

INTRODUCING *THE POSEN LIBRARY OF JEWISH CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION*

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Nearly eight years ago, I was invited by Felix Posen to serve as editor-in-chief of a massive anthology project. Its aim was to collect all the primary texts, documents, images, and artifacts constituting Jewish culture and

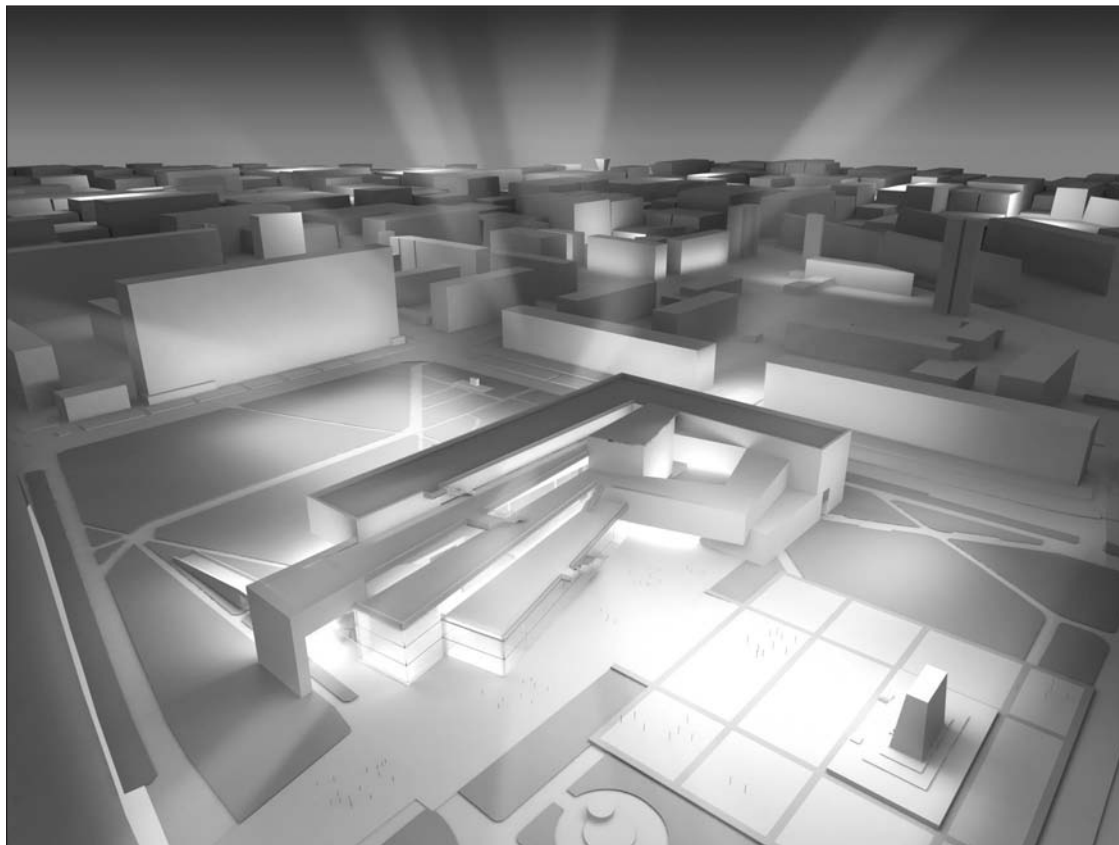
ben-Sasson, Ora Limor, Elisheva Carlebach, Eli Lederhendler, Todd Endelman, Zvi Gitelman, David Roskies, and Deborah Dash Moore, among others. The first two of ten 1,000-page volumes comprising *The Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization* are due to be published by Yale University Press sometime late in

reproductions of illuminated manuscripts, architecture, religious objects, folk art, design, drawings, paintings, sculpture, photography, film, and other arts, high and low, including music and theater, from ancient to present times.

A special effort will be made to include works that have been traditionally neglected and marginalized by prevailing canons. The central mission of this collection is threefold and meant as an explicit mandate: 1. To gather into a single, usable collection all that the current generation of scholars agrees best represents Jewish culture and civilization in its historical and global entirety; 2. To establish an inclusive and pluralistic definition of Jewish culture and civilization in all

of its rich diversity, an evolving amalgam of religious and secular experience; 3. To provide a working anthological legacy by which new generations will come to recover, know, and organize past, present, and future Jewish cultures and civilizations.

From the outset, however, we recognized that our foundational question here, “What is Jewish culture?” needed to be followed (in



Rendering of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews by Israeli architect Zvi Hecker, Warsaw, Poland, 2005. Image courtesy of Zvi Hecker.

civilization, from ancient times to the present. He had approached me on behalf of a sterling editorial board, including some of our generation’s leading scholars and thinkers in Jewish culture. After consulting several of these board members, I accepted, somewhat humbled and embarrassed by the audacity of the project. I then proceeded to write the project’s précis and to appoint a list of volume editors, again, including some of the leading scholars of our age, such as Jeffrey Tigay, Menahem

2010, with two more to be published each year after that until 2013.

For the purposes of the *Posen Library*, expressions of Jewish culture will include, among hundreds of chronologically, geographically, generically, linguistically, and thematically organized entries—extracts from historical, philosophical, religious, legal, literary, exegetical, political, folkloristic, artistic documents, images, and artifacts. All volumes will be richly illustrated with

good Jewish fashion) with several other questions: Toward what ends are we defining Jewish culture? Do we want to know what is essential to Jewish culture? Or what distinguishes it from other cultures? Do we want to know in order to celebrate all the cultural creations of the Jews as essentially “Jewish”? Or to be able to weed out the supposed non-Jewish elements from it? Or to acknowledge the Jewish parts of other cultures (and by extension, to acknowledge the influence of other cultures on Jewish culture)? Do we collect only the “great works,” or the most representative—including the good, the bad, and the ugly? Is Jewish culture global, or is it an aggregate of many local Jewish cultures, each of them formed and defined in the interaction between Jewish and surrounding non-Jewish cultures? Are there essentially Jewish qualities to Jewish culture, or is Jewish culture itself essentially a dialectic between “adaptation and resistance to surrounding non-Jewish cultures,” as David Biale has suggested in his *Cultures of the Jews*? Or should Jewish culture be regarded as something that is produced mostly in relationship to itself, its own traditions and texts, as David Roskies argued in his review of Biale’s volume of essays?

Rather than pretending to answer these questions definitively, and thereby prescriptively suggesting some kind of hard and impermeable canon to be excavated by our volume editors, we have chosen to allow such questions to remain embedded in the multitude of entries to be selected by individual volume editors and their expert advisory boards. That is, insofar as any culture is itself a composite of multiple peoples, nations, languages, traditions, and beliefs, the editors have chosen to recognize the heterogeneity of Jewish culture and civilization. While at times a majority culture in ancient or modern Israel, Jewish culture has historically been more often a distinct

minority culture present in the midst of other nations and peoples.

Historically, there have also been any number of distinctive and parallel Jewish civilizations, some sharing common cultural traits and traditions, some with little in common beyond core religious laws and beliefs. The aim of the *Posen Library* will not be to unify or homogenize expressions of Jewish culture in arbitrarily imposed thematic categories. But rather, the library’s chronological and thematic organization will reflect as closely as possible the multiple, even

world as Jewish texts, or codified and responded to as Jewish texts. Here the stories of Franz Kafka might be regarded as parables for Jewish experience, as might Sigmund Freud’s meditations on dreams and monotheism. This also means that instances of culture produced by non-Jews for Jewish purposes (such as illuminated Hebrew manuscripts, synagogue architecture, and headstone reliefs) can be included, as well.

Indeed, it is clear that this issue of “What is a Jewish text” is also one

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competing expressions of Jewish culture as they existed in their own temporal and geographic contexts. For example, the flowering of Hebrew poetry in Islamic lands during the Middle Ages will be regarded as distinct from the rise of Yiddish literature in central and eastern Europe—even as both kinds of literature are necessarily constituent parts of Jewish culture and civilization.

For our purposes, the entries of this anthology may also include texts produced by Jews but not always with explicit Jewish content. Such texts warrant inclusion if they have been inspired by Jewish texts or experiences, received by the Jewish

that arises most prominently in the modern eras of emancipation, assimilation, and national self-definition and may be less pressing in the ancient to medieval times. This said, one of the *Library*’s editorial board members, Yehuda Bauer, insists that Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” is “so similar to a Jewish text that it is absolutely clear to [him] that this was a Jew speaking to Jews” and would have to be included, even if the original words were subsequently Christianized in the context of their redaction as part of the New Testament and depleted of Jewish meaning.

Still, questions of Jewish literature, philosophy, liturgy, music, folk art,

and other forms of material culture before the twentieth century may be easier to navigate than the questions that arise later, such as: What is Jewish art, or photography, or architecture? What makes Barnett Newman, or Philip Guston, or Mark Rothko Jewish artists? Is, for instance, Rothko's iconoclastic insistence on the abstract color field after the Holocaust a gesture toward the second commandment prohibition of images, and if so, does that give him a Jewish sensibility?

Is William Klein a Jewish photographer? Or Weegee (né Arthur Feelig), or Robert Capa (né Andreas Friedmann), or Brassai (né Gyula Halasz)? Aside from its cheekiness, what are we to make of William Klein's mischievous remark that ". . . there are two kinds of photography—Jewish photography and goyish photography. If you look at modern photography you find, on the one hand, the Weegees, the Diane Arbuses, the Robert Franks—funky photographers. And then you have people who go out in the woods. Ansel Adams, Weston. It's like black and white jazz."

Is there such a thing as Jewish architecture? The current generation of Jewish architects is certainly legend (think of Frank Gehry, né Frank Owen Goldberg, Richard Meier, Peter Eisenman, Daniel Libeskind, Santiago Calatrava, James Ingo Freed, Moshe Safdie, and A. M. Stern, to name but a few of the most prominent). But what are we to make of Gehry's suggestion that the undulating steel forms for which he is so famous are inspired by the live carp his grandmother kept in a bathtub before turning it into gefilte fish? I've been asked often if Jewish architects were somehow predisposed toward articulating the memory of catastrophe in their work, in order to explain how Libeskind, Calatrava, and now Michael Arad (designer of the memorial at Ground Zero) have become the architects of record in

post-9/11 lower Manhattan. I've usually answered that I see no direct references to Jewish catastrophe in their designs, but that the forms of postwar architecture itself have surely been inflected by an entire generation's knowledge of the Holocaust.

What strategic purposes are served by attempting to collect in a ten-volume anthology all that this generation deems to constitute Jewish culture and civilization? I believe there are at least two large purposes, each with several parts. First, we hope that the *Posen Library* will open the world's eyes to the extraordinary contributions Jewish thinkers, writers, and artists have made as Jews to dozens of other national cultures around the globe. As a corollary, we also hope that as a process, the *Posen Library* demonstrates that like Jewish culture, all national cultures are comprised of multiple, often competing constituent cultures. Like Jewish culture, national cultures everywhere are formed in the constant give and take, the frisson between and within themselves.

What point is in this? It is to make clear that just as we Jews express ourselves in, participate in, and contribute to national cultures around the world, and just as these national cultures bear the imprint of Jewish culture and experience, so too do these other cultures nourish our own Jewish cultures. We write our literature, poetry, religious thought, Talmudic commentaries, and even treatises on what constitutes Jewish culture in a multitude of tongues. Our Jewish world's experiences are not only lived in, but also framed for us and shaped by, these cultural and linguistic contexts.

In this way, we hope to show that Jewish culture necessarily includes the living, breathing, ever-evolving expressions of Jewish experience in all of its shapes and forms, inside and outside halakhah, and that it is

animated in its constant interrogation, debate, and disputation. As such, the *Posen Library* might serve not only as an outreach to the non-Jewish world, but also as a kind of shaliach to otherwise disaffected and disengaged Jews whose religious identities have lapsed, but whose cultural identification as Jews might now be renewed. It also affirms the cultural expressions of Jews around the world, whose connection to Jewish life may have existed primarily in the struggle with Jewish identity and traditions and not only in its embrace.

Finally, we would like to suggest the *Posen Library* as a model for defining "national culture" as distinct from "nationalist culture." In this approach, we see a national culture as it defines itself by its differences and reciprocal exchanges with other cultures, whereas "nationalist culture" attempts to define itself as sui generis and self-generated, pure and somehow untainted by other cultures and traditions. National cultures grow in reciprocal exchanges with others; nationalist cultures partake in the myth of self-containment and self-creation. For we know too well what happens when nations and cultures attempt to purge themselves of all supposedly foreign elements. They become very small and sometimes so depleted of inspiration and imagination that they collapse inwardly like the hollow shells they have become.

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