



Editors' Introduction v44 n2

Harriet Hartman¹ · Adina Bankier-Karp²

Published online: 20 July 2024

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2024

When Maja Hultman and Joachim Schlorr first proposed their special issue on Jewish virtual spaces in Europe, the editorial board and we as editors requested a lot of clarification. We wanted to understand the significance of the virtual developments for Jewish life in Europe, as well as what data and case studies were available, and whether they would be intelligible to the *Contemporary Jewry* reader. Studies of virtuality are not common nor easy to conduct, despite their importance in contemporary society. Convinced by the guest editors of its long-term significance [beyond the virtuality necessitated by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19 pandemic)], the special issue was given the green light to proceed. We are indeed grateful for the insight it provides into the ramifications for Jewish life in Europe and beyond, as well as the challenges virtual Jewishness presents, with virtuality magnifying some challenges as well as facilitating some benefits. Jewish life in Europe is particularly precarious at this time, and it is important to add this virtual dimension to the picture to understand it better.

Over the past three decades, scholars have studied evolving “Jewish Spaces” and “virtual Jewishness” in Europe, which Maja Hultman and Joachim Schlorr introduce to us. While initially viewed as promising inclusive and democratic environments, extremists in Europe from both the right and left wings of the political spectrum have fueled racism, xenophobia, and antisemitism in the early 2020s—especially in response to conflicts such as the current Israeli–Hamas war—which has posed significant challenges. This special issue examines how digital platforms help European Jews and non-Jews navigate these crises, evaluating whether these spaces can support Jewish life and interfaith relations amid growing antisemitism. This special issue explores the potential of digital spaces to foster Jewish/non-Jewish interactions, co-construct memories, and shape contemporary Jewish identity, despite the sociopolitical complexities and limitations.

✉ Harriet Hartman
hartman@rowan.edu

Adina Bankier-Karp
adinabankierkarp@gmail.com; adina.bankier-karp1@monash.edu

¹ Rowan University, Glassboro, USA

² Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

The editors articulate several important arguments that merit discussion.

First, virtual European Jewish spaces are sites of Jewish and non-Jewish interactions, cultural co-construction, and the development of a sense of shared heritage. These spaces are crucial for the creative and collaborative processes that shape contemporary understandings of Jewish culture and history. Virtual European Jewish spaces also offer continuity and support, which was especially important during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Secondly, virtual Jewish spaces face significant challenges, given that they are vulnerable to antisemitism much like physical spaces, and may not always facilitate meaningful relationship building. One of the challenges inherent to virtuality relates to claims they are fake or inherently inauthentic, which the guest editors maintain are unsubstantiated. The guest editors also add that strengths and limitations of virtuality must be acknowledged, and these spaces must be designed to harness virtuality's strengths.

Finally, the guest editors express hope that digital and virtual Jewish spaces can nurture Jewish/non-Jewish co-construction, leading to innovative solutions that incorporate Jewish history into broader European narratives. This, in turn, could foster sociability and mutual understanding in situations where physical interactions are limited or impossible.

In their introduction to the special issue, the guest editors elaborate on these claims and introduce the contributions of each of the five essays included. We hope you will find this special issue provocative and enlightening.

We follow this symposium with three “regular” research articles, introducing a change that *Contemporary Jewry* will incorporate starting in 2025: Articles and reviews will be included in our print publication as they are ready to be published, without waiting for special issues. Articles that otherwise would have waited to be collected in special issues will be expedited to publication as part of Springer’s “Collections,” rather than waiting for the rest of a special issue’s articles to be ready for publication. As articles on the same subject area are published, they will be added to these Collections. Thus far, we have four collections available: one for the Marshall Sklare Memorial addresses, another for articles on the Pew 2020 survey, another for articles discussing Jews of Color (which will include those in the upcoming special issue on the topic), and another for European Virtual Jewish Spaces (including the articles in this special issue). See <https://link.springer.com/journal/12397/collections?filter=articlesAvailable> for more information on these collections. Our last special issue will be on the topic of “Response to and Emergence from Crisis,” appearing as v44(4) this year.

The first of the current issue’s “regular” articles is Benji Davis and Hanan Alexander’s “‘You Never Told Me’: The Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) of Israel Education,” which details the findings of a phenomenological study of 20 Israel educators working in English-speaking high schools. The authors claim these Israel educators differentiate themselves from those of earlier generations through their embrace of greater nuance and less idealized conceptions of Israel, in both the content they convey and the pedagogies with which they convey it. Eight recommendations are made for Israel education

across educational contexts, including discussion of the Arab–Israeli conflict, which seems unignorable in the post-October 7 period.

Ehud Nahir's "Pre-Military Preparatory Schools (Mechinot) in Israel as Models for Informal Education" delves into the content and pedagogy of Mechina programs in Israel. Drawing on thematically analyzed qualitative interviews with participants across secular, religious, and mixed *mechinot*, themes including identity, autonomy, and affiliation are identified, as well as the informal approach, each maintained to contribute to the popularity of the program.

Lilach Lev Ari's "Native-Born and Migrants, in Brussels: Social Integration, 'Bubbles' and Acculturation" focuses on two groups of Jewish women who reside in Brussels, native-born and migrants, regarding their social integration into native-born Jewish and non-Jewish communities. Using the metaphor of "bubbles," Lev Ari compares the overlap between the social groups, their fluidity, as well as the isolation of each as they create social networks that build and shape ethnic–diasporic communities.

Updates of research in our field follow, showing both significant scope and variety.

Our six book reviews were wide-ranging in topic and treatment:

Daniel Ross Goodman's *Soloveitchik's Children: Irving Greenberg, David Hartman, Jonathan Sacks, and the Future of Jewish Theology in America* is both a "scholarly work on Jewish thought" and "a religious work of Jewish theology." All three scholars discussed in the book connect their theology to Soloveitchik, while departing in significant ways from him, thus building on his legacy.

When We Collide: Sex, Social Risk, and Jewish Ethics, by Rebecca Epstein-Levi, brings together contemporary theory and classic-rabbinic scholarship to explore the intersection of sex and Jewish ethics. The reviewer notes that some of the book's claims are easier to embrace than others, and that "much hinges on the degree to which the reader is persuaded by some key correlations—for example... between contemporary BDSM communities and classical Bet Midrash communities."

Joseph Reimer's *Making Shabbat: Celebrating and Learning at American Jewish Summer Camps* deals with the learning and celebration of Shabbat at three American sleepaway camps. The reviewer notes that while the book invites stakeholders in American Jewish education to bear witness to the joy and enthusiasm that can be cultivated with careful planning and generous investment, the book also suggests there is something inimitable about Jewish camp experiences, which cannot be replicated in other contexts.

Charles Freilich, Matthew Cohen, and Gabi Siboni's *Israel and the Cyber Threat: How the Startup Nation Became a Global Cyber Power* presents a detailed history of Israel's emergence as a dominant actor in the realm of cyber defense. It explains why and how Israel became a world-class cyber power,

and demonstrates the economic, military, and diplomatic advantages that it has thereby gained. The review maintains that Israel's historical awareness of existential threats and its comparably small population meant that cyber technology enabled it to "punch far above its conventional weight" in a "start-up world." A comprehensive review, this is both a resource for the expert and an informed discussion of policy considerations for the future.

Rachel Elior's *The Unknown History of Jewish Women Through the Ages: On Learning and Illiteracy: On Slavery and Liberty*, is a comprehensive study exploring the history of Jewish women, emphasizing their exclusion from the Hebrew literary canon, public literacy, and Jewish education due to patriarchal norms until the early twentieth century, as well as its impact on twentieth-century immigration to Israel. The reviewer praises the scope and depth of the corpus of research presented, noting, however, that "the author chose not to incorporate examples of... more enlightened Jewish approaches to women's education and activities into earlier, foundational chapters," which would not have detracted from the protracted history of female subjugation, but would have acceded that "Jewish women's options were broader than the narrowest rabbinic decisions might indicate."

We trust this issue will spark thought and interest, and welcome your feedback in response. Wishing us all *bsorot tovot* (good news) and better times, wherever you may be.

Funding The authors have not disclosed any funding.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors have not disclosed any competing interests.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.