

ARTS & LETTERS

On the Bookshelf

Sex, white supremacists, ramen noodles, and more

BY JOSH LAMBERT

JUNE 22, 2009

The subject of Danya Ruttenberg's anthology, *The Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism* (NYU, June) isn't exactly a new one: earlier collections on the topic have included *Jews & Sex* (2008) and *Jewish Explorations of Sexuality* (1995). To be fair, Ruttenberg, a dynamic young rabbi and memoirist, takes a different tack than her predecessors, including not only academics but also activists like Jewish Renewal stalwart Arthur Waskow and Orthodox feminist Haviva Ner-David. Ruttenberg groups the essays under rubrics of "I-It," "I-Thou," and "We-Thou" relationships, which might sound a little kinky, but is really just her way of echoing Martin Buber and of suggesting how variously Jews in different times and places relate to their sexuality.

Useful as this collection might be, perhaps the reason that anthologies proliferate on this topic (apart from the equation, irresistible to publishers, of Sex Sells + Jews Buy Books), is that it would take a massive encyclopedia to cover the history of Jewish sexual practices and attitudes comprehensively. Even a seemingly tiny subtopic, like levirate marriage—the responsibility of a man to marry his brother's widow, familiar, if at all, from the Biblical story of Ruth and Boaz—benefits from book-length attention. Or so proposes Dvora E. Weisberg in *Levirate Marriage and the Family in Ancient Judaism* (Brandeis, May), which leverages that somewhat obscure practice to illuminate the structure of families and the politics of women's sexuality among the Israelites. Similarly, Gwynn Kessler's *Conceiving Israel: The Fetus in Rabbinic Narratives* (Penn, June) addresses some fascinating issues of sexuality and biology that crop up in the Talmud's stories. What does it mean, in our age of 3D sonograms, *in vitro* fertilization, and *Roe v. Wade*, that Jewish fetuses were said to participate in the exodus from Egypt?

Politically and morally fraught as fetuses may be for us, a new collection of essays edited by Amy Neustein takes up an even thornier subject: the sexual abuse of children by leaders of Jewish schools and synagogues. Neustein's *Tempest in the Temple: Jewish Communities and Child Sex Scandals* (Brandeis, May) bears a

respectable imprimatur and includes contributions from sociologists, psychologists, and other professionals, but that won't stop some readers from feeling that the book constitutes a *shande far di goyim*, an airing of Jews' dirty laundry where non-Jews can see it. Such fears aren't completely unfounded. In the early 20th century, it wasn't uncommon for anti-Semites like Telemachus Timayensis to accuse Jews of an insatiable urge for child molestation. Theodore Dreiser's bizarre play, *The Hand of the Potter* (1918), dramatizes those visions, but ultimately suggests that Jews are no more prone to perversion than anyone else. That message should be kept in mind whenever Jews demonstrate sexually transgressive behavior—as in the recent case, in Montreal, of a former B'nai B'rith official's arrest for possession of child pornography. And when it comes to the protection of children from abuse, it should be agreed that the real scandal would be to remain silent.

* * *

One would hope that Leonard Zeskind was not pleased by the perfect marketing opportunity that presented itself just weeks after the release of his new book, *Blood and Politics: The History of the White Nationalist Movement from the Margins to the Mainstream* (FSG, May). Zeskind offers the most thorough, detailed history and analysis to date of white supremacist movements in the U.S., and the recent shooting at the Holocaust Museum makes his research more relevant than ever. The coincidence between the publication date and the attack would be downright eerie—Zeskind has been working on the book for more than fifteen years and received a MacArthur Fellowship for his efforts back in 1998—if it weren't for the disheartening sense that radical right-wing violence has become more and more common in the U.S. in recent years.

* * *

One might think that the history of the Holocaust has all already been written and published. It hasn't. Scholars and historians continue to mine archives and gather evidence, and the results continue to appear in bookstores. Two recent examples include the second volume of *The Diaries and Papers of James G. McDonald*, an American diplomat and advocate for Jewish refugees, and the first volume of a projected seven-volume *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945* (both Indiana, May). The publication of such histories and documents remains necessary because of the sheer scale of the catastrophe. How else to understand the dizzying scope of the 20,000 internment facilities set up by the Nazis—many, many more than the handful of camp names we tend to associate with *l'univers concentrationnaire*—than with an exhaustive encyclopedia, the first volume of which alone clocks in at over 1,700 pages?

In terms of the survivors of those camps, too, even with over 4,300 testimonies already gathered on video in New Haven, we've only begun to scratch the surface. That's why we'll continue to see books like *This Is Home Now: Kentucky's Holocaust Survivors Speak* (Kentucky, May) and Avinaom Patt's *Finding Home and Homeland: Jewish Youth and Zionism in the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Wayne State, May), which describes the hundreds of kibbutzim and agricultural training settlements in American-occupied Germany after the war, staffed by young survivors who fixed their hopes on Zionism. Whether they traveled to the American heartland or to the Land of Milk and Honey, the displaced persons, as they used to be called, have always had crucial stories to tell.

* * *

Much less pressing, and considerably goofier, are the memoirs of American schlemiels who overcome their immaturity to become mensches, or at least grown-ups. Andy Raskin's *The Ramen King and I: How the Inventor of Instant Noodles Fixed My Love Life* (Gotham, June) features a Long Island native who decides he can overcome the resistance to romantic commitment that he developed in his Jewish childhood by seeking the counsel of Momofuku Ando, the fabled 96-year-old inventor of Japan's popular noodle soup brand. Closer to home, Sam Apple, in *American Parent: My Strange and Surprising Adventures in Modern Babyland* (Ballantine, June), gazes at his navel and beyond, contemplating his own bris, and consulting a bevy of pseudo-experts, as he comes to terms with his own role as a father. The literary critic Ruth Wisse has remarked that American Jewish writers often struggle to see themselves as fathers, because they feel unable or unworthy to perpetuate the traditions of their ancestors, and Raskin might be a case in point. But for Apple, whose father Max has written charming memoirs, including *Roommates* (1994), writing his way into parenthood continues the family tradition.

Josh Lambert (@joshnlambert), a Tablet Magazine contributing editor and comedy columnist, is the academic director of the Yiddish Book Center, Visiting Assistant Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and author most recently of Unclean Lips: Obscenity, Jews, and American Culture.

Josh Lambert (@joshnlambert), a Tablet Magazine contributing editor and comedy columnist, is the academic director of the Yiddish Book Center, Visiting Assistant Professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and author most recently of Unclean Lips: Obscenity, Jews, and American Culture.