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Review essay:

Moving towards Disability-Jewish histories

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Review essay

Moving towards Disability-Jewish histories

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The field of disability history began to develop in the 1990s, as part of politically engaged scholarship concerning disabled people.¹ Seeking to address harmful stereotypes and to amplify the voices of disabled people, historical research into disability can be considered a tool of disability activism. Scholarship in this field, drawing on the “social model of disability”, has focused on the social construction of disability and impairment across different historical contexts, cultures, and time periods, as well as groups of people.² As such, disability, alongside other forms of marginality like Deafness and neurodivergence can be understood as analytical perspectives on which historians can draw, in a similar fashion to race, gender, sexuality, or class.³ In turn, this provides for a myriad interdisciplinary and intersectional research opportunities with other fields and marginalized groups to promote new insights

1 Daniel Blackie and Alexia Moncrieff, “State of the Field: Disability History”, *History* 107, no. 377 (2022): 2–3.

2 The social model of disability refers to the principle that disability is a socially created identity, enforced onto certain groups of people due to physical, psychological, or behavioural impairments. This model moves the locus of disability from individual deficit to structural and societal powers; Tom Shakespeare, “The Social Model of Disability”, in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2010), 197; Michael Rembis, “Challenging the Impairment/Disability Divide: Disability History and the Social Model of Disability”, in *The Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, ed. Nick Watson and Simo Vehmas (New York: Routledge, 2019), 379.

3 This article generally uses language referring to disability and marginality present in the publications highlighted. The term “marginality” is used as an umbrella for different groups of disabled and neurodivergent people, alongside others ostracized socially and economically. Language around Deaf people and Deafness generally uses the capital “D” to refer to the specific identity of Deaf communities and identities. However, in some circumstances, deaf or D/deaf is used to refer to hearing-impaired groups broadly. In my research I recognize the identity and communal differences between Deaf and deaf groups; see Jemina Napier, “The D/Deaf—H/Hearing Debate”, *Sign Language Studies* 2, no. 2 (2002): 141–2; Blackie and Moncrieff, “State of the Field”, 4–5. For ethical and research implications for the D/deaf perspective, see also Annelies Kusters, Maartje De Meulder, and Dai O'Brien, eds., *Innovations in Deaf Studies: The Role of Deaf Scholars. Perspectives on Deafness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

and analyses of benefit to a number of disciplines. This article seeks to consider Jewish history and disability history to consider the potential of such intersectional approaches.

Both Jewish studies and disability history are concerned with concepts of difference and discrimination. From biblical and ancient history to modern antisemitism and the Holocaust, marginality and oppression are common ideas throughout Jewish history. For the majority of their history, Jewish communities have existed as minority ethno-religious groups in non-Jewish societies, perceived as a religious, spiritual, racial, ethnic, cultural, or bodily “other”. In considering the “otherness” that Jewish people have often represented to non-Jewish societies, disability and other forms of marginality present powerful avenues of analytic consideration. The extent to which anti-Jewish and antisemitic caricatures regarding Jewish bodies, facial features, or health may be given extra weight in the context of ableism and disablism in wider society.⁴ However, consideration of disability studies and Jewish studies must also consider the experiences of marginality from a Jewish perspective. How are disabled, neurodivergent and/or D/deaf people represented in the Torah and religious responsa? What rights do disabled people have under Halakhic law, and how have these changed over time? In what ways are disabled people supported or included, or stigmatized and excluded, within modern Jewish communities? This is not an exhaustive list of possible research avenues, but such questions seek to demonstrate the variety of ways in which disability studies and Jewish studies can be considered together. I also shall address the political impetus often behind disability histories.

New strides into the Disability-Jewish histories cannot, nevertheless, be made without an exploration of existing scholarship. This article serves as a hybrid book review and exploration piece, seeking to outline some notable scholarship regarding the study of disability/disabled people, and Judaism/Jewish history/Jewish people. My aim is to promote consideration of disability studies and Jewish studies, and to highlight existing work in the field, providing future scholarship with a launching

4 The term “disablism” is used throughout this article, as opposed to “ableism”. While both terms refer to discrimination against disabled people, the focus is different. Ableism refers to the preference given to able-bodied or non-disabled people, whereas disablism refers to “discriminatory, oppressive or abusive behaviour arising from the belief that disabled people are inferior to others”; Mark Deal, “Aversive Disablism: Subtle Prejudice toward Disabled People”, *Disability & Society* 22, no. 1 (1 January 2007): 95. Given this article’s contents, the distinction between the terms is important.

point. Subsequently, the main focus of this article will consist of three book reviews, conducted specifically for this article. These books are *Deaf People in Hitler's Europe*, edited by Donna F. Ryan and John S. Schuchman (Washington DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2002), *On the Margins of a Minority: Leprosy, Madness, and Disability among the Jews of Medieval Europe*, by Ephraim Shoham-Steiner (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2014), and *Stepchildren of the Shtetl: The Destitute, Disabled, and Mad of Jewish Eastern Europe, 1800–1939* by Natan M. Meir (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2020). These books have been selected because of their overall focus on disability, neurodiversity, and D/deafness (as well as other forms of marginality) in a variety of periods. Following these reviews, a number of discussion topics will be outlined, drawing on ideas present in all three books, and other publications or research.

Indeed, there are other publications within Jewish studies or about Jewish history that do consider disability as a category of historical inquiry, but not as a primary, singular focus as in the books in question. Research in the historiography ranges from the use of disability to conceptualize the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, by Julia Watts Belser, to Jewish social work and welfare in the Weimar Republic, by Sharon Gillerman.⁵ Furthermore, literature has explored the treatment of disabled, neurodivergent, and D/deaf Jews in Jewish communities, remarking on the exclusion of deaf and other disabled people from Orthodox communities in early twentieth-century Germany, or children with special educational needs in the Hasidic community of Kiryas Joel.⁶ Another vital detail may be the work of Jewish scholars in disability-related research. This could include Henry Friedlander's establishment of Nazi discrimination of disabled, neurodivergent, and D/deaf people in the Holocaust, and Sander Gilman's extensive range of research interests in the history of medicine, Jewish culture, and antisemitism, among other

5 Julia Watts Belser, *Rabbinic Tales of Destruction: Gender, Sex, and Disability in the Ruins of Jerusalem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Sharon Gillerman, *Germans into Jews: Remaking the Jewish Social Body in the Weimar Republic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009). For another publication on the ancient world, see Lennart Lehmhaus, "An Amputee May Go out with His Wooden Aid on Shabbat': Dynamics of Prosthetic Discourse in Talmudic Traditions", in *Prostheses in Antiquity*, ed. Jane Draycott (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 97–124.

6 Bernard Wasserstein, *On the Eve: The Jews of Europe before the Second World War* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2012); David N. Myers and Nomi M. Stolzenberg, *American Shtetl: The Making of Kiryas Joel, a Hasidic Village in Upstate New York* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).

important topics.⁷ This canon could also include important scholars in the field of disability studies of Jewish identity or heritage, such as Lennard J. Davis, Simi Linton, and Victor Finkelstein.⁸

Moreover, there is a range of literature regarding religious, rabbinical, and legal interpretations of disability within Jewish studies.⁹ This article is focused on the sociohistorical study of disability and disabled people in line with the growing field of disability history. Nevertheless, scholarship concerning Jewish religious texts, theology, and law are pivotal to the conception of disabled Jews historically, and some of the authors featured in this review refer heavily to these sources. Yet, the publications also contextualize these laws and practices in their time period, considering the lived experience of disabled, neurodivergent, and D/deaf Jews in more detail. Finally, this article refers to a number of distressing topics, including antisemitism, disablism and ableism, the Holocaust, and gender-based discrimination.

7 Henry Friedlander, *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Sander L. Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Gilman, *Jewish Frontiers: Essays on Bodies, Histories, and Identities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Gilman, "Madness as Disability", *History of Psychiatry* 25, no. 4 (December 2014): 441–9; Gilman, *Stand Up Straight!: A History of Posture* (London: Reaktion, 2018); Gilman and James M. Thomas, *Are Racists Crazy? How Prejudice, Racism, and Antisemitism Became Markers of Insanity* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

8 Lennard J. Davis, ed., *The Disability Studies Reader*, 5th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016); Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso Books, 1995); Davis, *Beginning with Disability: A Primer* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Linton, *My Body Politic: A Memoir* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006); Victor Finkelstein, *Changing Attitudes and Disabled People: Issues for Discussion* (New York: International Exchange of Information in Rehabilitation, 1980); Victor Finkelstein, *Disability: Identity Sexuality and Relationships*, Student Pack (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991); John Swain et al., *Disabling Barriers . . . Enabling Environments* (London, SAGE Publications, 1993).

9 See e.g. Judith Z. Abrams and William C. Gaventa, eds., *Jewish Perspectives on Theology and the Human Experience of Disability* (New York: Routledge, 2006); William Cutter, ed., *Healing and the Jewish Imagination: Spiritual and Practical Perspectives on Judaism and Health* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2008); Ethan Eisen, "Sexuality and Physical Disability: Perspectives and Practice within Orthodox Judaism", in *The Routledge Handbook of Disability and Sexuality*, ed. Russell Shuttleworth and Linda Mona (London: Routledge, 2020); Mike Gulliver and William John Lyons, "Conceptualizing the Place of Deaf People in Ancient Israel: Suggestions from Deaf Space", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137, no. 3 (2018): 537–53; Tzvi Marx, *Halakha and Handicap Jewish Law and Ethics on Disability* (Jerusalem, 1993); Darla Schumm and Michael Stoltzfus, eds., *Disability in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Sacred Texts, Historical Traditions, and Social Analysis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

Deaf People in Hitler's Europe, edited by Donna F. Ryan and John S. Schuchman (Washington DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2002), ISBN 1-56368-126-9, \$28.95.

The Holocaust appears to be an obvious point of entry in the consideration of Disability-Jewish histories. Disabled people and Jews were explicitly targeted by the Nazis, outlining potent linkages between antisemitism and disablism under eugenics and science reform. The growth of eugenic science, medicine, and the biological conceptualization of race grew increasingly popular in the early twentieth century. Proponents of negative eugenics sought to eliminate groups of people they deemed “unworthy”. Moreover, the physical and psychological injuries endured by Jewish people in the Holocaust prompt a consideration of the lasting effects of these events. Indeed, what of those disabled Jews who faced targeted discrimination of two parts of their lived experiences?

In this context, the collection *Deaf People in Hitler's Europe*, edited by Donna F. Ryan and John S. Schuchman, can be fully appreciated in that it interrogates such sensitive questions. This collection was published by Gallaudet University Press, in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and emerged from a conference which took place in Washington DC in June 1998. As the title suggests, the book outlines the events of the Holocaust with a specific focus on Deaf individuals and communities. The collection is split into three distinct sections, the first concerning the eugenic ideologies and practices of the Nazi movement; the second concerning the experiences of Deaf people and communities in Nazi Germany; and the third concerning the experiences and testimonies of Hungarian Deaf Jews. Throughout, the authors are acutely aware of the intersections between Deaf and Jewish experiences in this volatile period, and the volume works hard to outline the specific experiences of Deaf Jews before and during the Nazi era.

In fact, the historiographic and methodological aspects of the volume's creation are equally as interesting as its contents. Ryan notes in the preface a lack of contact between professional oral historians and Deaf community oral historians during the 1998 conference, and the general lack of research concerning Deaf communities in Nazi Germany (this is the language used by Ryan in her preface, viii).¹⁰ In the two decades since,

¹⁰ Donna F. Ryan, “Preface”, in *Deaf People in Hitler's Europe*, ed. Donna F. Ryan and John S. Schuchman (Washington DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2002), viii.

research into Deaf people and Deaf Jews in Nazi Germany has continued, notably with the work of Mark Zaurov.¹¹ At the turn of the millennium, however, Ryan and Schuchman's collection provides ground-breaking insights into the experiences of Deaf Germans and Deaf Jews in this period.

The chapters in the first section focus on the growth of Nazi medicine and eugenic practices that impacted both Jews and other groups of disabled people. The chapters by Henry Friedlander, Robert N. Proctor, and Patricia Heberer outline the ways in which the Nazi's medical, sterilization, and "euthanasia" programmes originated with the treatment of neurodivergent, physically disabled, and D/deaf people. Later, these "solutions" were ultimately applied to the "Jewish problem". In creating these links, the authors indicate ways in which racial antisemitism and disablism in the medical sphere overlapped according to eugenic racial and biological science. Both Friedlander and Heberer, for instance, specifically refer to the creation of the Aktion T4 euthanasia programme, which was initially used to exterminate different groups of disabled people in Germany. Later, the technology for this programme and its operators were employed across Poland and concentration camps for exterminating Jews and others who did not fit into the Nazis' *Volksgemeinschaft* (folk's community, used by the Nazi party to evoke the idea of a national or racial community and promote national unity).¹² Nevertheless, only Heberer focuses specifically on this connection, which in some ways is appropriate given the volume's broader primary focus on locating D/deaf people in Nazi atrocities. Primarily, for instance, these chapters centre on the practices of sterilization and euthanasia in different contexts. Heberer's chapter focuses on the specific policies and legislation employed by the Nazis, whereas Proctor outlines how the medical community helped to create the racialized politics practised by the Nazis. In this regard, this section of book provides an excellent overview of the crimes perpetrated

11 Mark Zaurov, "'Deaf Holocaust': Deaf Jews and their 'True' Communication in the Nazi Concentration Camps", in *Interpreting in Nazi Concentration Camps*, ed. Michaela Wolf (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 135–45; Zaurov, "Rediscovering the Memory of the Jewish Deaf Community and the Deaf Holocaust: A Question of Human Rights according to the UN CRPD, with Differentiation from Forced Sterilization and 'Action T4'", in *Between Heteronomy and Autonomy: New Impulses for the History of the Deaf in Germany, Austria and Switzerland*, ed. Marion Schmidt and Anja Werner (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2019), 263–292.

12 Henry Friedlander, "Holocaust Studies and the Deaf Community", in Ryan and Schuchman, *Deaf People in Hitler's Europe*, 26.

on D/deaf people as well as on disabled groups by the Nazi regime, and the medical eugenics which justified such actions. This adds powerful context to other aspects of the Nazi's eugenic ideologies, particularly regarding racial politics and antisemitism. For the purposes of this article, the ease with which these links can be made highlights the multitude of intersections in this period of history.

The second section of the collection underscores the varied, and seemingly incongruent, experiences of Deaf people in Germany before and during the Nazi regime. Chapters in this section explore Deaf involvement with the Nazi party, such as the merger of Deaf communal organizations under the Nazis, Deaf membership of the Hitler Youth or Storm Troops (SA), and marginalization of Deaf Jews from the wider Deaf community. These chapters also highlight the discrimination and sterilization laws that the Deaf people faced under the Nazis. Detailing these examples, Jochen Muhs draws from interviews with Deaf Germans, aiming to help them "become aware of their own past", as the unique complexities of the community's relationship to Nazi ideology and Nazi party was, up to that point, largely ignored by the contemporary D/deaf community.¹³ Similarly, John S. Schuchmann explores a film entitled *Verkannte Menschen* (Misjudged People), made by the German Deaf community in 1932. Created as a positive representation of Deaf communities and individuals in Germany, the film was, unsurprisingly, banned by Nazi authorities. Through these chapters, the Nazis' view of D/deaf individuals as biologically inferior is made clear, encompassing all D/deaf people, and not simply the "hereditarily deafened" or "diseased".¹⁴ Chapters in this section also focus on deaf schools, such as the inclusion of a 1934 article written for the *Journal for the Education of the Deaf*, which argued against education programmes for all deaf people on biological grounds, or the chapter by Horst Biesold, which demonstrates that educators of Deaf children actively supported racial hygiene measures.¹⁵ Overall, this section of the collection greatly contextualizes D/deaf German history during the Nazi regime, presenting complex narratives in an engaging manner.

13 Jochen Muhs, "Deaf People as Eyewitnesses of National Socialism", in Ryan and Schuchman, *Deaf People in Hitler's Europe*, 93–5.

14 John S. Schuchman, "Misjudged People: The German Deaf Community in 1932", in Ryan and Schuchman, *Deaf People in Hitler's Europe*, 108.

15 Kurt Lietz, "The Place of the School for the Deaf in the New Reich", trans. Tobias Brill, in Ryan and Schuchman, *Deaf People in Hitler's Europe*, 114–20; Horst Biesold, "Teacher-Collaborators", trans. William Sayers, in *ibid.*, 121–63.

Importantly, chapters in this section also stress the discrimination that D/deaf Jews faced in Germany from the wider Deaf community. The chapter by Muhs in particular highlights these cases, such as the presence of antisemitic headlines in national Deaf newspapers, expulsion of Jewish children from secular Deaf schools, or removal of Deaf Jews from membership and positions of leadership in Deaf people's organizations (90–93). In doing so, these examples highlight ways in which Deaf Germans were occasionally complicit in Nazi atrocities. Yet, Muhs also points out that many Deaf people had only fragmented information about the discrimination that both Deaf and hearing Jews faced, particularly as the communities became separated from each other (79, 92). These chapters begin to navigate the historical complexities of this subject matter, aiming to outline how Deaf people and Jews related to one another in this context, and the impact this had on Deaf Jews in Germany. Nevertheless, this topic probably requires further consideration, particularly as it proves a powerful example of how marginalized groups may view each other in times of crisis. Muhs cites a specific lack of availability of resources regarding the Deaf Jews in Germany due to the nearly complete destruction of this community's population (92). Indeed, this is a common issue associated with the study of such marginal groups, and one that is worthy of further exploration.

These concepts are expanded on in the next section, which focuses entirely on the experiences of D/deaf Jews in Hungary during the Holocaust. The editors Ryan and Schuchman interviewed more than a dozen D/deaf Holocaust survivors, who then spoke at the 1998 conference in Washington DC. This section comprises two chapters, the first being a narrative constructed by Schuchman using the testimonies of the interviewed survivors, and the second being transcripts of the original testimonies.¹⁶ They powerfully demonstrate the ways in which Jewishness and Deafness interacted for these individuals during this time. The majority of these testimonies indicate that antisemitism was the core basis for discriminatory actions suffered, but the lived experience of Deafness provided additional complications in their survival. Examples of this include the inability to hear orders from militiamen, resulting in the murder of a young Deaf Jewish man, or camp guards assuming Deaf people were unable to perform adequate work in slave-labour factories,

¹⁶ Donna F. Ryan, "Part III: The Jewish Deaf Experience: Introduction", in Ryan and Schuchman, *Deaf People in Hitler's Europe*, 168.

thus deemed “useless”.¹⁷ As Schuchman points out, social and political differences between Hungary and Germany at different stages of the war may have resulted in different approaches to discrimination – namely, that antisemitism was a more powerful source of discrimination than disablism (193). This stands in contrast to the policies of Nazi Germany explored earlier in the book, in which the mechanisms of the T4 Euthanasia programme targeted disabled people before Jewish populations. Nevertheless, the testimonies of these survivors give powerful examples of the intersections of the lived experiences of Deafness and Jewish identification during the Holocaust.

Moreover, this chapter makes an additional, powerful link to the previous section of the volume, via the framing of the Mexico Street School, a Jewish school for deaf and blind children in Budapest, which later became a site of refuge for Jews during the violent war years. Under the Nazi occupation, social activities and organizations for Deaf Hungarians ceased, and the Mexico Street School accordingly became the sole communal space for Deaf Jews. Earlier chapters in the volume highlight such specialist schools as markers of the lives of Deaf Jews. Yet, this section solidifies the impact this had on the identity formation of these individuals, in addition to helping them survive the war. Despite their lack of religious faith, the interviewees demonstrated their connection to a type of Jewish community via their continued return to the Mexico Street School. This serves to underscore the social and communal importance of specific Deaf Jewish schools, and the sociohistorical context that facilitated their creation and operation.

Following this, the final section of the collection features a short reflection by Peter Black consolidating the contents of the volume and its historiographic value, while calling for more research into this topic.

Overall, Ryan and Schuchman’s volume provides a powerful insight into the experience of D/deaf people during the Holocaust with a particular focus on the lives and experiences of Deaf Jews. The specific historiographical niche this publication addresses, particularly at the time of publication, is notable in building on the work of Holocaust scholars such as Henry Friedlander who began to identify disabled groups in the Holocaust in the late twentieth century.¹⁸ The subsequent focus on Jewish Deaf experiences by Ryan and Schuchman permits a deeper analytical lens

¹⁷ John S. Schuchman, “Hungarian Deaf Jews and the Holocaust”, in *ibid.*, 189.

¹⁸ Friedlander, *Origins of Nazi Genocide*; Friedlander, “Holocaust Studies and the Deaf Community”, 26.

into people belonging to this demographic. In this regard, the volume does not simply “fill in the gaps” regarding this history but demonstrates the unique perspectives that can be understood via this intersectional lens.

On the Margins of a Minority: Leprosy, Madness, and Disability among the Jews of Medieval Europe, by Ephraim Shoham-Steiner, translated by Haim Watzman (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2014), ISBN 978-0-8143-3931-2, \$49.99.

In the preface to *On the Margins of a Minority: Leprosy, Madness and Disability among the Jews of Medieval Europe*, Ephraim Shoham-Steiner details a personal encounter in the 1990s, when a neurodivergent Jewish man was not counted as part of a *minyan* (ix). Shoham-Steiner goes on to use this account to frame the wider importance of considering attitudes to marginal individuals within Jewish law, religious texts, and rabbinic interpretations to explore attitudes to the marginal in medieval European Jewish communities. Throughout this publication, the author effectively uses comparisons between the ancient Jewish world and the medieval to contrast attitudes regarding marginal members of these communities, alongside the evolution of religious and legal interpretations. In doing so, he invites readers to consider how attitudes to Jewish marginality have developed, from the ancient and medieval to the modern stigmatization of the neurodivergent man at the *minyan*. Only by understanding past interpretations of marginal individuals can we improve in the present.

The word “marginal” is useful when considering disability in medieval and ancient contexts. For example, this word allows Shoham-Steiner to encapsulate a variety of stigmatized members of the Jewish community based on their “objective states” and the broad “cultural-mental context” (3). He outlines that this is a deliberate choice, moving away from the language of “involuntary deviant” used in late twentieth-century social science scholarship, to remove the moral judgment which accompanies this phrase (9). The marginal people whom Shoham-Steiner explores – those identified in the title of the book as “lepers”, “mad persons”, or “disabled people” – did not choose their marginality. Thus, the negative judgment on their existence and behaviours as “deviant” is seemingly unfair to their experiences. The idea of marginality, however, lacks moral judgment, and serves as a prism to explore the values and attitudes of the Jewish society, law, and religious interpretation that marginalized them.

The publication is split into three sections, each comprising two chapters. Each section focuses on one type of marginality listed in the title: “leprosy”, “madness”, and “disability”. Largely, each section of the book follows a similar structure. The first chapter outlines the concept of the marginal status (as demonstrated in the fourth chapter title “What is Madness?”), alongside representations in religious or legal texts and different interpretations of such texts, medical definitions, use of language, and historiographical developments. The second chapter in each section is devoted to the social attitudes of European medieval Jewish groups towards the marginal individuals of each section. For instance, the third part of the book, concerning physical disability, uses its first chapter to outline Talmudic and Halakhic discussions about disabled individuals, and how this compared to the larger Christian societies which surrounded the Jewish communities of medieval Europe. Following this, the second chapter considers the ways in which Jews reacted to disabled members of their community. A key example of this is the inclusion of blind individuals in sacred prayer spaces (168–70). In Talmudic times, a visually impaired person was restricted from being called to the Torah to participate in the prayer service as they were required to read the text from the scroll (169). This also excluded those visually impaired who knew the text by heart (169). However, the author also uses these sections to explore changes in practices and values regarding the treatment of marginal people. The restrictions on visually impaired individuals changed in the fifteenth century, as generally by that point the service was led by a cantor who read from the Torah for those called up – thus allowing visually impaired people, as well as anyone deemed an “ignoramus”, to be called up to read (169). Using this structure, Shoham-Steiner effectively contextualizes and defines each type of marginality explored in the book, alongside the social realities of marginal status.

A key strength of the publication is the author’s awareness of the temporality and social construction of marginality. Throughout the text, Shoham-Steiner jumps between attitudes and sources from ancient periods, various medieval European Jewish communities, Jewish religious and legal texts from different areas or periods, and the wider Christian societies which encircled the Jewish community. In doing so, the key principle of his argument is made clear: Jewish attitudes to marginal individuals were a complex construction, stemming from a variety of conflicting sources. These sources include differing interpretations of religious and legal texts, values from wider non-Jewish society, the fear

of antisemitism, concepts of shame, embarrassment, and rationality, gender roles, and other factors. This approach highlights the importance of understanding marginality in a much wider context of the lives of ethnoreligious minorities, and their own positionality as an Other. The concluding chapter of the book emphasizes how relatively recent is this perspective on medieval Jewish histories, and considers how this may be applied to other periods. As will be explored in the next review, Natan M. Meir, historian of nineteenth-century European Jewry, builds on Shoham-Steiner's perspective in his scholarship on different eras of Jewish history.

The experiences of marginal Jews are not necessarily the focal point of the content. As Shoham-Steiner highlights, the nature of resources available to him necessitated the use of material that often only referred to marginal individuals, as opposed to accounts by or experiences of marginal individuals. As a result, most of the content focuses on examples of legal disputes including marginal people, most commonly divorce proceedings, and references to religious responsa, which demonstrate changing values towards marginal Jews. Often the invisibility of marginalized people in historical sources presents a key challenge in engaging with marginal histories. Yet, the resources available to Shoham-Steiner still allow for powerful conclusions to be drawn about the wider community. For instance, one of the author's key conclusions concerns the differences between rabbinic leaders and members of the public in response to marginal individuals. Through the analysis of the existence of and conclusion to disputes, Shoham-Steiner argues that the rabbinic elite seemingly wanted marginal people to remain members of the community instead of being outcast. This suggests a desire to include marginal people within these communities, and Shoham-Steiner's convincing analysis argues that in keeping marginal Jews within the community, Jewish authorities were able to protect the community from backlash by the non-Jewish majority. This is notable in the context of antisemitism or anti-Jewish sentiment, as illness, neurodiversity, and physical impairment may have been seen as confirmation of Jews as being immoral, evil, or cursed.¹⁹ This analysis is vital in considering general attitudes to disability, illness, and marginality in the era. However, it is still limited in terms of commenting specifically on the lived experiences of marginality.

Shoham-Steiner's scholarship is a powerful demonstration of the insightful conclusions that can be drawn from research into Jewish

¹⁹ Similar parallels can be made to other perceptions of Jewish bodily difference and otherness; see Gilman, *The Jew's Body*, 38–59.

marginality. He focuses on a variety of sources, including Halakha, Jewish folk literature, ethical literature, biblical commentary, sermonic literature, commentaries/interpretations of liturgical poetry, and medieval folk medical literature. This work creates varied and well-reasoned interpretations regarding the aforementioned topics. Overall, this publication is a foundational text in the study of marginality in the historical Jewish community, and for the sub-category of Disability-Jewish histories.

Stepchildren of the Shtetl: The Destitute, Disabled, and Mad of Jewish Eastern Europe, 1800–1939, by Natan M. Meir (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2020), ISBN 978-1-5036-1305-8, \$30.00.

Focusing on Eastern European Jewish communities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Natan M. Meir's *Stepchildren of the Shtetl: The Destitute, Disabled, and Mad of Jewish Eastern Europe, 1800–1939* reveals attitudes to marginal Jews at a specific period in Jewish history. Within these Jewish communities, Meir highlights a range of attitudes, from mockery to discrimination to superstition. Meir also demonstrates how the marginal Jew became a symbol of the unassimilated, rural, traditional Jewish communities who lived in Russia, Poland, and other parts of Eastern Europe. With the advent of modernity over this period, Jewish communities in Eastern Europe faced increased antisemitic persecution, and also saw the development of Zionist ideology. Meir suggests that within Jewish and non-Jewish thought, the concept of the disabled, poor, or sick Jew became a generalized symbol for Jewry as a whole. This monograph shows that the concept of the marginal Jew continued to evolve throughout Jewish history, and how internalized this idea became with Jewish communities. Moreover, Meir's publication provides great detail on the lived experiences of marginal Jews, utilizing the existing source material. Here, marginal is defined as referring to physically disabled, "mad", or otherwise sick people, as well as orphans, beggars, criminals, and "freaks".²⁰ In comparison to Shoham-Steiner, Meir's

²⁰ Wasserstein, *On the Eve*, ch. 8, "Luftmenschen", invokes a similarly broad term to discuss the margins of historic Jewish communities, although this usage encompasses many others alongside disabled, neurodivergent, and d/Deaf people. The term he uses is *luftmensch* or *luftmensen* (literally, "flight/flying man") inspired by the work and experiences of the artist Marc Chagall; it denotes the transient nature of many marginal Jews, which Chagall represented with a figure literally floating above the urban scene; see also the blog *Ain't Mine No More*, 9 April 2013, <https://baytaschwarz.wordpress.com/2013/04/09/luftmenschen/>.

emphasis on socio-economic status as well as disability highlights the lived reality of marginal status, particularly in poor ethnic communities like nineteenth-century Eastern European Jewry.

Each chapter in the monograph focuses on a key topic or theme, presented largely in chronological order. In the first two chapters, Meir establishes the groundwork for later discussion points. The first chapter explores Jewish attitudes to “beggary” and charity in pre-industrial times, which provides a framework to consider other forms of marginality within the community. Similarly, the second chapter outlines the historical context surrounding the incorporation of a large number of Jews into the Russian Empire in the early nineteenth century, and the impoverished socio-economic conditions Jews faced. To do this, the chapter outlines how both Jewish and Slavic society saw the figure of the beggar, and the transformation of the *hekdesh* (a type of communal sick house) to a poorhouse (47). The chapter also explores a campaign of military conscriptions, in which marginal poor, such as orphans and the homeless, were used as replacements for non-marginal Jews to avoid recruitment into the Tsar’s army.²¹

Following this, the subsequent chapters expand on these and other elements of life for and attitudes to marginal Jews. Chapter Three outlines contemporary and literary descriptions of the *hekdesh*, and the way authors such as Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (1835–1917) and I. L. Peretz (1852–1915) used the physical and geographical location of the building as a metaphor for its residents. Nevertheless, these authors also used literature to highlight the mistreatment of the liminal members of Jewish society, and the creation of marginality as a social category (82–5). This chapter also begins to establish anxieties surrounding the poor and sick, and their confirmation of antisemitic tropes within Jewish communities. The fourth chapter centres on phenomena of the “cholera wedding”, where disadvantaged members of the community would be forced into marriages as part of a ritualistic ceremony to rid the community of cholera (89–91). Meir outlines how the practice reveals social anxiety around

21 Olga Litvak’s *Conscription and the Search for Modern Russian Jewry* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006) on the literary and communal memory of Russian conscription of Jews is important here. Litvak demonstrates how narratives regarding conscription have been utilized for different political ends by Jewish authors, intellectuals, and communal leaders, and how they have persisted in Jewish collective memory. As such, the ways in which these communal narratives interact with the perception of marginal Jews in this period is ripe for further consideration.

disease, sexual intimacy, and the “grotesque” (107–8). The practice also showcased another circumstance in which marginal Jews were used as scapegoats, as the ceremony took place in a graveyard, literally and symbolically placing ostracized Jews at the forefront of the epidemic.

Chapter Five explores the attitudes of Jewish reformers and progressives, who seemingly harboured ambivalence or fear regarding marginalized Jews. Antisemitic rhetoric concerning unproductiveness and idleness appears to have been internalized by progressive Jews, who then saw the bodily and socially other marginal Jews as reinforcing these concepts (121, 144–6). Here, notions of enlightenment and social uplift prevail as “idleness” became shorthand for Jewish social and moral ills. Moreover, traditional charitable customs and communal institutions were seen by progressives to “deform” Jewish children into becoming poor, disabled, and lazy (122–6). Progressives therefore favoured contemporary forms of philanthropy, performed to address their own anxieties regarding Jewish marginality. Centred on those with psychological disorders, Chapter Six contrasts communal, spiritual, and familial approaches to care and cure in the late nineteenth century with the growth of psychiatric institutions in Jewish hospitals in the early twentieth century. While the former highlights the role of the family in facilitating care for the individual, the latter demonstrates that mental illness was interpreted as a widespread neurosis specifically in Jewish populations. For some progressives, the concept of Jewish neurosis was directly linked to revolutionary class politics of the era, persecution faced by Jews, and broad economic, social, and political circumstances, while later scholars saw this trend with existing antisemitic stereotypes (172–3).

In Chapter Seven, Meir moves into the post-First World War era, when attitudes to marginalized Jews, and the perception of Jewish marginality, shifted once more. Following the war, Yiddish literature and folklorists appeared to embrace the earlier view that marginality was born of social and political circumstances, including the antisemitic persecution that Jews faced in Eastern Europe. Marginal Jews began to be taken to represent the entirety of Eastern European Jewry. In America, marginal Jews represented the alien “other” immigrant Jews left behind, while Zionists used this view to promote the transformational value of their ideology (183–4, 196–8). For progressives, philanthropy was seen as a means of “saving the marginalized”, allowing individuals to overcome their psychological or physical impairments. At the same time, contemporary cinematic interpretations of the “cholera wedding” established the

humanity of the bride and groom, highlighting the shift from mockery and superstition to sympathy following the war. In the epilogue, Meir crafts haunting links to the rise of the Nazis and the Holocaust. Seen only by their marginal members, Jews were able to be dehumanized in Nazi propaganda and imagery. Meir suggests that following the Holocaust, marginality became mainstream reality for Eastern European Jews. The Holocaust created new marginal Jews in sick, poor, and orphaned survivors, and American Yiddish literature used the marginal to represent all of Eastern European Jewry in a post-Holocaust world (232–5).

Meir crafts a varied and powerful exploration of disability and other marginalities in this period of Eastern European Jewish history. Despite its focus on social history, the monograph uses a range of interdisciplinary inspirations, hailing from disability studies, anthropology, and literary analysis to frame the enquiry. Indeed, the use of Hebrew and Yiddish literature as sources is particularly powerful, allowing Meir to develop unique analytic insights, while making these sources accessible for English-language audiences. Meir also draws on a variety of other sources to create a rich analysis, including cinema, memoirs, Yiddish and Russian newspapers, government records, and military handbooks, among many others.

Meir's scholarship provides an effective bridge between the two previous publications explored, expanding on some of the concepts invoked by previous authors. The influence of Shoham-Steiner's publication is apparent, particularly as they cover a similar geographical region and share a framework of marginality. However, Meir utilizes a broader taxonomy of marginality than Shoham-Steiner, considering socio-economic forms of marginality in greater detail, such as beggars or the poor. Furthermore, the thrust of Meir's analysis provides an interesting companion to Shoham-Steiner's. In medieval times, Shoham-Steiner argues that an anxiety existed within the religious and communal leadership that marginal Jews would serve as representatives of Jewry to the Christian majority and justify their discrimination. According to Meir, by the nineteenth and on into the twentieth century, these ideas had been internalized by Jews both within isolated shtetl communities and elite progressives, particularly with the growth of Zionism, opposition to traditional forms of care and charity, and mainstream conflation of Jews with marginality.

Moreover, Meir highlights greater hostility to marginal Jews from both

the public and communal leadership, as seen in the inhumane conditions of the *hekdesh*, or the superstitious rituals in which marginal Jews were forced to play the main roles. Further, Meir and Shoham-Steiner both contextualize attitudes to Jews and marginal people in the majority society that surrounded these Jewish communities, using them to consider the power of external influences. Arguably, that power is more noticeable in Meir's period due to the international growth of antisemitic rhetoric by progressives. Meir also makes a powerful link to the Ryan and Schuchman volume in the epilogue of his monograph, in a brief consideration of the impact on this period down to the Holocaust (227–36). Jewish communities were seen only by their marginal members, by both Jews and non-Jews. This is represented in the dehumanizing propaganda of the Nazis, which viewed Jews as dirty and having grotesque bodies. The otherness or “wrongness” of the Jew was seen in the same light as disabled, neurodivergent, and Deaf people, and subjected to the same discrimination.

In summary, this monograph also provides a number of important insights regarding the lives of marginal Jews. Vitally, it includes Jewish and non-Jewish attitudes to liminal members of the Jewish community, and the concept of Jews as a racial and biological “other” in and of themselves. Moreover, Meir engages with a range of important topics concerning Disability-Jewish history of the era, including but not limited to institutionalization, philanthropy, communal care and charity, media representation, religious, folk and supernatural beliefs, and socio-economic and political uplift of marginalized people.

Discussion points

These publications propose and explore important themes concerning marginal members of the Jewish community and their experiences, the perception of disability within Jewish communities, and the representation of disability within religious texts and literature. The following section considers some of these themes in more detail as they present potent avenues for historical inquiry for the intersectional study of disability and Jewish histories. However, these are not extensive or exclusive possible topics of interest or relevant literature, as there is certainly a wider range of topics orbiting this subject to be explored in future scholarship.

Antisemitism and disablism

The discrimination faced by both Jewish and disabled people as individual groups, or the specific intersectional discrimination faced by disabled, neurodivergent, or D/deaf Jews, is a potent topic of consideration. While temporally and contextually dependent, clear comparisons between some forms of antisemitism and disablism can be made.

The “othering” of Jewish bodies, highlighted by both Meir and Shoham-Steiner, suggests the root of disablism in certain types of antisemitic rhetoric. In medieval Europe, for instance, the Jewish body was interpreted as the progenitor of disease, linked to the Black Death or syphilis.²² Moreover, male Jewish bodies were perceived as both sexually deviant and effeminate, due to the myth of male Jewish menstruation, and the perception of circumcision as a method of limiting sexual behaviour. Indeed, these stereotypes were deeply linked to the religious division between Jews and Christians, as many of these stereotypes take root in the idea of “punishment” for the rejection of Christian theology.²³ Yet, as demonstrated, the perception of the Jew as a bodily “other” continued into the age of eugenics, into the early twentieth century. In the epilogue of his monograph, Meir highlights how antisemitism within Nazi propaganda often focused on the bodily other or “freakishness” of the Jewish body.²⁴ In this instance, the negative conception of the non-typical body, based in disablism thought, is used to signify racial difference between Jews and non-Jews. This is contextualized in the discussion of eugenics covered by Ryan and Schuman’s book, and other literature pertaining to the Holocaust. Indeed, eugenic discrimination targeted Jewish and disabled groups across the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and shows how these forces often worked in tandem. This may suggest that the subject of antisemitism related to Jewish bodies, and perceived difference, would benefit from further consideration through a critical disability lens, in order to highlight how perceptions of bodily difference constructed antisemitic stereotypes.

22 Gilman, *The Jew’s Body*, 18–20; Irven M. Resnick, *Marks of Distinctions: Christian Perceptions of Jews in the High Middle Ages* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 33, 171.

23 Resnick, *Marks of Distinction*, 79, 182; Noga Roguin Maor et al., “Medieval Roots of the Myth of Jewish Male Menstruation”, *Rambam Maimonides Medical Journal* 12, no. 4 (2021), 3–4.

24 Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl*, 228.

Scholarship has also demonstrated ways in which certain physical or cognitive impairments were seen as innately “Jewish” in early twentieth-century Eastern Europe. For instance, neurosis and mental illness were perceived as specifically Jewish issues. Meir highlights that this perception was often linked to a number of factors, such as the social and economic situation of rural Jewish communities, antisemitic discrimination, or pseudo-scientific physiological differences in nervous systems.²⁵ Yet, this was seemingly also based on existing antisemitic tropes, such as incest within Jewish communities, or the stereotype concerning male Jewish bodies displaying female characteristics.²⁶ Nevertheless, it is unclear whether the rapid development of psychiatric wards in Jewish hospitals across this period actually indicated higher levels of mental illness within Jewish communities, or that there was more impetus to provide such services for marginal Jews.²⁷ Moreover, in “Fat as Disability: The Case of the Jews” (2004), Sander L. Gilman explores historic and literary connections between Jews and obesity and diabetes in the early twentieth century. Gilman details how diabetes in particular was referred to by eugenicists as a “Jewish disease”.²⁸ This was justified in a number of ways, including the lifestyles or economic status of well-off Jews, poor or over-extravagant diets, the “passionate nature of their temperaments”, or “incest”.²⁹ Indeed, like mental illness, the association between Jews and diabetes was based on persisting antisemitic caricatures and tropes, including an existing association between Jews and obesity. Gilman also showcases eugenicists’ suggestions that Jews’ “Oriental” ethnicity created “an extremely favourable soil for obesity.”³⁰ This suggests a connection between the perceived body and health and race that constructed Jews as impaired under eugenic racial science.

Importantly, the perception of Jewish people as inherently disabled, or producing impairment or disease, has in turn served as justification for antisemitic discrimination. A key example of this development can be observed between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century, as a large number of Jews emigrated from Eastern Europe to the United States

25 Ibid., 169–73.

26 Ibid., 172–3.

27 Ibid., 169–70.

28 Sander L. Gilman, “Fat as Disability: The Case of the Jews”, *Literature and Medicine* 23, no. 1 (2004): 51.

29 Ibid., 50–52.

30 Ibid., 51.

and the United Kingdom. Douglas Bayton shows that anti-immigration rhetoric in the early twentieth-century United States was fixated on fears of bodily difference, as well as race, gender, and sexuality.³¹ In some cases, anti-immigration arguments took the form of antisemitic literature, such as Joseph Banister's *England under the Jews*, originally published in the UK in 1901.³² Banister draws on a range of antisemitic tropes, such as control of media and government, lack of patriotism, and criminality. Yet, race, disease, and disability were also perceived as Jewish ills. Banister argued that Jews were made visible "not only by their repulsive Asiatic physiognomy, their yellow oily skins, their flat feet, fat legs and loathsome skin and scalp diseases" but also by the smells which they "emitted".³³ Here, ethnicity, bodies, and disease are all intrinsically linked by Banister, hoping to create the idea of inherent biological – and therefore moral – difference between Jews and non-Jews. Transferring these ideas to the immigration of Jews to England, Banister was obsessed with the notion of Jewish immigrants carrying diseases into the country. He stated that "Jewish blood, like that of other Oriental breeds, seems to be loaded with scrofula" (tuberculosis) and that Jews were inherently susceptible to skin and eye conditions, such as lupus, trachoma, favus,³⁴ eczema, and scurvy. He went on to maintain that in spreading trachoma, "English children in the East End [of London] have been rendered more or less blind", allowing him to argue that Jewish populations were in fact a cause of impairments among the English population.³⁵ In this example, a direct line is drawn between disability and the immigrant Jewish population, showing how ableism was used in antisemitic rhetoric of this era.

The experiences of disabled or other marginal Jews should be consid-

31 Douglas C. Bayton, *Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 2.

32 I investigated Banister's work as part of my Masters thesis, "'A Special Case': Leeds Jewry, Disability and Jewish Social Welfare in the History of the Leeds Jewish Board of Guardians, 1878–1928", University of Leeds, 2019. I used the same source in the blog post "Disability in Jewish History: The Value of Intersectional Research", Institute of Historical Research Historylab, 17 December 2021, <https://ihrhistorylab.wordpress.com/2021/12/17/disability-in-jewish-history-the-value-of-intersectional-research/>.

33 Joseph Banister, *England under the Jews* (London, 1901), cited in Colin Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British Society, 1876–1939* (Oxford: Routledge, 2016), 40.

34 Trachoma infection causes the roughening of the inner surface of the eyelids, eventually causing blindness; favus is a skin disease commonly found on the scalp, which manifests on the skin and often produces an odour.

35 Banister, *England under the Jews* (3rd edn., London, 1907), 61.

ered, because the ways in which antisemitism and disablism overlap had profound effects for disabled Jews. As previously highlighted, the experiences of Deaf Jews during the Nazi occupation of Hungary provides illuminating examples of the layered discrimination faced during the Second World War. Targeted for their Jewish heritage, survivors told the story of a young Deaf Jewish man murdered by militiamen for not following their orders, when he could not understand them.³⁶ In another way, their Deafness made these Jews “useless” for manual labour, potentially condemning them to death.³⁷ In these examples, the discrimination faced individually by disabled people and Jews during the Holocaust was experienced simultaneously. Invisibility of disabled people in historical sources may limit the ability to draw on disabled or other marginal Jews’ own perspectives on their experiences, however; this is a topic worthy of future consideration.

Perception of disability within Jewish communities may also speak to concepts of invisibility. Actions of community leaders in medieval Europe were driven by the perception of marginality by wider non-Jewish society, as demonstrated by Shoham-Steiner. Fearing violent repercussions, community leaders made sure that marginal Jews stayed within the community, seemingly internalizing antisemitic stereotypes to some degree.³⁸ Indeed, these trends can be seen later on in Jewish history. Meir, for instance, shows how progressive Jews and Zionists implemented new systems of philanthropy and institutionalization out of concerns about the perception of Jews as marginal.³⁹ Furthermore, actions of community leaders in the UK during periods of mass immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century can be interpreted with these motives. In cities like London, Manchester, and Leeds, settled Jewish communities received an influx of immigrants from Eastern Europe.⁴⁰ Many of these recent immigrants could be considered as marginal, often unable to find work, lacking suitable accommodation, and prone to disease: slum-like conditions in the working-class Jewish areas of these cities resulted in cramped accommodation. Poor working conditions also

36 Schuchman, “Hungarian Deaf Jews”, 181–2.

37 *Ibid.*, 189.

38 Shoham-Steiner, *On the Margins of a Minority*, 129.

39 Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl*, 144–6.

40 Hannah Ewence, *The Alien Jew in the British Imagination, 1881–1905: Space, Mobility and Territoriality* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 7, 10–11.

caused breathing, eyesight, and posture problems for many sweatshop workers.⁴¹ For more assimilated parts of English Jewry, such as communal leaders or business owners, new immigrant Jews represented the marginal status of Eastern Europe, and reinforced antisemitic stereotypes like those presented by Banister. Association with marginality impacted processes of assimilation, and highlighted class and racial differences between Jews and non-Jews.⁴² In this context, factors like the development of communal care institutions or the ethnoracial status of Jews can be interpreted via a lens of marginality, and the lengths to which different communities sought to remove the stigma of “otherness”.

As such, the connection between disablism and antisemitism must be considered from multiple perspectives: the impact of disablism on antisemitism, experiences of disabled and other marginal Jews, and the perception of disability and marginality by the wider Jewish community. Where possible, this allows researchers to develop a complex and nuanced understanding of disablism and antisemitism in their temporal contexts, and the impact these had on marginal Jews.

Specificity or generality

Meir and Shoham-Steiner focus generally on a variety of impairments and disability as a concept, as part of a wider focus on marginality. By comparison, Ryan and Schuchman exclusively focus on the experiences of Deaf Jews and other Deaf people during the Second World War. The exploration of disability, as well as other forms of marginality such as Deafness, needs to be cognizant of embodied and political differences between impairment groups, and cultural conceptualizations of difference. Shoham-Steiner, for instance, persuasively differentiates between

41 Heinz Skyte, *Care in the Jewish Community: The Story of the Leeds Jewish Welfare Board and the Leeds Jewish Housing Association* (Leeds: Leeds Jewish Welfare Board, 1999), 1–2; Lloyd P. Gartner, *The Jewish Immigrant in England 1870–1914* (Elstree: Vallentine Mitchell, 2001), 158–61; Todd M. Endelman, *The Jews of Britain 1656–2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 136–7.

42 Inferences from Louis Saïpe, *A Century of Care: The History of the Leeds Jewish Welfare Board 1878–1978* (Leeds: Leeds Jewish Welfare Board, 1978), esp. 13, on the growing size of the immigrant community: “if you have poor and needy in your midst, do not let them become a charge on the Gentile community. Look after them yourselves”. Saïpe also referred to tensions between the new immigrants, known as “Grinners” (newcomers), and earlier settlers, known as “Englishers” (16). Murray Freedman, *Chapeltown and its Jews* (Leeds: M. Freedman, 2003), considers the demographic shift of Jewish communities away from urban centres, as communities in Britain became assimilated in the mid-twentieth century.

definitions where possible, and outlines various behaviours associated with madness during the medieval era to maintain specificity in his analysis. While Shoham-Steiner and Meir present broad conclusions regarding the different marginal Jews of their periods, the specific focus on Deaf people and Deaf Jews in Nazi Germany allows Ryan and Schuchman to create more powerful accounts and arguments in some respects. However, this may be a consequence of the periods studied, as the availability of sources or use of language regarding disability and marginality may alter the type of analysis that can be drawn. Indeed, the modern use and interpretation of identity groups is rooted in late twentieth-century political ideology, therefore adding complexity to the application of modern terms to historic groups. Nevertheless, this difference in focus is worthy of consideration, since limiting analysis to one type of impairment might allow for a greater depth of analysis, dependent on the aims of the research.

Gender and punishment

Another key point of consideration would be gendered perspectives regarding Disability-Jewish histories. Meir and Shoham-Steiner both highlight gendered narratives regarding disability, disease, and marginalization in their publications. Shoham-Steiner, for instance, writes that in medieval European Jewry, *tsaraat* (a leprosy-like condition) was linked to menstruation laws, and in particular the act of intercourse during menstrual flow.⁴³ Similarly, Meir shows that misogynistic attitudes among progressive reformers blamed Jewish women for their perceived grievances with traditional Jewish communities. Progressives like Lev Levanda (1835–1888) argued that Jewish children grew up in illness and chaos, leading them to become “more hunchbacked, cross-eyed, crippled, and deformed”, as women undertook commerce opportunities and “abandoned motherly duties.”⁴⁴ These examples indicate some of the ways in which gender was linked to impairment and marginality. Jewish progressives in the mid- to late nineteenth century argued that the “Jewish environment” “deformed” Jewish children into becoming poor, disabled, and lazy.⁴⁵ That environment included existing methods of charitable customs and communal care, but also women, as primary

43 Shoham-Steiner, *On the Margins of a Minority*, 35–6.

44 Lev Levanda, “Neskol’ko slov o evreiakh Zapadnogo Kraia Rossii,” *Razsvet*, no. 1 (27 May 1860), cited in Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl*, 125.

45 *Ibid.*, 122–6.

care givers within the family. Meir suggests that absent mothers were seen by progressives as a root cause of idleness, which would in turn reinforce the label of marginality they feared.⁴⁶ Meir, importantly, links these concepts to the queering of Jewish bodies by European antisemitism, such as the stereotypes of effeminate Jewish men, which have roots in medieval perceptions of the “otherness” of Jewish men’s bodies.⁴⁷ Broader intersectional analysis of disability, gender, and queerness adds extra dimensionality to Jewish historical research. Further, the previous section on antisemitism and disablism highlights the historic linkages between these concepts, which require further investigation.

External and internal disablism

All three publications centre on the pressure that non-Jewish society placed on Jewish communities and their ostracized members. In Meir and Shoham-Steiner’s research, this pressure is explicit. Medieval European Jewish communities feared retaliation from their Christian neighbours. It was thought that disabled, mad, or sick Jews would enhance the religious and cultural “otherness” that the Jew presented to Christian society, or moral affirmation of their religious transgressions.⁴⁸ Anxieties grew around the fear that wandering marginal Jews might be subject to the evils of Christendom, such as sexual exploitation of Jewish women, while behavioural transgressions may have been used as excuses to attack local Jewish communities.⁴⁹ Shoham-Steiner suggests that Jewish communal leaders wished to hide the marginal in order to protect the wider community. Similarly, Meir identifies a trend of Jews wishing to hide the marginal from broader non-Jewish society. Indeed, these trends appeared not to have changed between medieval times and the late nineteenth century, particularly in Central Europe. While antisemitism had developed new branches in the modern period, the root of otherness for Ashkenazi Jewish communities remained the same. As mentioned, Meir makes explicit links in his conclusion regarding the queerness of the Jewish body, and the liminal spaces that the concept of the Jew occupied in non-Jewish society.⁵⁰ Jewish authorities were keen to take care of their

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 238; Gilman, “Fat as Disability”, 56–7; Irvn M. Resnick, “Medieval Roots of the Myth of Jewish Male Menses”, *Harvard Theological Review* 93, no. 3 (2000): 244.

⁴⁸ Shoham-Steiner, *On the Margins of a Minority*, 128–9.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 121.

⁵⁰ Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl*, 238.

own, probably to avoid the negative connotations that may have come with the existence of the disabled, sick, mentally ill, or otherwise “dangerous” Jew. Moreover, Meir shows explicit internalization of these concepts by middle-class and educated Jews, in the development of Zionism. Jews of the shtetl were seen as backward, impoverished, and of poor health – a reflection of what non-Jewish society thought all Jews to be.⁵¹ In embracing the politics of social uplift, these ideas were internalized, and used to marginalize the members of this minority.

By contrast, the experiences of Deaf Jews in Nazi Germany and Hungary tell a slightly different story of mainstream rejection. As demonstrated in Schuchman’s research regarding German Deaf communities, there was an explicit willingness from Deaf society in Germany to distance itself from the “otherness” of the Jew, whether Deaf or hearing. In constructing themselves as a model minority, Jews were an easy target for the powerful. This is particularly noticeable in the later testimony of Hungarian Holocaust survivors, in which the status of survivors as Deaf was seemingly unimportant compared to their status as Jews.⁵² Vitally, this is not to rank the othering of marginalized people, nor to simplify the complex social and political factors at play in these circumstances. However, it is important to understand how the marginal status of different groups interacted with one another, given the relational categorization of disability and the historic “other” of Jewish communities. Intersectional research considering these factors provides much more detailed and nuanced insight into these topics, which would be much harder to do without this intersectional lens.

This does not mean, however, that Jewish society was itself free of ableism or disablism. Shoham-Steiner shows that while the rabbinical elite aimed to keep marginal Jews within the Jewish community, this was often at odds with public attitudes to marginal people.⁵³ Shoham-Steiner maintains that medieval Jews harboured fear of disabled, sick, or mentally ill Jews, which was probably reinforced by the wider Christian society encompassing them. Meir showcases similar patterns, particularly regarding the uplift politics of progressives and Jewish political movements. Moreover, Meir details superstitious and ritualistic practices that marginal Jews were forced into by the wider community, such as the “cholera wedding”. The practice of forced “cholera weddings” between

51 Ibid.

52 Schuchman, “Hungarian Deaf Jews”, 193.

53 Shoham-Steiner, *On the Margins of a Minority*, 177–80.

marginal people (used to ward away bad spirits) outlines how conceptions regarding disability and demonic presences had not evolved noticeably since the period covered by Shoham-Steiner's book.⁵⁴

Ryan and Schuchman also demonstrate disablism within the Jewish community, with the lack of support for, or acceptance of, Deaf people in Jewish communities before the rise of the Nazi Party.⁵⁵ Indeed, it is significant that after the Second World War, the Deaf Hungarian Jews that had survived often had little connection to the mainstream Jewish community. While these survivors' testimonies demonstrate the power of Jewish spaces in creating communal bonds between Jews during the Occupation of Hungary, it is clear that they did not otherwise feel part of a wider Jewish community before or after the war. Importantly, both ableist and disablist attitudes are present in Jewish religious texts, as outlined by Shoham-Steiner and also by other academic publications regarding disability in the Old Testament, Jewish law, and other religious texts.⁵⁶ The realization of this issue may be one of the more powerful aspects of intersectional research, for exclusionary attitudes within Jewish history, religion, and culture all need to be addressed for the benefit and diversification of modern Jewish communities globally.

Conclusion

As more intersectional and interdisciplinary research into disability history and Jewish history materializes, this article has aimed to showcase three publications concerning Disability-Jewish histories to outline their valuable contributions to this emerging topic. Scholarship on this topic appears to be growing, with an increase in postgraduate research, publications, and other materials. This is particularly the case in American Jewish studies, which may be linked to the current growth of Disability studies in the United States. Two examples are Yakov Ellenbogen's postgraduate research into disability in late-medieval Jewish society, conducted at Columbia University, and Hannah Zaves-Greene's postgraduate research into the response of American Jews to discrimination against immigrants on the basis of disability, alongside health and gender, in federal law and its enforcement.⁵⁷ Many important

⁵⁴ Meir, *Stepchildren of the Shtetl*, 108.

⁵⁵ Schuchman, "Hungarian Deaf Jews", 170, 194.

⁵⁶ See n. 9 for further reading on this topic.

⁵⁷ Yakov Ellenbogen has no published articles, as far as I am aware; Hannah Zaves-Greene,

ideas, including the relationship between antisemitism and disablism, attitudes to marginality within Jewish communities, and the experiences of disabled or marginalized Jews, can be drawn from these texts. Indeed, the variety of topics, periods, and viewpoints within these publications allows for meaningful connections to be made across these texts. These publications serve as excellent entry points into this intersectional field, with which it is hoped other scholars in Jewish studies and disability studies would engage.

Nevertheless, there are still many other areas of inquiry to be considered through a Disability-Jewish lens. For instance, Meir's use of Yiddish literature suggests the value of further literary and media analysis. This may be particularly useful in the analysis of late-twentieth century literature, television, and film, which use the trope of Jewish neurosis in drama and comedy. Similarly, exploration of Yiddish theatre may present new ways to explore late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century depictions of disability, as seen in Meir's book.⁵⁸ In addition, the experiences of disabled and marginal Jews in modern diasporic Jewish history, and in Israel, are of particular importance as Jewish communities strive to be more accessible and inclusive.⁵⁹ To that end, the experiences, lives, and achievements of specific disabled, neurodivergent, or D/deaf Jews are

"Who May Come to America? Integrating Disability into Jewish Studies", *AJS Perspectives* (Fall 2019), 70–71. See also Katherine E. Sorrels's podcast "A Sense of Belonging: The Camphill Movement and its Origins – A Two-Part Podcast Series", 25 August 2022, <https://botstiberbiaas.org/camphill-podcast-news/>; she is currently writing "On the Spectrum: Jewish Refugees from Nazi Austria and the Politics of Disability in Britain and North America" (publication forthcoming).

⁵⁸ Other research concerning disability and Yiddish theatre includes John Michael Sefel, "Staging the [Disabled] Jew: The Thematic Use of Doctors, Disability, and Disease in Yiddish Plays on Modernization, 1790–1929", Ph.D. thesis, Ohio State University, 2021.

⁵⁹ Notable articles for the Israeli context may include, most recently, Marco Di Giulio, "The Origins of Israeli Deaf Ethnicity", *Jewish Social Studies* 27, no. 2 (2022): 144–82; Ian Brittain and Yeshayahu Hutzler, "A Social-Historical Perspective on the Development of Sports for Persons with Physical Disability in Israel", *Sport in Society* 12, no. 8 (2009): 1075–88; Joav Merrick et al., "A Short History of Disability Aspects from Israel", in *The Routledge History of Disability*, ed. Roy Hanes, Ivan Brown, and Nancy E. Hansen (London: Routledge, 2017), 94–113; Liat Ben-Moshe and Sumi Colligan, "The State of Disability in Israel/Palestine: An Introduction", *Disability Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (2007); Avi Ohry, John Russell Silver, and Ludwig Guttmann, "Ludwig Guttmann (1899–1980) and David Ben Gurion (1886–1973): An Early Account of the Rehabilitation Facilities in Israel", *Journal of Medical Biography* 14, no. 4 (2006): 201–9; Arie Rimmerman et al., "Israel's Equal Rights for Persons with Disabilities Law: Current Status and Future Directions", *Disability Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2005).

worthy of exploration, such as those of the author Emma Wolf or the activist Judy Heumann. Drawing on Sander Gilman's analysis of Sigmund Freud and the influence of his Jewishness on his hypotheses, the roles of Jews in the development of medicine, psychiatry, and rehabilitation may also be potent areas of consideration, including the work of figures such as Ludwig Guttmann, Beatrice Wright, or Oliver Sacks.⁶⁰ Indeed, this may also apply to studies of marginal Jews, as the aims of such research may be linked to the sociopolitical status of marginality within Jewish thought. Undeniably, there are many different paths scholars may take as this intersectional field develops. It is this author's hope that this article, and the excellent publications it covers, provides ample ground for new scholarship to develop.

60 Sander L. Gilman, *Freud, Race, and Gender* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).