

Letter from the Editors

We are proud to welcome you to this issue of the University of Toronto Journal of Jewish Thought (TJJT), “Re-imagining Jewish Communities.” In this issue, we provide glimpses of how Jewish individuals and communities challenge and reinterpret their identities. Our contributors offer new interpretations to Jewish histories and peoplehood from perspectives as far-ranging as ethnomusicology, comparative literature, and rabbinic studies. In addition to three scholarly articles, this issue features two interviews, a full translation of an imaginative speech, poetry, and photography.

In our first year as TJJT’s editors, we have experienced the arduous and rewarding process of producing a multidisciplinary journal, a process that has taken us from Shanghai to Berkeley, from biblical antiquity to the modern Israeli state. This issue reflects our quest for shared scholarly spaces and places in the pages—virtual and printed—that bind them.

We open this issue with an interview of the renowned biblical scholar and translator Robert Alter, who describes his new translations of the Hebrew Bible. We cover the formative experiences that led him to Jewish Studies and to biblical translation, as well as his thoughts on contemporary trends in academia. In a subsequent interview with historian Glenn Dynner, former editors Josh Tapper and Alexis Lerner discuss the Jewish involvement in Poland’s liquor trade. They touch on themes of piety, acculturation, and economic relations between Jews and non-Jews in Poland.

Both interviews were conducted as part of the annual lecture series of the Anne Tanenbaum Centre for Jewish Studies (CJS).

The CJS's programming allowed us, as emerging scholars, to learn and interact with the distinguished and innovative thinkers of our fields, and we are grateful for the opportunities. We thank Robert Alter and Glenn Dynner for engaging in insightful and candid conversations.

Re-imagining Jewish communities implicates us, the editors, in the task of illuminating texts and movements from the past. The work of translation makes such texts accessible to a new audience, and so we are thrilled that this issue re-introduces the thought of Edmond Jabès (1912–1991) to a generation of English speakers unacquainted with the Egyptian-French poet.

Jabès's 1983 inaugural speech at the Institut Universitaire d'Études Juives in Paris, "Judaism and Writing," poetically asserts the inextricable textuality of Jewish identity in an era of cultural and historical ruptures. In this issue, we present the first-ever complete translation of that speech. The translator, Philippe Mesly, began his sensitive and precise work after discovering the speech's transcription in a now out-of-print French journal in an old bookstore. Since that chance encounter, we have journeyed with Mesly, contacting the Bibliothèque nationale de France, publishing houses, and Jabès's living daughters, Viviane Jabès Crasson and Nimet Frascaria Jabès, to revive this work from the forgotten past. We are especially thankful to Viviane and Nimet for granting us permission to reprint the source-text for the first time since its original publication, alongside Mesly's translation.

A generation after his death, Jabès remains an original, wildly imaginative, and yet thoroughly challenging voice. His abstruse meditations on creation reified by text, on the Jew's affiliation with the desert, and the *mise en abyme* of what he terms The Book, can perplex any reader. To provide a helpful *guide for the perplexed*, we include two separate introductions into Jabès's life and worldview: a biographical introduction by Jabès scholar Steven Jaron and an overview of the speech's central themes by Mesly.

Drawing on Jabès's kabbalistic meditations on existence, Robert Yerachmiel Sniderman juxtaposes a typewritten text with an old photograph of his forebears. The aging materiality of both artifacts evoke an intimate bond between the reader and the fading past. In a set of minimalist poetry, Sniderman considers the confluence of biblical and familial histories that form Jewish identity by re-imagining the fraught relationship of Jacob and Esau.

The legalistic writings of religious commandments, as surveyed by Jon A. Levisohn and Marc Herman, are similarly inspired by biblical archetypes of Jewish communities. Approaching the topic of Jewish community in rabbinic studies, Levisohn and Herman, in the article "This is One of the Commandments that Devolve upon the Community: *Hovot ha-Tzibbur* (Communal Obligations) as Resources for Imagining Jewish Community," present the first systematic catalog of communal commandments, or religious laws fulfilled by a Jewish community, as opposed to Jewish individuals.

While Levisohn & Herman touch on legalistic interpretations of Jewish community, two other articles analyze cultural representations of Jewish communities and history. These articles argue that national interests intersect with cultural production to create narratives of Jewish identity. In "With Song and Hard Work: *Shirei Eretz Yisrael* and the Social Imaginary," Jardena Gertler-Jaffe traces the conscious effort to build a national Jewish "folk" through song composition and circulation in British Mandate Palestine and later Israel. Yu Wang, in "The Myth of 'Shanghai Ark' and the Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum," lays out the history of the Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum to illustrate the politics of Holocaust memory in China.

As this issue underscores the cyclical process of rebirth and returning to the past in Jewish tradition and culture, we celebrate Dorielle Parker's beautiful circle of Alephs drawn specifically for the journal cover, as well as her Hebrew letter flourishes that decorate the beginning of each piece.

Finally, we wish to thank all those who have helped make this journal a reality:

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Hadas Binyamini & Leonard Stein
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