

Jewish Historical Studies
A Journal of English-Speaking Jewry

Article:

Response to Shirli Gilbert

Deborah Dash Moore¹*

How to cite: Dash Moore, D. 'Response to Shirli Gilbert'. *Jewish Historical Studies*, 2023, 55(1), pp. 222–225. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2024v55.11>.

Published: 12 January 2024

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal's standard double blind peer-review process, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

Copyright:

© 2023, The Author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2024v55.11>.

Open Access:

Jewish Historical Studies is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

*Correspondence: ddmoore@umich.edu

¹University of Michigan, USA

Response to Shirli Gilbert

DEBORAH DASH MOORE

When I mentioned that I had just finished reading an article on the historiography of South African Jews that began with a quotation citing the rationale for the establishment of the American Jewish Historical Society, a colleague immediately asked me for the reference. His son-in-law had come to Philadelphia as a young child from South Africa. “I always thought there was a ‘story’ of the South African diaspora to the US”, he explained. Then he added: “and the reasons why”. Shirli Gilbert’s graceful and comprehensive “state of the field” discussion of scholarship on South African Jews does not particularly get into the story of the South African diaspora to the United States, but it does explicitly invite “further engagement” from its readership. In fact, Gilbert points to studies of the impact of South African migrants on communal life in Israel and Australia, and suggests that similar research on their presence in North America and the United Kingdom would be welcome.

I second that idea. An account of South African Jewish immigration to the United States and Canada would simultaneously enrich and complicate post-1965 discussions of migration to the U.S., as well as enhance understanding of South African Jewish history. After Congress passed the Hart-Celler bill as the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965, immigration to the U.S. increased, with many more migrants from Africa and Asia than in the past. Aside from Jewish migrants from the Soviet Union and the accompanying political struggle for Soviet Jews, relatively little attention has been paid to Jews coming from other parts of the world.¹

1 For a good overview of immigration to the U.S. see Carl J. Bon Tempo and Hasia R. Diner, *Immigration: An American History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022); see also Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002); David Gerber, *American Immigration: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022). On contemporary immigration to the U.S. see Carly Goodman, *Dreamland: America’s Immigration Lottery in an Age of Restriction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023). For discussions of issues around immigration restriction see Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Libby Garland, *After they closed the Gates: Jewish Illegal Immigration to the United States, 1921–*

Broadening the framework of diaspora studies to include the multiple migrations of South African Jews – from Europe to South Africa and from South Africa to other places on the globe – suggests how valuable might be Devi Mays’s conceptualization of Sephardi Ottoman Jews’ movements across multiple borders. Her book, *Forging Ties, Forging Passports: Migration and the Modern Sephardi Diaspora* (2020), provides a potential model for new approaches to the intersections of belonging, family, commerce, nationality, and citizenship. Mays demonstrates how Sephardi migrants challenged physical and legal boundaries of states as well as emotional boundaries of nations, even as they retained permeable and flexible understandings of Jewishness.²

Mobility across time and space would situate South African Jews within overlapping and at times conflicting identities. Gilbert’s discussion of Jews’ appearance in social and economic histories by South African historians reveals possibilities for future work by historians interested in writing a non-communalist account of Jewish experiences in South Africa.³ The

1965 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Katherine Benton-Cohen, *Inventing the Immigration Problem: The Dillingham Commission and its Legacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018). On the Soviet Jewry movement see Stuart Altshuler, *From Exodus to Freedom: The History of the Soviet Jewry Movement* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005); Fred A. Lazin, *The Struggle for Soviet Jewry in American Politics: Israel versus the American Jewish Establishment* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005); Henry L. Feingold, “Silent No More”: *Saving the Jews of Russia. The American Jewish Effort, 1967–1989* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007); Gal Beckerman, *When they come for us we’ll be gone: The Epic Struggle to save Soviet Jewry* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2010). Fran Markowitz, *A Community in Spite of Itself: Soviet Jewish Emigres in New York* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1993), is an early ethnographic study. There are a few studies of other Jewish immigrants and refugees: on Cuban Jews see Caroline Bettinger-Lopez, *Cuban-Jewish Journeys: Searching for Identity, Home, and History in Miami* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2000); on Iranian Jews see Saba Soomekh, *From the Shahs to Los Angeles: Three Generations of Iranian Jewish Women between Religion and Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012); on Satmar Hasidic immigrants see Michael Casper and Nathaniel Deutsch, *A Fortress in Brooklyn: Race, Real Estate, and the Making of Hasidic Williamsburg* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021); on Polish Jews and Christians see Barbara Stern Burstin, *After the Holocaust: The Migration of Polish Jews and Christians to Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989); on Holocaust survivors see Beth B. Cohen, *Case Closed: Holocaust Survivors in Postwar America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

2 Devi Mays, *Forging Ties, Forging Passports: Migration and the Modern Sephardi Diaspora* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

3 On communalist vs. dispersionist history of American Jews see David Hollinger, “Communalist and Dispersionist Approaches to American Jewish History in a Post-Jewish Era”, *American Jewish History* 95, no. 1 (2009): 1–32; with comments by Hasia Diner, “Why American Historians really ignore American Jewish History”, *ibid.*, 33–41; Alan Kraut,

American Jewish historian Lila Corwin Berman's article "Jewish History beyond the Jewish People" (2018) offers a different alternative to looking at the movements and experiences of actual Jews. By "decentering the Jewish people and its places or productions as the subjects of Jewish history," Berman argues, "we can transform Jewishness from a personalist or territorial claim that guides historical analysis to an interpretive mode of historical analysis able to travel across peoples and spaces (used here in the broadest sense to include physical places, material objects, texts, and ideas) to illuminate networks, relationships, behaviors, and materiality." Berman's approach to mobility would free Jewishness from travelling as connected to Jews to become "an interpretive mode", a way of "thinking, exercising power, or interacting with materiality."⁴

To these examples might be added the work of Arijit Sen and Lisa Silverman on "embodied placemaking". In their co-edited volume *Making Place* (2014), they argue that there is a "mutually constitutive relationship between place and the body", that the former, "a physical environment[,] cannot exist without the human inhabitants who experience it in their everyday lives, and its meaning is dependent upon the larger political and economic contexts within which these individuals operate in any specific location."⁵ Attention to the embodied places of South African Jews, specifically the cities in which they live, would illuminate both the emancipatory and oppressive features of urban places. It would also contribute to fresh interpretations of South African Jewish history. Silverman's own essay, "Jewish Memory and Jewish Geography in Vienna before 1938",⁶ can be read constructively with Gilbert's own call for more attention to memory and its uses among South African Jews.

Gilbert mentions photography among literature and the arts as an area that has stimulated "a modest body of scholarship". I certainly support additional attention to photography – not only that produced by professional photographers, but also personal photography ensconced in

"Dispersionism, Pluralism, and the Nebulous Contours of Post-Jewish Identity", *ibid.*, 43–51; Paula Hyman, "We are all Post-Jewish Historians now: What American Jewish History brings to the Table", *ibid.*, 52–60; Tony Michels, "Communist History and Beyond: What is the Potential of American Jewish History?" *ibid.*, 61–71.

4 Lila Corwin Berman, "Jewish History beyond the Jewish People", *AJS Review* 42, no. 2 (Nov. 2018): 274.

5 Arijit Sen and Lisa Silverman, eds., *Making Place: Space and Embodiment in the City* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), "Introduction", 3.

6 Lisa Silverman, "Jewish Memory and Jewish Geography in Vienna before 1938", in *ibid.*, 173–98.

family albums.⁷ Such consideration would be a fruitful avenue for future scholarship to address intimate dimensions of South African Jewish history. Bringing visual culture into the conversation about South African Jews would also help to bridge connections between South African and other Jewish photographers. In addition to Gilbert's mention of important professional Jewish photographers in South Africa, one might add the work of several American Jewish photographers. For example, in the 1950s Dan Weiner collaborated with Alan Paton in *South Africa in Transition* (1956); twenty years later Eve Arnold pictured shantytowns and black children dying of malnutrition in South Africa.⁸ These photographers brought images of South Africa to the world and at the same time can be considered as participating in and helping to shape Jewish visual culture of the twentieth century.

Finally, let me applaud Gilbert's call for more attention to gender and to religion. Vernacular religious expressions of South African Jews deserve to be analysed and linked to other forms of vernacular Judaism.⁹ Current interest in religion could be combined with gender to elicit modes of Jewishness that expand not just South African Jewish history but also contemporary Jewish history. Gilbert is correct to ask about contacts between Jews and non-whites in the domestic sphere as well as in public spaces of work and commerce. Her series of questions in the paragraph on relationships between Jews and non-Jews provides stimulating possibilities for future scholarship.

7 See Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Leora Auslander, "Reading German Jewry through Vernacular Photography: From the Kaiserreich to the Third Reich", *Central European History* 48 (2015): 300–34; Maiken Umbach and Scott Sulzener, *Photography, Migration, and Identity: A German-Jewish-American Story* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Ofer Ashkenazi, "Exile at Home: Jewish Amateur Photography under National Socialism, 1933–1939", *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 64, no. 1 (2019): 115–40.

8 Alan Paton, *South Africa in Transition*, photographs by Dan Weiner (New York: Scribner, 1956); Janine di Giovanni, *Eve Arnold: Magnum Legacy* (New York: Prestel, 2015).

9 See *Vernacular Religion: Collected Essays of Leonard Norman Primiano*, ed. Deborah Dash Moore (New York: New York University Press, 2022), esp. "Introduction: Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife", 1–15.