

Zitierhinweis

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ASTRID ZAJDBAND, *German Rabbis in British Exile: From 'Heimat' into the Unknown* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2016), viii + 321 pp. ISBN 978 3 11 046948 6. €79.95. US\$112.00. £59.99

The subject of Astrid Zajdband's doctoral dissertation, completed at the University of Sussex, is those German-speaking rabbis who fled Germany to escape Nazi persecution between 1933 and 1939. The second part of its title, 'From "Heimat" into the Unknown', accurately reflects the author's interest in the painful journey of these refugees from initial flight to eventual integration into British society. Unsurprisingly, therefore, much of Zajdband's methodological approach focuses on questions of ethnicity and identity, the idea of cultural transfer, and network analysis.

However, a closer look at the title also reveals one of the main unresolved difficulties of this book. Zajdband argues convincingly in her introduction that 'German rabbis in British exile' should be seen as a discrete group among refugees, with their own specific characteristics, warranting a more explicit analysis of their life in exile. For example, she pays close attention to the way in which rabbis represented a link between religious practice and questions of ethnicity – two areas which are key to understanding German Jewry. She also rightly underlines the difficult duality of their position; rabbis were victims of Nazi persecution, yet at the same time, bore the responsibility for supporting and comforting other Jewish emigrants. But unfortunately, it is never entirely clear whom Zajdband is talking about. The reader is never quite sure whether 'German rabbis' here means only rabbis who were German citizens, or all rabbis who spoke German. This may seem a minor quibble, but in fact, several of the rabbis who appear in her study were born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and studied or worked, at least for some of the time, in an Austrian or Czechoslovakian context, where Jewish communities, especially the more liberal among them, were influenced by different reform traditions. It was not unusual for German-speaking rabbis between the wars to have worked in Germany, Austria, and the German-speaking communities in Czechoslovakia, which leads us to ask what Zajdband actually means when she speaks of a 'German rabbinate'. Clearly, it included *Doktorrabbiner* from the great

Trans. Emily Richards (GHIL).

seminaries in Breslau or Berlin, as well as others entitled to bear a doctoral title or who had served as rabbis to Jewish soldiers at the Front during the First World War. It would have been helpful to have a more explicit and more rounded definition of the 'German rabbinat', which would have added some much-needed depth to Zajdband's subsequent analysis of the cultural transfer that rabbis in the United Kingdom experienced.

This difficulty, however, is closely bound up with the author's methodological approach. Zajdband chooses a traditional structure for her dissertation, with the four main sections preceded by a 'Literaturbericht' and a note on method. The latter is used to explain central concepts such as 'exile' or the idea of 'Jewish leadership' based on the model of the three 'Ketarim' (crowns) developed by Daniel J. Eleazar and others. This model offers a differentiated perspective on the various and changing areas in which rabbis exercised authority or carried out tasks within the remit of their individual communities. Zajdband also comprehensively discusses various aspects of 'ethnicity' and 'identity', giving particular consideration to the process of ethnogenesis. This process, according to Zajdband, was responsible for groups of migrants splitting off into various subgroups based on ethnic and/or linguistic differences; but on the other hand, the eventual reversal of the process helped the refugees to become more integrated in the diverse society of their new country. If one is to believe the author, this was a relatively linear process, offering little room for a multifaceted concept of identity, or for a situative self-view of the actors concerned. This is shown, for example, when Zajdband discusses the fact that most German rabbis were only able to become British citizens after the war, when they were no longer 'German' and were therefore no longer 'caught between two identities' (p. 227). Nationality here is seen not as just one facet of identity but as its focal point – a point of view that the reader is likely to stumble over, given the almost exaggerated weight given to questions of identity and identities in current research.

It is perhaps this somewhat rigid theoretical approach that inhibits Zajdband from fully engaging the reader with her otherwise extremely interesting subject. We learn, for example, that communities in the early 1950s began to reject traditional German-style sermons that were characterized by a learned and 'lofty style' (p. 251). This led to the younger generation of rabbis – who had generally left

Germany for the UK immediately after completing their training—gradually replacing their older, German-speaking colleagues. Zajdband ascribes this to the fact that the younger rabbis, thanks to their skills in English and their military service during the war, knew far more about British society than the older rabbis and therefore, she argues, saw no reason to take up the mantle of their German preaching heritage. Ultimately, so her argument, the British Jewish majority were therefore responsible for the break with this tradition.

But this is not an entirely satisfying argument, as it fails to go into the subject matter in as much depth as one could wish. For example, one could ask whether certain elements of the ‘German’ preaching style became incorporated into its later English equivalent; a question that cannot be answered without a comparison of different sermons, which would admittedly be extremely difficult to carry out given that most sermons were never written down. The author could also have turned to the members of the communities themselves for help on this point, as it may be assumed that such changes in tradition did not go entirely unnoticed. Finally, it would have been helpful to have even a brief comparative discussion of the situation in the USA, where German-speaking rabbis were present in greater numbers than in the UK.

Overall, however, Zajdband’s work contributes many important insights on the continuance of the German-speaking rabbinic tradition in Anglo-American countries, for example, in her discussion of how German-speaking rabbis helped build new communities in Britain and Ireland (chapter 4). She also provides a well-informed overview of rabbinic activity in Germany before 1938 (chapter 1), a detailed description of the experience of flight and exile based on numerous ego documents written by the émigrés themselves or their descendants (chapter 2), and an analysis of the difficulties they encountered starting over in a new country (chapter 3). The period she chooses for her study is also convincing; the book’s closure with the death of Leo Baeck, the most important representative of (liberal) German-speaking Jewry, in 1956, makes sense in the context of the author’s inclusionist approach, as it gives the work a perspective transcending the war and immediate post-war years.

It is a shame, therefore, that the publishers did not take a little more care with the editing process; the book includes numerous minor errors such as sentences that begin with minuscule letters or

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missing punctuation (as on p. 103), and more distressingly (at least for a German reader), the repeated unreflected use of 'Machtergreifung' instead of a more neutral equivalent (e.g. p. 58 and p. 261). A more attentive editor could easily have ironed out these problems. Nonetheless, Zajdband's study is well worth reading. We may hope that it will encourage more readers and researchers to engage with a German(-speaking)/British/Jewish history that can be described, in the best sense, as truly transnational.

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