

Judaism (Modern)

MEMORIALIZING THE HOLOCAUST IN HUMAN RIGHTS MUSEUMS. By Katrin Antweiler. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023. Pp. v + 240. Hardback, \$114.99; paperback, \$21.99.

Katrin Antweiler examines how human rights museums, through the lens of Foucault's concept of governmentality, shape societal understandings of the Holocaust by influencing public perceptions and moral norms within systems of power. Through case studies in Germany, Canada, and South Africa, she demonstrates that these museums often reinforce dominant sociopolitical narratives. She warns that unexamined accounts risk perpetuating existing power structures rather than fostering deeper understanding or meaningful change. Critiquing the use of Holocaust memory for political agendas, Antweiler emphasizes the need for museums to balance education, commemoration, and activism without compromising historical integrity. While her work is invaluable for understanding how Holocaust memory influences contemporary notions of citizenship, governance, and human rights, it also invites critical reflection. Antweiler cautions against positioning the Holocaust as the central moral reference point, arguing that this stance can inadvertently sideline other crucial histories, particularly those of colonized peoples. However, while it is essential to ensure that diverse histories receive equal attention, the Holocaust demands singular exploration due to the unique mechanisms of antisemitism and its enduring consequences. Unlike other forms of prejudice that dehumanize targets as inferior, antisemitism often operates as a conspiracy theory that portrays the Jewish people as a hidden, malevolent force manipulating global systems—a narrative epitomized by texts like *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. As historian Shulamit Volkov asserts, antisemitism functions as a “cultural code”—an enduring and adaptable phenomenon that evolves with shifting societal contexts. This distinct characteristic has fueled centuries of anti-Jewish hatred, which in the twentieth century emerged in a new, violent form—the systematic annihilation of Europe's Jews by the Nazis. Antweiler's work could have been further strengthened by a more explicit recognition of the critical role that addressing antisemitism plays in the imperative to memorialize the Holocaust within human rights museums. A deeper exploration of this aspect would underscore why the Holocaust warrants distinct consideration—separate from, but not superior to, other histories of genocide. Nonetheless, Antweiler's nuanced analysis compellingly challenges readers to critically engage with how societies remember atrocities and how these narratives shape political and social discourse both locally and globally.

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LAWS OF THE SPIRIT: RITUAL, MYSTICISM, AND THE COMMANDMENTS IN EARLY HASIDISM. By Ariel Evan Mayse. Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024. Pp. xix + 400; Cloth, \$75.00.

Ariel Evan Mayse's *Laws of the Spirit* presents a novel reading of the early Hasidic movement using the tools of ritual studies. Hasidism began as a Jewish revival movement in the middle of the eighteenth century in Eastern Europe around the figure of Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (c.1698-c.1760), known as the “Ba'al Shem Tov,” a miracle-working charismatic. The Ba'al Shem Tov and his disciples developed a vision of Judaism that emphasized divine immanence, positive emotions such as joy in devotional life, an intense personal connection with divinity called *devekut*, and worship through mundane actions. Given these features, one might think that ritualized normative practices are anathema to the engaged spiritual ethos of Hasidism.

Laws of the Spirit critiques the notion that *halakhah* (Jewish law) constrains religious experience and creativity through the study of early Hasidism. Mayse explores several themes relating to the *mitsvot*, the required and prohibited actions of *halakhah*. For Hasidism, following the *mitsvot* is an embodied experience, one that involves the entirety of the person and thereby facilitates *devekut*. Just as importantly, Hasidim believe that *mitsvot* ought to be performed with the proper intentionality or *kavvanah*, rather than by rote. Mayse perceptively connects the Hasidic emphasis on interior religious life to eighteenth-century discourses of self-formation.

Countering accusations that Hasidim devaluated the study of Jewish texts, Mayse provides a panoply of Hasidic sources that describe how text study is a pathway to *devekut*. Moreover, Hasidic leaders seemed to recognize that their approach to *halakhah* was novel by repeatedly interpreting the Talmudic statement often understood as justifying legal pluralism (“these and these are the words of the living God” (b.T. *Eruvin* 13b)).

Mayse creates a chorus of voices of early Hasidic masters, including female authors of prayers called *tekhines*—figures often ignored by scholars of Hasidism. He puts them into conversation with mystics from other religious traditions (e.g., Buddhist and Islamic traditions) and scholars of religion. At times, the wide-ranging and free-flowing nature of these discussions make it difficult to follow a particular argumentative thread. Nonetheless, *Laws of the Spirit* is an innovative contribution to the study of Hasidism.

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