interest us less. This is the same as treating Yiddish literature as a pre-Holocaust phenomenon. I found this particularly incongruous, because elsewhere in *EJ2* Soviet Yiddish gets better treatment, including in the article on *Sovetish heymland* itself. Many entries on Soviet Yiddish seem to have been contributed or revised by Genady Estraiikh. He details the lives of numerous writers from the later era of Soviet Yiddish literature, among them my particular favorite, the virtually-unknown Shira Gorshman. These contributions, I hope, will help to overcome our reluctance to study or attempt to understand the later Yiddish writers of the Soviet Union and CIS states.

While comparing entries on the same topic in the two editions is an important exercise, I also wanted to find a fresh set of entries to judge purely on their own merits: I settled on entries for people who gained prominence in the years since the first edition. Numerous scholars, writers, and *klal-tuers* (community leaders) were added in this category: literary critics such as Dan Miron, Ruth Wisse, Chone Shmeruk, and David Roskies; folklorists and ethnographers Chana Mlotek and Dov-Ber Kerler; linguists Mordkhe Schaechter and Dovid Katz; writers Chava Rosenfarb and Aaron (Arn) Vergelis; and, pleasingly for her professional colleagues, librarian Dina Abramowicz. Most of these people are living or recently deceased; their inclusion speaks to an editorial attitude towards contemporary Yiddish as both an organic continuation of earlier Yiddish activity and as an important component of Jewish culture. The entries tend to be brief but cover the bio-bibliographical basics adequately. I was pleased with their accuracy and execution. The entry on Abramowicz describes her as “assiduous in her efforts to acquire new and unusual publications for the library”—which made me laugh out loud. I imagine she was a royal pain when she decided she needed a certain hard-to-get Hasidic or Israeli item and couldn’t find a vendor who would get it for her.

I was surprised not to find an entry for klezmer. The entry on music does include some mention of traditional klezmer, but not as much as the current

¹ Editor’s note: Four of a projected total of thirteen volumes—covering only the first letter of the alphabet (*alef*)—have been published, with no foreseeable prospect of additional volumes coming out.

interest in it would seem to warrant. I couldn't find entries on important klezmerim such as Naftule Brandwein, Dave Tarras or the Epstein brothers, or on Yiddish singers such as the Barry Sisters. Similarly, the most important figures in the contemporary klezmer revival don't seem to be there, nor is there an entry for KlezKamp. Compared to the good coverage of Yiddish literature and its institutions, this is a bit puzzling. I didn't count, but I do believe there are more entries for klezmer musicologists than klezmerim.

There is no entry for WEVD, the most prominent Yiddish radio station, although it is mentioned in passing in a few other entries. Yiddish book publishing is touched on but not summed up in the entry on publishing. Another entry I would have liked is an overview of Yiddish dictionaries and encyclopedias. For some reason, the reference work is a very strong genre in Yiddish and there is enough material on that topic to support an entry. In fact, I would settle for an entry on Jewish dictionaries in general: there doesn't seem to be one at all, although a few lexicographers make the cut. There is an entry on encyclopedias, but it remains unchanged from the previous edition and its handling of Yiddish is minimal.

Sometimes I found that I had to reconsider my original conclusion concerning omissions. I thought the editors might have chosen to include a separate entry on Yiddish folklore; but on re-reading Dov Noy's magisterial summation of Jewish folklore, retained from the first edition, I was satisfied that he had incorporated Yiddish material thoroughly. Yiddish theater is dealt with in the entry for theater, but it does not rely upon the first

edition's treatment and instead is a thorough revision of this topic.

I felt some discomfort with entries on organizations written by members (in some cases, heads) of those same organizations. In two cases, I felt that the entries came across partly as fundraising letters and avoided valid criticism. In other cases, particularly where the entries are very short and there is little room for self-promotion, I did not find much to criticize; but I remain ambivalent about the practice. On the one hand, an active participant in an organization may very well have the deepest knowledge of it; yet the potential for conflict of interest remains.² Is there a way, in our small Yiddish scholarly community, to bring the necessary distance to this kind of work that would allow for dispassionate and constructive criticism? I'm not sure there are even enough of us to achieve the kind of distance that other fields can manage, or enough secondary sources to allow non-specialists to help with this work. This is not so much a criticism as a conundrum which needs to be faced.

In sum, the coverage of Yiddish in *EJ2* is vastly expanded and improved from the earlier edition; and while there are still some lacunae, particularly in the musical and book arts, I find little to complain about. The new encyclopedia can be used to answer Yiddish-related questions with some confidence now, given the revisions, and information can be found because of standard orthography and cross-referencing. In all, this is a well-executed section of the encyclopedia.

² As it does in my case, as I review a section of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* to which I contributed.