

**Michaelson on Baader and Gillerman and Lerner and eds., 'Jewish Masculinities: German Jews, Gender, and History' and Nur, 'Eros and Tragedy: Jewish Male Fantasies and the Masculine Revolution of Zionism'**

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**Benjamin Maria Baader, Sharon Gillerman, Paul Lerner, eds.** *Jewish Masculinities: German Jews, Gender, and History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012. viii + 242 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-00213-6; \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-00206-8; \$23.99 (e-book), ISBN 978-0-253-00221-1. **Ofer Nordheimer Nur.** *Eros and Tragedy: Jewish Male Fantasies and the Masculine Revolution of Zionism*. Israel: Society, Culture, and History Series. Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2014. xxiv + 220 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-936235-85-8.

**Reviewed by** Jay Michaelson (Brown University) **Published on** H-Judaic (February, 2015)  
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**A Minyan of Masculinities: German and Zionist Constructions of the Jewish Man**

There is no single stereotype, let alone actual performance, of Jewish masculinity. Jewish men are Woody Allen and Harry Houdini, Elliott Gould and Ariel Sharon. Yet a uniform conception of the “Jewish man” persists even in scholarship addressing its construction. Two recent books usefully problematize this notion.

*Jewish Masculinities: German Jews, Gender, and History*, edited by Benjamin Maria Baader, Sharon Gillerman, and Paul Lerner, sits at the intersection of masculinity studies and Jewish studies. In dialogue with Daniel Boyarin, who famously (or infamously) proposed a transhistorical indigenous Jewish construction of an effeminate masculinity, and with scholars of anti-Semitism such as Sander Gilman, the coeditors argue for multiple, shifting iterations of Jewish masculinity among different periods, albeit focused almost entirely on German culture. The anthology is, itself, multiple in its conclusions.

The chapter by Andreas Gotzmann, “Respectability Tested,” uses seventeenth-century German court records to show a significant gap between Jewish ideals of male nonviolence, and Jewish realities of male violence. “Virility was at the core of the entire range of expression of Jewish male behavior and sexuality,” says Gotzmann, noting a “distance that Jewish society kept from norms” (p. 37). This divergence is not a sign of decay, Gotzmann adds, stating that it allowed for societal flexibility and dynamism—even if ultimately in the service of patriarchal power. One may complain here that Gotzmann’s primary sources are, after all, criminal records, and may show the exceptions rather than the rule. One of the few nonjudicial sources he cites is, curiously, R. Jacob Emden’s confession of suffering impotence on his wedding night. Gotzmann argues that this is a boast of scholarly otherworldliness—but if this is not an account of “soft masculinity” (p. 35), one wonders what is.

Moving forward to the nineteenth century, Benjamin Maria Baader’s chapter, “Jewish Difference and

the Feminine Spirit of Judaism,” shows that precisely the Jewish “femininity” derided by Zionists and anti-Semites was embraced by both Reform (Adolf Jellinek, Gotthold Salomon) and Orthodox (Samson Raphael Hirsch) preachers. These and other figures extolled the virtues of Jewish women—piety, love, faithfulness—and praised Jewish culture in general for reflecting such virtues rather than the masculine pursuits of power and war. Jewish men, for these writers, were “sensitive, tender, and feminine” (p. 60). Baader’s helpful essay sits at a fascinating intersection of Boyarin, Otto Weininger, and queer theory.

In contrast, Robin Judd’s analysis of nineteenth-century anti-Semitic depictions of mohels and *shochetim* (butchers) reveals a discourse of men as “motivated by their brutality, blood lust, and economic greed” (p. 76). How such stereotypes sat alongside those of male feminization remains a central contradiction of anti-Semitism. In fact, as Judd shows, both professions were internally governed by ever-increasing standards of hygiene and morality, perhaps to a fault. One senses a certain anxiety regarding these bloody rites, and indeed, the German manuals Judd adduces draw a contrast between themselves and the barbaric *Ostjuden*. Judd shows how these discourses constructed a “reputable manhood” that is “learned, disciplined, physically neat, and handsome” (p. 84), perhaps not dissimilar from the “feminine” masculinity Baader’s sources describe.

Stefanie Schüler-Springorum unearths an obscure, unpublished autobiography of Aron Liebeck, a Königsberg businessman who chronicled, through the lens of his own life, the ascent of bourgeois German Jewry. Written in 1928, when Liebeck was seventy-two, it is already the story of a vanished nineteenth-century world, with the ambitious protagonist seeking “wealth and prestige” (p. 93). Here, too, we see a masculine ambition for “respectability and education”—Liebeck even described himself, a bookkeeper, as a “fighter”—juxtaposed with “feminine” virtues such as sensitivity and possessing “soft eyes” (pp. 101, 103). Liebeck’s memoir is like a genteel Charles Dickens tale, but as Schüler-Springorum notes, his virtues only just mask his ambition as a “social climber” (p. 106).

The most overtly queer of the book’s subjects is Karl. M. Baer, also known as N. O. Body, an intersex individual whose pseudonymous autobiography appeared in 1907. Sander L. Gilman ably situates this unique document in the context of nineteenth and twentieth century German understandings of homosexuality, which were the template for the current LGBTQ equality movement. For Karl Ulrichs, Richard Krafft-Ebing, and Magnus Hirschfeld, gay men were not deviant heterosexuals but a “third sex,” combining aspects of masculine and feminine in their minds and/or bodies. (Some of these early accounts included lesbians; others did not.) Baer—born with ambiguous genitalia, raised as a girl, but insistent on his male identity—was a case study in such biological determinism. Citing the work of Hermann Simon, Gilman notes that Baer was a Jew, active in B’nai Brith, and analogizes Ulrichs and others’ understanding of homosexuality to the Zionists’ understanding of the Jew. Jews, too, are not deviant Europeans but different, “oriental” by nature. At the same time, Gilman situates Baer in the context of anti-Semitic discourses of Jewish hermaphroditism, which saw Jewish men as so effeminate that they secretly menstruated. His chapter reads like part of a longer study, which indeed it is—it is adapted from his 2006 book *Multiculturalism and the Jews*—and as such can only touch on some of the most provocative themes of Baer’s real and symbolic lives.

The most far afield of *Jewish Masculinities*’ chapters is Etan Bloom’s study of the vigorous, hypermasculine “modern Hebrew handshake,” which arose “from the need to overcompensate (or hypercorrect) for the effeminacy, passivity, feebleness, and bodily unfitness so often ascribed to Jews

by other Europeans” (p. 163). Bloom shows how the masculine grip, familiar to all who have shaken a sabra’s hand, took hold in both Europe and Palestine, and in Israel evolved to include backslapping and other forms of machismo. In some ways, Bloom’s micro-history of the handshake is a clearer elucidation of Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin’s gender-based analysis of Zionism than the Boyarins themselves have offered—right down to his own ambivalence about it. Though perhaps longer than its subject warrants, it is an excellent introduction to the Zionist remasculinization of the Jewish male.

Ann Goldberg’s study of pre-Nazi conservative homosexuality, meanwhile, provides a window into gay history that many LGBTQ people would like to forget: that prior to the Nazi crackdown on homosexuals, there were circles of mostly homosexual, misogynist, and anti-Semitic conservative German men who pined for a restored German-Romantic masculine culture as against the “effeminacy” of contemporary society—the *Männerbunden*. Remarkably, one member of such a circle was the Jewish, heterosexual (or bisexual) Friedrich Gundolf, whose correspondence with his emancipated, female lover Elisabeth Salomon is the source material for Goldberg’s chapter. Gundolf’s schizoid existence is difficult to reconcile, though it provides a window on what Daniel Boyarin has labeled “Jewish Wagnerianism”—the overcompensation, as in Bloom’s handshakes, for perceived Jewish effeminacy.

Also in dialogue with Boyarin, by way of postcolonialist theorist Homi Bhabha, is Sharon Gillerman, whose study of the “kinder, gentler” Jewish strongman Siegmund Breitbart makes use of Bhabha’s analysis of “mimicry”, wherein the colonized subject adopts, mimics, and often transforms the mores of the colonizer. Here, it is Breitbart, dressed in Roman costumes and striking “hypermasculine poses,” who undermines and recontextualizes the colonizers’ (Roman and German) symbolic structures by juxtaposing them with his publicly displayed Jewish virtues, Jewish appearance, and status as a kind of Jewish pinup idol (p. 201). By displaying a Jewish soul in a Romanesque body, he transformed the constructions of each.

*Jewish Masculinities* concludes with Judith Gerson’s study of Nazi refugees, thus revealing a gaping lacuna in the book, i.e., the Holocaust, but one that obviously would require its own volume. Gerson’s male subjects seem to have lost their “civic sense of masculinity” when they lost their German citizenship and identity (p. 227). She tentatively proposes that Jewish masculinity becomes privatized among this population, which expressed it in familial and economic pursuits rather than civic ones. Ironically, Gerson says, this made them seem more like women.

Where *Jewish Masculinities* leaves off, Ofer Nordheimer Nur’s *Eros and Tragedy: Jewish Male Fantasies and the Masculine Revolution of Zionism* begins. Says Nur in the preface, “I claim that wishing to heal the injured masculinity of a generation of young Jews in central Europe is at the very heart of Zionism as a project for national regeneration” (p. vii). Indeed, Nur perhaps overstates the case, in light of the varied perspectives in *Jewish Masculinities*—Breitbart does not seem possessed of an “injured masculinity.” And like several of the contributors to *Jewish Masculinities*, he owes a significant debt to the Boyarin brothers. Yet to juxtapose the two books—although Nur’s young *halutzim* (pioneers) hail from Galicia and Austria, rather than Germany—is to reveal the conundrum of masculinity itself: one can never quite be man enough.

Nur’s focus is on the Bitania Ilit kibbutz, one of Palestine’s first, which lasted all of eight months (August 1920 to April 1921) and comprised merely twenty-four young people, but which attained

mythic status in Zionist imagination. Much of Nur's project—which he describes as influenced by the genre of the micro-history—is to uncover the reasons for this outsized appeal. He vividly depicts the founders of Hashomer Hatzair, the idealistic Zionist youth movement which eventually would found Bitania Ilit, as refugees traumatized by war and exile. Most of their parents, Nur notes, were assimilationists, but they were not. Inspired by Polish nationalism, scouting movements (both Polish and German), and some of the same neo-Romantic, back-to-nature rhetoric that inspired German far rightists, the two groups, which eventually combined to form Hashomer Hazair, were particularist (and elitist), and as contemptuous of the Diaspora Jew as any anti-Semite—here, Nur focuses on the writings of Yosef Haim Brenner as paradigmatic. Whatever the complex realities of Jewish masculinity in fin de siècle Europe, they were reduced to a familiar caricature: the weak, over-intellectual, feminized Jewish male.

Sexuality was already at the forefront of their concerns. Today, we may associate hypermasculinity with aggressive sexuality—but for Hashomer Hazair, it was, in fact, its opposite. As described in chapter 2, Hashomer Hazair youth were scandalized by Vienna's cosmopolitan sexuality—yet they did not remain in a prudish condemnation of it. Rather, Nur describes how they eventually come to embrace the sublimation of sexuality into love, the building of social institutions, and even (anticipating Herbert Marcuse) civilization itself (p. 44). This is the Eros of *Eros and Tragedy*: not sex or pleasure, but “the key to a fulfillment of exalted ideals” (p. 56). The sexual drive, sublimated, became “a tool, to be utilized as a glue to cement the building blocks of an ideal society” (p. 60). A kind of bridge between nineteenth-century notions of sexual vitality and Freudian notions of the libido, this construction of Eros enabled these future pioneers to reject both decadent sexuality on the one hand, and deracinated masculinity on the other.

The tragedy of which Nur speaks is described in chapter 3—and it is the most surprising of his themes. Unlike most historiography of Zionism which depicts the movement as redemptive and messianic, Nur proposes that it be read as inspired by a “tragic vision of the world” (p. 68). By this he means the Nietzschean view that “man is alienated both from nature and from human society and has become acutely lonely” (p. 70). Bereft of God—Nur calls this a “secular negative theology” (p. 71)—he must take his fate into his own hands. Yet the result is not nihilism but “total commitment: the loss of God and the shattering of any conventional authority, coupled with a strong idealism and a deep commitment to ethical and moral ideals, brought about a commitment to absolute values” (p. 74).

These two themes are combined by Nur in chapter 4, which focuses on a twenty-page letter by Meir Yaari, the leader of Bitania, and a manifesto by David Horowitz published in 1922. The two texts are, it must be said, quite surprising. They are Nietzschean, almost Schopenhauerian, in their depiction of the human will. Yaari seeks a mystical “will to experience” land and work directly, a will that is more Eros than intellect (p. 84). The German notion of *Erlebnis*—spiritual, lived experience—is the ideal of the pioneer working the land. Reading Nur, one pauses to reflect on these idealists perched on a hill in the Galilee, Nietzsche under one arm and a shovel in the other, likewise sublimating the sexual drive into work on the one hand, dreaming on the other.

By comparison, Nur's analysis in chapter 5 of the impact of Martin Buber and Gustav Landauer on the Bitania community is rather dry. Clearly, Buberian notions of spiritual community and Landauerian ones of the autonomous individual living in a small, autonomous community impacted the Bitania *Weltanschauung*. But chapter 5 is somewhat disconnected from the book's subject; it is a

symptom of Nur's book as a whole that there are frequent excursions into philosophical archaeology with only slight tethers to the cultural history he intends to write. If nothing else, the chapter makes the reader yearn for a return to dirt and sex.

That comes in chapter 6, which returns to the chronological narrative interrupted by chapters 4 and 5. Hashomer Hazair groups have left Vienna for Palestine, eager "to be reborn into a new society" (p. 140). Bitania begins to take shape as a utopian community, complete with group confessions (*slichot*), "togetherness through materiality," and "dancing in the dark around a campfire" (pp. 144, 148). The kibbutz feels like a Zionist Burning Man. Yet despite the myths of Zionist gender egalitarianism, Nur shows in chapter 7 that Yaari, in particular, was inspired by the same all-male *Männerbunden* we encountered in Goldberg's essay in *Jewish Masculinities*. Put into practice, the Eros of Hashomer Hazair became, according to chapter 7, homoerotic. Like the male societies of German masculinist writers, the kibbutz would overthrow philistine, bourgeois sexuality and replace it with a group homoeroticism. Writes Hashomer Hazair member Benjamin Dror, "An association of men [*Männerbund*] formed erotic bonds and thereby became a cultural nucleus, a spiritual heart of the nation" (p. 158).

In a sense, the homoeroticism of these idealized—apparently never realized—all-male communities is simply an extension of the sublimated Eros Nur describes in chapter 2. "Our erotic attachment bursts out of our unified soul," wrote Yaari, "spreading everywhere and covering all—the land, work, the landscape" (p. 167). Yaari's revived man is erotically diffuse, and thus infuses everything with Eros. Here, Nur may move too quickly to conclude that Daniel Boyarin is right and the Zionist dream is to cure the purportedly sick masculinity of Europe—a mere half-page at the end of chapter 7. It seems Yaari and his fellow pioneers are after something more subtle than replacing effeminacy with machismo; rather, they are replacing a certain experience of Eros with another, the latter transmuted into a neo-Romantic attachment to the land and the people. This is less masculinity recovered than masculinity recontextualized.

Obviously, such utopianism cannot last, and chapter 8 swiftly moves to pick up the pieces. Already in 1921, the lofty rhetoric is being questioned, and its lofty promises unexperienced. The women of Hashomer Hazair resisted being marginalized and relegated to "mere service jobs" (pp. 179, 182). Indeed, at the end of two books about male experience and male desire, it is refreshing to finally have the voices of women objecting to the male fantasies into which they are conscripted.

Alas, Nur does not fully answer the questions he asks at the outset. Why was this particular iteration of the Zionist male *imaginaire* so appealing to a generation of Zionist writers and polemicists, given its frankly bizarre erotic, Nietzschean and German-homoerotic sources? How is the tragic to be reconciled with the triumphalist? Why did this experiment collapse so quickly, and what took its place? And which Jewish masculinities, exactly, did it seek to restore?

The idealists of Hashomer Hazair, while fulfilling Boyarin's prediction of Zionist masculinization, also problematize it—perhaps more than the diasporic constructions of *Jewish Masculinities*. It is almost as if every noun must be made plural; there are multiple masculinities, multiple discourses of recovery, multiple contexts in which gender is enacted in Jewish diasporic and Zionist culture. Paraphrasing the famous aphorism that Sigmund Freud almost certainly did not utter, sometimes a cigar is not just one cigar.

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