

Rosenfarb—the latter two comparatively understudied in the field of Yiddish, but of course none of them have yet to receive their scholarly due—are major advances.

Schwarz's focus on Sutzkever's "fervent . . . belief in the transcendent power of poetry to recreate and animate the world" (40), and the Yiddish word and world in particular, leads to a study of the Vilna writings as an act, not just of memorialization, but of real continuity and progression. Sutzkever's own cultural activities for Yiddish in Israel, seen in this light, are more than simple custodianship: they are artistic broadsides in a fight for reinvigorated relevance. His work on Rosenfarb, the author of "the first Holocaust novel written in Yiddish" (60), is not only a firm claim for the author's centrality in the Yiddish canon but for her efforts to sacralize the Yiddish language: the novel's title, *The Tree of Life*, has obvious liturgical resonances, rendering her Lodz and its citizens as ever fructifying. And in discussing Leib Rochman's diary, Schwarz manages the remarkable feat of putting it in conversation with the most significant Holocaust testimonies—Anne Frank's, particularly—and having it stand that test.

Schwarz is on equally firm footing when he moves from individuals to institutions, although it would be hard for anyone to create real analytic focus with the 175 (!) volumes of *Dos poylishe yidentum*, or the decades of recordings at the 92nd Street Y. Still, the work he does there provides remarkable entrée for future scholars, as well as suggesting how these central locales—whether they be on paper or before a podium—create opportunities for surprising ideological and literary bedfellows and encounters. What mattered to them, far more, was the overarching task that the participants had set for themselves: the maintenance and continuity of Yiddish culture. Schwarz has done great service in helping them, in almost every case posthumously, achieve that goal, in the most substantive and scholarly way. It's an essential book for anyone interested in the past—and, yes, the future—of Yiddish culture.

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Anita Shapira. *Yosef Haim Brenner: A Life*. Translated by Anthony Berris. Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014. 488 pp.
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In the pantheon of the pure challengers of God and man, in which we find Job, Jesus, and Enoch, Yosef Haim Brenner's heavy, earthbound figure can be seen one who, as Berl Katznelson wrote, "has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows," on whom "God laid the tragedy of all of us." (399)

Historians, as Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi teaches us, record the past as it was. Jews, by contrast, remember the past not necessarily as it happened, but rather in

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light of the significance they ascribe to it. Yosef Ḥayim Brenner—the hero of Anita Shapira’s book—is the champion of memories.

It would seem that there is no other Hebrew author about whom so many memories have been written. One such example, mentioned by Shapira (380), is a memory recalled by the Israeli artist Nahum Gutman, son of the author S. Ben Zion. Gutman tells of a number of Hebrew authors sitting on the veranda of his father’s house:

While we sat on the veranda, Agnon suggested that we pray *Minḥah* [the afternoon service] at Rav Kook’s house. Several of those present objected: “Rav Kook is religious and we are not.” Brenner was also among those objecting. Nonetheless, Agnon, R. Binyamin and Azar got up and left together for Rav Kook’s house, after which they accompanied him to the synagogue.

Brenner did not walk together with them but rather, strode a distance behind them, while placing his footsteps exactly after those of Rav Kook. This made a lasting impression upon me. While I thought it childish, I nevertheless viewed it as a type of sign. It still strikes me as a symbol even today. And whenever Rav Kook walked to the synagogue, I would also deliberately stride behind him and sink my footsteps into his. I admired him so. (Ehud Ben-Ezer, *Ben ḥolot u-keḥol shamayim* [Hebrew] [Tel Aviv: Yavne], 87–94)

Gutman recalls himself walking through the city, which during his childhood was “a lone house on the sand,” in the footsteps of the instigators of the Hebrew revolution. Just as he had strode in Rav Kook’s footsteps, so too he walked in Brenner’s: “My admiration for Brenner was deep and very natural. He would pass through the lane by Bezalel on his way to the Aḥdut offices, not a tall man, bent, trying not to stand out, and I would often walk behind him, trying to place my feet in the footsteps Brenner left, and I would feel that I was doing something that expressed my very being and my own way” (Ben-Ezer, *Ben ḥolot*, 96).

These are semi-imaginary childhood stories. However, like many of Brenner’s stories, and as Gutman himself declares, they bear symbolic meaning. Gutman follows in his heroes’ footsteps out of veneration, which succeeded in integrating the contradictory legacies of these two esteemed personalities. But how should Brenner’s following in Rav Kook’s footsteps be interpreted?

At least three alternatives present themselves: Brenner followed in the footsteps of the pioneering rabbi out of admiration; Brenner sought to trample the religious Rav Kook’s footsteps and replace them with his own; or, a third interpretation—which I choose to adopt—Brenner did so mischievously, as a joke, as if dancing in Rav Kook’s footsteps and flitting between tradition and innovation or between two types of Jewish renewal.

A reading of Anita Shapira’s comprehensive book will lead to the inescapable conclusion that the third interpretation is the least probable. Shapira does not depict Yosef Ḥayim Brenner as a mythic figure; Brenner does not appear as the multifaceted and contradictory cultural hero that he constituted for the people of

his generation. In other words, Shapira does not sketch for us a picture of Brenner as he should be fittingly or deservedly remembered.

With punctiliousness, she surveys the different stages of his life: his childhood; his service in and desertion from the tsar's army; his time in London and Lviv; his aliyah (immigration) to *'Erez Yisra'el* and his time in Jaffa, Neve Tzedek, and Ein Ganim; the move to Jerusalem and the crisis of World War I; the period of the British Mandate following the war; and the Arab riots of 1921, during which Brenner was murdered. Only the concluding chapter differs in character by providing a general outline of Brenner's personality and a description of how Brenner's legacy was fashioned following his death.

Shapira describes Brenner as he was. She utilizes every shred of available information: his letters, memoirs, autobiographical details spread throughout his stories and essays, and scattered biographical details in others' stories. The book is composed in a diachronic fashion, exposing minute details in each of its chapters. However, its treatment of Brenner lacks consistency: for example, the opening chapter deals mainly with the young Brenner's psychological character; subsequently, Brenner's endeavor as a literary entrepreneur prior to his immigration to *'Erez Yisra'el* is emphasized. The chapter on Jaffa expounds on Brenner's journalistic writing and his intellectual role, while the Jerusalem chapter focuses on the coterie of writers with whom he associated and his relations with women. Short chapters of his life occasionally merit emphasis and discussion, while his extensive writing as a literary critic is almost completely ignored.

A biography such as this naturally has both advantages and disadvantages. The significant advantage is its faithfulness to Brenner's own statement: "Life is larger than any paradigm." Brenner, too, did not conform to one single pattern. It is thus incumbent upon the reader to locate the gems scattered throughout Brenner's life.

One such gem I discovered in the book is the description of Brenner as a teacher at the Herzliya Hebrew Gymnasium during World War I. Drafts of lessons he prepared display the figure of a respected educator, teaching Hebrew to eighth- and ninth-grade students. Brenner the author, the intellectual, and the provocative antireligious publicist is revealed here teaching love for the Jewish People's cultural and literary heritage. In one of the drafts he formulates a question for discussion: "What is a people? One race? One religion? The citizens of one country? Speakers of one language? People with a shared destiny?" And then came the definition: "People sharing a common destiny (historical unity)" (290–91). Shapira shows that Brenner, who frequently expressed reservations about being defined as a Zionist, taught his pupils, in the midst of a terrible crisis for the Yishuv (the Jewish community of pre-1948 Israel), that Zionism revives "the national desire," and that this desire is elevated by the Hebrew language. It seems to me that this observation may characterize Brenner's life and his work.

The striking disadvantage of this genre is that the biography is not centered around one focal point and does not construct a "hero" or character with a distinct life objective or endeavor, but features descriptions of isolated episodes. It is only the axis of Brenner's depressive personality that remains as the central linchpin

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connecting the book's chapters. Shapira brings abundant evidence of Brenner's depression, but also points out that Brenner's functioning is inconsistent with his depressive tendencies. Indeed, it is doubtful whether this personality trait can sufficiently explain the behaviors that Shapira ascribes to him, whether explicitly or implicitly—a pessimistic attitude vis-à-vis the achievements of Zionism and the future of the Zionist movement, writing that emphasizes bereavement and failure, strange eccentric behavior, shying away from women, difficulty in intimacy and in close relationships with others—and it certainly cannot explain Brenner's literary and journalistic strength. Brenner seemingly exhibited, in a refined manner, a sort of “holy depression,” or as the pioneers of the Second and Third Aliyot preferred to term it—a type of “holy despair.” Despair appears in Hebrew revival literature as both a destructive and constructive force (as it similarly does in the literature of the end of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century). Undeniably, doubt, depression, and despair were not personality traits unique to Brenner, but rather a significant part of the generational ethos and that of its literary convention.

Indeed, it is only in the book's closing chapter that Shapira reveals the significance that Brenner and his contemporaries ascribed to his personality traits. She identifies the Russian “holy fool” model of *Yurodivi*, which sheds new light on events in Brenner's life. Whether this model is the most applicable and successful in describing Brenner may be the subject of a detailed discussion (especially in light of the fact that the term does not feature in either his writings or in those of his eulogizers). Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Brenner accorded great significance to “the ways of the abyss of madness, the doubts and the exertion of mental fortitude.” (*Collected Writings of Brenner* [Hebrew], 3:657. In the original context this was written with regards to Nietzsche.)

In any case, this is a powerful conceptualization, and I would recommend that the reader begin with the final chapter and thereafter turn to the in-depth study of the details of Brenner's life that have, for the first time, been so extensively and spectacularly explored by Anita Shapira.

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Marc Shapiro. *Changing the Immutable: How Orthodox Judaism Rewrites Its History*. Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2015. 347 pp.
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Readers familiar with Marc Shapiro's wildly popular blog posts will confront a familiar product when they open and read this book. As they do in the blog, they will find here an encyclopedic knowledge of the subject, a willingness to enter into the smallest detail and follow the most interesting and sometimes