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Book Review: Monsters and Monstrosity in Jewish History: From the Middle Ages to Modernity edited by Iris Idelson-Shein and Christian Wiese

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Book Review

Monsters and Monstrosity in Jewish History: From the Middle Ages to Modernity

Edited by Iris Idelson-Shein and Christian Wiese. Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. xiv + 269 pp.

The past two decades have witnessed a surge of interest in monsters and the monstrous, but none from the perspective of Jewish studies except for some of the work of David Ruderman, who in a number of pioneering articles in the 1970s and 1980s analyzed early modern Jewish representations of conjoined twins, unicorns, and child prodigies, shedding light on the relationship of monsters and omens, teratology, and anthropology, science, religion, and magic. In addition, Jay Geller's *Bestiarium Judaicum: Unnatural Histories of the Jews* (2018) investigates the productive relationship between the animalization of Jews in Christian works, up to the depiction of animals in works by Kafka and Freud.

Thus this timely, well-written, erudite, well-researched book imports the increasing interest in monstrosity into the field of Jewish studies. The book gathers the scholarship of fourteen distinguished international academics, shows how, as Joshua Trachtenberg did, the mechanism by which Jews as the feared "outsider and other" have been demonized negatively into monsters by medieval Christians. Robert Chazan, Miri Rubin, and Sara Lipton have shown it was during the Middle Ages that the Jewish otherness coupled with Christian theology led to accusations of host desecrations, well poisonings, and ritual murder.

Its scope is from the medieval times to the modernity from the interdisciplinary methodologies of the perspectives of history, literature, anthropology, folklore, and history of science, art history, and religion, across geographical boundaries. Yet the book goes beyond Trachtenberg's seminal studies and is not susceptible to what Baron calls

“the lachrymose conception of Jewish history”; that is, the history of persecution in the diaspora, by demonstrating how Jews have sometimes subversively polemically flipped the image of monstrosity, a kind of Freudian sublimation and projection, onto their enemies—be they Christian Jew haters or secular Nazis as internally ethically bankrupt. For example, Kabalek’s chapter 7 in part analyzes the representations of Simon Wiesenthal’s representations of Nazis as monsters.

The book is in two parts. The first explores the predominance of images of monsters in Jewish Christian interreligious and intercultural encounter. In chapter 1 Krummel and Mittman examine *Beowulf* alongside the Old English Exodus, demonstrating how pursuing monsters sheds light on cultural intersections. In chapter 2 Strickland exposes images of medieval monstrous Jews in the painter Hieronymus Bosch, who uses Jewish racial stereotypes of physical features such as long noses, beards, and dark skin to represent Jews as well as Jews’ associations with toads, owls, asses, pigs, and scorpions. In chapter 3 Epstein considers the Duke of Sussex Pentateuch from the fourteenth century in southern Germany, whereby four monstrous figures are depicted representing different types of gentiles juxtaposed with four images of anti-Jewish tropes of Jews. In chapter 4 Guesnet examines matted hair assumed to be the work of demons called *Plica Polonica* [Polish plait] or *Judenzopf* [Jewish braid] as a marker of contamination and transgression. In chapter 5 Jacobs offers a close reading of Oskar Panizza’s *The Operated Goy* (1922) and Salomo Friedlaender’s *The Operated Jew* (1893) to reveal how science can create monstrosity. In chapter 6 Gelbin looks at Weimar cinematic expressionism. Her examples are Paul Wegener’s *Der Golem* (1920), Friedrich Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922), and Richard Oswald’s *Anders als die Anderen* (1919) to reveal anti-Jewish stereotypes and iconographies of horror. In chapter 6, drawing creatively on Lyotard and other postmodern philosophers, Kabalek analyses Holocaust testimonies that represent the Nazi persecutors and their collaborators as moral monsters, and also addresses the image of the *Muselmänner* as an image of degraded monstrosity created by the Nazis who worked the *Muselmänner* to death.

Part 2 looks at “the Jewish monsters” within the European Jewish communities’ self-perception and intracommunal meanings of monstrosity. In chapter 8 Shyovitz considers the monstrous inhabitants on the realm of Tevel from the seventh- to eighth-century cosmological text *Seder rabbah de Bereshit*. In chapter 9 Rotman considers the marriage of a Jewish man with a she-demon, revealing its misogyny and fear of women. In chapter 10 Lembke considers the Yiddish *Mayse bukh*, which depicts a rabbi turned werewolf. Chapter 11 reproduces an essay by Ruderman focusing on Abraham Yagel’s intertwining of monstrosity with science, religion, and magic. In Chapter 12 Kahana continues to examine the attitudes toward monstrosity, magic, and science in nineteenth-century Ashkenaz by focusing on the work of the Hatam Sofer (1762–1839) in performing exorcisms and deploying amulets. In the final chapter Jay Geller looks at the Jewish werewolf represented in H. Leivick’s poetic chronicle “Der Volf,” which depicts a rabbi who, awaking from the aftermath of a pogrom, is transformed into a werewolf. Geller shows the identification of Jews with wolves representing those outside the law, rapaciousness, and cruelty, and dovetails his analysis of this work with that of Bialik’s *be’ir ha-harigah*, in which the Jewish victims of the Kishneff pogrom are viewed by their persecutors as dogs, while Bialik in turn characterizes the murders and rapists of the Kishneff pogrom as *chazirey ya’ar* [wild boars]. Bialik is critical of the Jewish men who acted as mice rather than lions in fighting back. Geller might have drawn on how Agnon wrote a kind of midrash to Bialik’s poem in his short story “Ma’aseh ha-ez.”

One caveat regarding the book is that I would have liked a separate essay in disability studies regarding Jewish law’s compassionate ethical treatment of persons with birth defects. Biblical injunctions such as not to put a stumbling block before the blind all attest, as does the Rabbi of Prague Eleazar Fleckeles, “any creature born to a human mother bears the right to life no matter how malformed and abnormally different.”¹ A second caveat is that the book focusses on monsters primarily in Jewish Ashkenazi discourse, with some exceptions such as Shyovitz and Ruderman’s chapters (8 and 11). As recognized by the editors it is a hope

that future studies in the Jewish studies will provide insight into the place of monsters in history of other Jewish diasporas (8). A third caveat is that a chapter on the medieval conception of the Leviathan would be relevant. Recently Eliyahu Munks' new collection has an essay tracing the monster Leviathan and its reception in medieval exegesis.

This book will be of great interest as a resource for academics, postgraduates, and advanced undergraduates interested in the field of Jewish studies as well as the history of monsters [*mifletset*] and monstrosity, or what in old Yiddish is called *ungehuer* and *schleußlich*.

NOTE

1. Fleckeles, *Responsa Teshuva*, 1:30b, 53.

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