To our teachers, who taught us the canons that we have inherited; and to our students, who will surely compile and write the ones that will emerge.

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Introduction

The State of Jewish Ideas: Towards a New Jewish Canon

If periods in Jewish history can be described in reference to major themes, then contemporary Judaism deserves its own place in the timeline, and we are bidden to characterize and understand its defining ideas. Contemporary Judaism constitutes something of a paradox. On the one hand, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries witness a great Jewish "settling down" after the ruptures, revolutions, disruptions, and dislocations of the mid-twentieth century. The majority of Jews in the world are found now split between Israel and North America and experiencing a new Jewish economic and political stability based in remarkable social, economic, and political conditions. Patterns of migration over the last three centuries, the destruction of Eastern European Jewry in the Holocaust, and the mass exodus of Middle Eastern Jewry to Israel since its founding, have resulted in the overwhelming majority of world Jewry now living between these twin poles. One dominant story of contemporary Jewishness is thus a story of at-home-ness both in Israel and America. On the other hand, this very stability—in demographics, geography, and relative security—has enabled the flourishing of new diversities in ideological and political foments *within* these two primary sites of Jewish community. Stability generates entropy. And as a result, Jewish life in North America and Israel is witnessing large-scale and fast-moving change in the realms of identity (who is a Jew?), ideology (what is Jewishness?), and infrastructure (what are the institutions of Jewish life in and through which Judaism is lived, studied, and practiced?).

In short: we are living in a period of the mass production and proliferation of Jewish ideas. Even while Jewish life is incredibly diverse, it is also increasingly unstable. While it can be frightening for some, mass instability in the structures of Jewish community and identity enables and exhibits new forms of Jewish expression: some that are entirely new, and many that constitute the remaking of the textual and ideological traditions inherited from the past. In this process,

the nature of Jewish authority is being transformed, both within the formal power structures of established institutions as well as in less formally structured communities that can also produce (and control) what constitutes authoritative Jewish knowledge.

Meantime, the modes and means of the production of ideas are changing dramatically as well. The digital revolution has created new and cluttered public squares: American, Israeli, and Jewish. The mass culture of blogging has a democratizing quality to it, as it shortens the distance between writer and reader and the time between the inception or incubation of an idea and its publication. The same culture also risks diminishing the quality and meaning of the written word, and certainly eliminates the implication that publication necessarily grants or recognizes authority. And the possibility for misrepresentation and falsehood—either deliberate or accidental—has dramatically increased. This means that the structures of authority and authenticity are teetering at the same time as there are many new claimants to authority and authenticity, and this contributes to both the calcification and reification of structures of authority in some parts of the Jewish world, and the total collapse of authority structures in others.

The New Jewish Canon is an effort both to acknowledge the revolutionary times in which we are living and to offer a conceptual roadmap to make sense of all these changes. It combines some of the best writing from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries with perspectives drawn from some of the best scholars of Jewish thought today. Together, these writings continue an ages-old conversation on what it might mean to be Jewish, to live a Jewish life, to be part of a Jewish community, or to identify with the Jewish people.

In studying the Jewish past, we often seek to identify the tension between continuity, on the one hand, and change, on the other. The discipline of studying Jewish ideological and behavioral trends is also pulled in two directions, between what "Judaism" is said to be and what Jewish people actually do. But the central story of contemporary Jewish life appears to be one of fast moving change, which departs from the past both in its relationship to time and the pace of change, and in challenging our attempts to understand Jewish life holistically. This contrast between the past and the present helps shape some of what we see as dominant contemporary ideas, as Jews struggle with how the pace of change is influencing the production of ideas and the evolution of communities; and as we witness implicit contests between the sociologists, the historians, and the philosophers on the authority and capacity to best describe and understand the present moment.

From the standpoint of Jewish intellectual history, it is also hard to classify and understand the most recent period. Are we still in the period known as modernity? Have we entered postmodernity? Or perhaps we are further still, in a post-postmodernity? Do any of these terms help us to make sense of what we see before us? Older anthologies of modern Jewish thought—whether focused on post-Holocaust Jewish thought, the Jewish political tradition, the history of Halakhah, or other themes—often end in the 1970s. They tend to focus on the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust and the birth of the State of Israel, and in so doing they confine the story of Jewish thought to the mid-twentieth century and its particular challenges. The ideas of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century still entail a rethinking of Judaism prompted by these twin massive historical events, to be sure, and they thus represent a form of continuity with the thematic centerpieces of the recent past; but they also demonstrate a shift to wider theaters of politics, law, theology, and religious practice that imply some rupture and some opening of new conceptual possibilities for Israel and the Jewish people. The canon of Jewish ideas continues to develop and grow relative to new challenges faced by the Jewish people. Enough time has elapsed—enough new ideas have been articulated—that it is time to expand the canon more formally with a volume like this.

A canon project represents a kind of search for order in chaos. Like all other forms of boundary-drawing, it bears witness to an underlying culture of complexity and anxiety. It is hegemonic, to be sure, but maybe—if conducted with transparency—it can still be useful. Forming and naming a canon is also an act of authority, imposing a false superstructure atop a set of disparate ideas and disconnected written pieces, and of course also drawing exclusionary lines that separate—whether intentionally or more arbitrarily—between what counts as "in" and what counts as "out." The process of canon formation combines the descriptive and the prescriptive: some pieces find themselves in the canon because they are already known to be "canonical," having acquired value from their widespread familiarity or because they are considered foundational to the emergence of later ideas and/or to shaping the discourse. Other texts find their way into the canon because the canon-formers, whether consciously or not, are making explicit decisions to elevate their status, to hold them alongside those texts that are more universally acknowledged as canonical, and in doing so to change the arc of an intellectual history. The postmodern canon-former differs from the canon-formers of the past only in the self-awareness and transparency through which this unscientific exercise is undertaken. And as with any such exercise, we completely anticipate the most obvious criticism of this project: why this and not that?

In the interest of transparency, a few words on the process that led to this particular take on the new Jewish canon. This anthology focuses on non-fiction prose, in part on the theory that the inclusion of fiction, culture, and art would render the project unwieldy, and in part because the core definitional question that vexes such efforts—what makes a piece of work Jewish?—is far more complicated in the realm of fiction and art than it is in politics, law, and theology. In this volume, many if not most of the authors would self-consciously acknowledge that they are working in the realm of the "Jewish," which is more than can be said about many Jewish fiction authors who are vexed by an ethnic or religious classification of what they see as a work of art. While a focus on non-fiction prose simplifies some matters, it also effectively excises much of the lived experience and social history of contemporary Jews in their economic lives, foodways, travel, and cultural creativity.

Canons are also textbooks, which is a goal for this book as well. Beyond making a cultural argument about the ongoing production of Jewish ideas, the complicated state of Jewish political and social diversity, and the still unfolding central categories of Jewish history and identity, *The New Jewish Canon* invites debate both about why these documents and ideas help us understand the present moment, as well as whether they should—and what is left behind of contemporary Judaism as a result.

Canon formation has been a surprisingly common activity in recent Jewish publishing. There are many such books that reflect efforts to make sense of how "contemporary" Judaism had come to manifest its complexity and diversity through a study of the modern Jewish experience up to the recent past. In fact, one could even construct a canon of late twentieth-century canons, each with its own ideological underpinnings and implied boundaries within the larger body of Jewish literature from which they are making their selections. These include Jehuda Reinharz and Paul Mendes-Flohr's magisterial *The Jew in the Modern World,* a chronologically and thematically-organized survey of major texts of Jewish modernity (with an emphasis on the religious and the political); the mulit-volume *Jewish Political Tradition* collection, which uses categories from political theory and thought to organize ancient, classical, premodern, and modern Jewish writings, together with analytical essays by contemporary philosophers and legal theorists, into an effort towards a comprehensive thematic survey; Arthur Hertzberg's *The Zionist Idea* and now Gil Troy's revamping of Hertzberg into *The Zionist Ideas*; David Roskies's *The Literature of Destruction*; and Ruth Wisse's *The Modern Jewish Canon*, with its emphasis on twentieth-century literature. There are also countless collections of major papers and

academic essays in all fields of Jewish Studies, as well as meta-analyses of trends in Jewish Studies that help us understand trends in the field of how scholars in the present understand the Jewish people's history and its present realities.

As noted above, we seek to go beyond these existing acts of canonization by focusing on a later period that carries us into the present, to bear witness to the contemporary canon—from 1980 to 2015. Despite this different focus, we were determined to use what we saw as the "best practices" of the best of these anthologies. Thus, this book is composed of excerpts of primary sources written during the period in question alongside essays from scholars written specifically for this volume. The excerpts from the primary texts were chosen with the intention of capturing something representative of the larger work, whether in an essential theme, a characteristic of style, or a particularly memorable section of prose. In some cases, the primary texts may not reflect the most famous contribution of the writer, but will be more useful as a vehicle to engage with the writer's ideas and their enduring legacy. The accompanying essays are intended to provide historical context for the primary sources and also to indicate why the ideas expressed in these sources were significant when they appeared and how they have continued to evolve. The essays, in turn, constitute a canon in their own right; essayists received broad guidelines and followed a broad stylesheet, but the diversity of their responses help us understand the complexity of "reception history" of contemporary Jewish ideas as much as the primary text selections. In some cases, one of us wrote the essay. The book in its total package also strives for and struggles with all forms of diversity—in the background and identities of the authors of primary texts, in the background and identities of essayists, in the chosen and rejected parameters of the criteria for inclusion of topics and genres—which, in itself, constitutes a text of sorts for the present moment.

Though the term "canonization" has religious connotations, our choice to include the work of any particular scholar or writer in the selection of primary texts is not an endorsement, morally or otherwise, of them, their ideas, or their actions. Our goal in this book is to capture the dominant ideas and debates of the period 1980–2015. At times this has meant including the work of individuals who are known to have committed bad acts in their personal and/or professional lives or whose ideas we personally find offensive or even dangerous. In some cases, these opinions or actions are plainly essential to why the ideas were important enough to merit inclusion, as with authors who promoted violence or advanced radical or polarizing ideas that had major ramifications for Jewish and/or Israeli society. In other instances, it is more challenging to draw a direct line between the bad acts of individuals and the substance of their ideas

or their popularity as authors with lay and scholarly audiences. With both cases, we struggled with the impossibility of separating the artist from the work. This "tarnished legacy" problem is not unique to us but beguiles the history of literature, art, philosophy, and more. For our book, the stakes of this debate are intensified by the fact that we are working with living subjects, whose legacies are not fully established.

We struggled most in debating whether to include the work of several authors accused of abusive behavior toward women. More specifically, between 2016 and 2018 and in the context of the #metoo movement, Steven M. Cohen, Ari Shavit, and Leon Wieseltier were each accused of patterns of sexual impropriety, and each acknowledged his bad behavior. An important scholarly and public debate has emerged in the wake of this movement as to whether we should understand their patterns of abusive behavior toward women as correlating to their work in some way, even though none of that work directly addresses sexual ethics. Whether or not there is such a correlation between the behavior of these scholars and their ideas, we recognize that the power and charisma that allowed them to succeed professionally and to promote their ideas is the very same power and charisma that they are accused of abusing in their predatory actions. We recognize and regret that the continued publication of the works of these individuals risks rehabilitating their reputations and also risks re-traumatizing the victims of their bad behaviors.

We recognize the courage of the women who bore witness to the pain and humiliation they suffered. We identify with the cause of the #metoo movement in which they stepped forward, and each of us has participated in and led actions to call out abusive behavior in our Jewish community. We will continue to do so.

Despite our concerns, we decided to move forward with publishing the works of these men and other individuals who are known privately or publicly for problematic personal or political views or behavior. This is because we believe that the ideas they express and the pieces included here were central to the Jewish communal conversation in the years 1980–2015, particularly among American Jews, and that we cannot understand the period without reckoning with this material.

We hope that the coming phase of Jewish history is characterized by greater integrity, moral and intellectual, than the period we are chronicling: to get there, we believe, requires an intimate understanding of the recent past, in all its complexity.

We also want to acknowledge that some of the scholars we invited to comment were resistant to the very notion of creating and publishing a canon of