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Book Review: A Jewish Life on Three Continents: The Memoir of Menachem Mendel Frieden

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Frieden, Menachem Mendel, *A Jewish life on three continents: the memoir of Menachem Mendel Frieden*, translated, edited, and annotated and with an introduction and afterword by Lee Shai Weissbach, 470 pp., ISBN 978-0-8047-8363-7

The memoir of Menachem Frieden (1878-1963) makes a significant scholarly contribution to the study of a tumultuous era influenced by Haskalah, great waves of migration, and nation building, depicting life in the shtetl, mass migration from Eastern Europe to America, and the creation of the modern Jewish homeland in Israel. The scope covers several generations of family history, early years in a Lithuanian village, schooling and the life of Yeshivah students, courtship, marriage, the tensions between Hasidic elements of his family and anti-Hasidic Mitnagdic members, travel and readjustment that comes with migration, business experience as a peddler in the south of U.S.A., business entrepreneurship in Norfolk Va., and settlement in Palestine in 1921 up to the middle of the 20th century.

While Frieden's memoir seeks to transmit his own family memories, one of its strengths is that it also aims to place those events in their historical context. Thus, for example, we learn through this deeply personal story aspects of the impact of the Arab riots of 1929, and early of the functioning of charity organizations in 19th century Palestine. The memoir offers a window on the generation of Jews who lived through great transformations of Jewish life.

Frieden's identity is grounded by his refusal to forget his roots in the old country, the folkways of Ashkenazic Jewry. His identity is not that of what Sander Gilman identifies as a self-hating Jew (*On the Origins of Jewish Self Hatred*, 2012), but rather is outspokenly proud of his Jewish heritage. Frieden openly bemoans his choices that took him away from Jewish tradition, and chose to record his memoirs so that others may learn from his mistakes and avoid making them in the future. His voice is jaded with the sadness of abandoning his yeshiva studies and his admiration, valorization and respect for learned rabbis that means the most to him. While Frieden clearly pursued being a devoted family man, dutiful son, loving husband, and concerned and caring father, in the end it is being a part of something greater than the self, being a part of a living tradition, that Frieden values. Frieden confesses that he regrets not accepting an offer to lead one of Norfolk's synagogues, which he speculates would have led to his children being educated differently. Yet Frieden states he has no "Nietzschean" regrets about marrying a second time or making *aliyah*.

His memoir also sheds light on the many Jews who came to Palestine but did not take up agricultural development. Frieden's worked in banking, seeking to bring American "know-how" to help establish an urban entrepreneurial infra-structure in the *yishuv*. His identity is that of a strong Zionist. Thus Frieden's identity of a family patriarch often gives him a pedagogic voice and role to transmit to future family generational memories of religious rituals and customs that he wishes his heirs to remember. Some readers may be challenged identifying individual personalities of the times, geographic locations of eastern Europe, allusions to Rabbinic commentators such as the Maharsha, and Yiddish novelists like Shomer that were a part of the common culture of the Eastern European Jew. Frieden's identity is informed by the concept of "yerida" in Jewish history, that each generation is of a lower stature than the previous one, and thus his goal takes on a pedagogic force to transmit and keep alive for Jewish continuity the religious fervor, culture, and folkways of the past generations.

Frieden's frequent moments of introspection about turning points in his life sheds light on his identity and what he valued in life, to take the best of the new but not forget the good of the past. Frieden at times bares his soul so that readers may learn from his life experience. Ardent Zionism is a particularly strong component of his identity and his goal to bring American "know-how" to better the land of Israel. The fact that Frieden chose to write his memoir in Hebrew, although he was fluent in Yiddish and English, represents his view that Hebrew language – as the shared language of the Jewish people – constituted an essential component of Jewish identity, along with belief in one God and devotion to the Jewish homeland.

Perhaps a weakness of the memoir is that Frieden devotes so little attention to the Holocaust, although he does note in passing that some members of his family were murdered by the Nazis. He may be repressing the trauma of what Emil Fackenheim locates as a unique *caesura*, break, fissure, and rupture that separates modernity from post-modernity. Alternatively, he may be reluctant to discuss freely this catastrophe and its aftermath while in the wake of its shock because, as Nietzsche says, the ugly truth is too much to bear. Or as a Zionist, Frieden may ultimately believe in the negation of the diaspora, *shlilat ha-galut*, which for some radical Zionists is confirmed by the Holocaust.

Frieden is not timid to express critical opinions, such as his low assessment of American Jewry, whose "shallow" minds he feels are primarily occupied with business and materialism, the constant pursuit of hedonistic pleasure in sex and food, and fleeting popular fame. Frieden

believes American Jewry to be populated by “fat cats” who spend much time “dozing, yawning, and burping.” Frieden’s greatest sadness for the unrealized potential of post-war American Jewry is for their ignorance of their Jewish heritage. Frieden is equally outspoken in his dislike for the British occupation of Palestine and seems more sympathetic to the ideology of Jabotinski’s revisionism, and the political parties of Menachem Begin’s Irgun and its tactics to “bomb the British out” rather than David Ben-Gurion’s *Haganah* strategy to negotiate with the British and achieve their goals through diplomacy. In the memoir Frieden is brutally blunt at times when he expresses dislike for certain individuals and grateful when he recollects his debt to his teacher Rabbi Pinchas Lintrup, who he praises as “a great scholar, a very good person, full of ideas.”

Frieden’s memoir is recommended for all Jewish studies collections, especially those with an interest in Zionism, American and Israeli History, Jewish Sociology, Demographic studies, and for any scholars interested in the genre of memoir writing.

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