A New Identity: Soviet Jewish

Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006, 252 pp.

Anna Shternshis ends her study of Soviet Jewish identity and culture with an anecdote about a talk she gave in 1999 in Minneapolis to an audience of elderly Russian-Jewish émigrés. She played them a sentimental Russian song from the 1930s, "Synovia" (Sons), about parents whose successful sons live far away, a song often seen as Jewish. The audience was moved and many of them started crying. Shternshis then explained that "the images of the successful Jewish sons in the song were created in order to promote the integration of Jews into Soviet society," and that the parents in the song were depicted as celebrating the new year in January (rather than September) "to illustrate the success of Soviet antireligious propaganda among Jews." The audience responded angrily that "the song was genuinely Jewish and not propaganda." One man asserted, "If you call this propaganda, then all our lives are propaganda. These are pearls of Jewish culture, and one has to grow up there to understand it!" (p. 180).

Although she may not have succeeded in convincing her audience in Minneapolis, Shternshis draws a compelling picture of the Soviet state's deliberate construction in the 1920s and 1930s of a new kind of Jewish culture meant to replace the old religious culture and to aid Jews in their transition to a fully modern and Soviet identity. She looks at the many genres and media in which this culture was created: four chapters treat antireligious propaganda, amateur and professional journalism, theater, and songs in Yiddish, and a final one looks at the books, songs, articles, and films produced on Jewish topics in Russian with the primary intention of combating antisemitism among the non-Jewish Russian public. By examining these texts themselves and conducting a series of some 225 detailed oral interviews with Soviet Jews born between 1906 and 1930, Shternshis shows that what the Soviets succeeded in creating was not, ultimately, a Jewish population that became seamlessly integrated into the socialist state, but rather an idiosyncratic but powerful sense of a specifically Jewish identity. This new Soviet Jewish identity was entirely divorced from the Jewish religion, its practices and its traditional texts, but it was interested in

Jewish endogamy, sensitive to any manifestations of antisemitism, and strongly committed to a new set of secular central texts (such as the songs of Leonid Utesov and the stories of Sholem Aleichem). This identity proved far more durable than its creators had expected; the first generation of Soviet Jews succeeded in passing much of it down to their children and grandchildren, and only now, in the post-Socialist era, has it begun to dissipate.

Shternshis's book contributes to the ongoing English-language scholarly reexamination of the Soviet Jewish experience. Jeffrey Veidlinger, in *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater: Jewish Culture on the Soviet Stage* (2000), considers the Soviet state's support of Yiddish theater through World War II (and its quick demise thereafter). David Shneer, in *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture, 1918–1930* (2004), looks at the interactions between Yiddish writers and the Soviet state, focusing on the ways in which an array of Jewish writers expressed their views in literary polemics and various literary genres, especially poetry. And Yuri Slezkine, in his more far-reaching and controversial *The Jewish Century* (2004), takes the experience of the Soviet Jews and their success under the Communist regime as a model of what he sees as the fashioning of twentieth-century modernity in the Jewish image (or in the image of "Mercurians" or "service nomads," those mobile, clever, and fundamentally flexible groups that stand to benefit most from urbanization and industrialization). In contrast with some earlier historiography and some popular views, Veidlinger, Shneer, and Slezkine all show the triumphs as well as the tragedies of the Soviet Jews, especially before World War II. They all depict the Soviet Jews not only (or, in Slezkine's case, not at all) as victims, but rather as active subjects whose decisions about work and family, migration and settlement, and the production and consumption of culture reflected their own proclivities as much as they did the imperatives of the state.

Many of Shternshis's points about the strengths that Soviet Jews drew from their idiosyncratic Jewish culture coincide with those of Veidlinger, Shneer, and Slezkine. When contrasted with these works, Shternshis's book stands out for the intimacy of her knowledge of her subjects. Whereas her colleagues rely on printed and archival material, Shternshis's interdisciplinary breadth, her use of the methodology of anthropologists and folklorists in the many hours of interviews she conducted from 1999 through 2003, allow her to

ask the actual participants in Soviet Jewish culture which songs they remembered and sang, which Yiddish newspapers they and their families read, how they interpreted the antireligious propaganda, and how they reacted to staged trials, amateur plays, or films. Some of the answers are surprising. Throughout the book, Shternshis notes that the versions of songs that the respondents remembered differ – consistently – from the published versions, and that her respondents identified positively even with those fictional Jewish characters that were meant to exemplify bad (bourgeois) behavior. Anti-religious ceremonies, such as the "Red seder" created to mock Passover, were not remembered as anti-Jewish events but rather as "Soviet Jewish events, created for their entertainment, and also as traditional holidays," after which the participants would rush home to celebrate more traditional Passover seders (p. 39). In general, cultural events that were organized with the intent of drawing young Jews away from Judaism were welcomed as occasions for young Jews to meet Jewish friends and eligible marriage partners (p. 105). The Russian-language depictions of Jews that were produced with the explicit intention of combating antisemitism were instead embraced as the founding texts of Soviet-Jewish identity.

As Shternshis notes, her respondents, describing events of sixty years ago or more, may not be entirely reliable. She devotes little attention to her respondents' reactions to the mid-century crises of Eastern European Jews: the Holocaust and Stalin's anti-Jewish policies, including the murder of the Yiddish writers in 1952. It would be helpful – though perhaps outside the scope of her project – to understand not only the cultural similarities but also the differences between the generation she studied and the subsequent ones. Nonetheless, her data offer an intriguing corrective to the project of analyzing culture based on written sources. They fill out the picture and, as apparent in the comments she heard in Minneapolis, they confirm that no matter how startling this may be to American, Western European, or Israeli Jews, Soviet Jews perceived their culture as genuine and indeed as normative – as "kosher" in a way that had nothing to do with *halakhic* notions of *kashrut*. Like Jews elsewhere, Soviet Jews defined themselves in terms that were based on a specific history and on specific texts, albeit new Soviet ones.

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