
BOOK REVIEW

No Better Home?: Jews, Canada, and the Sense of Belonging, edited by David S. Koffman. University of Toronto Press, 2021. 314 + vii pp., 5 b/w illustrations. Pb., \$32.95 ISBN: 9781487523572

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This enjoyable and challenging book compiles nineteen responses to the playful question whether Canada is the best home in the world, and in history, for Jews. Most, but not all, answer the question with “yes” – while others use it to explore “home,” “belonging,” and Jewish distinctness.

The book was published at a fraught time. It is based on a conference held during the sesquicentennial of Confederation, in 2017 – a year of national soul-searching, compared to the 1967 centennial. Now, in the year of its publication (2021), the call to “cancel Canada Day” has moved from the margins to the mainstream. So have analyses of Canada as inherently genocidal, built on the destruction of Indigenous Peoples and the marginalization of many others.

As a result, many Canadians are feeling less sense of “home” and “belonging” than we were four years ago. Canadian Jews have added reasons for unease. To many supporters of Indigenous Peoples, Israel is a prime example of evil colonialism. Simultaneously, overt racism seems to be on the rise. Jews feel the theoretically distinct pincers of antisemitism and anti-Zionism closing in on them.

Readers of *Religious Studies and Theology* may wonder what wisdom the Jewish religious tradition can offer these troubled times. That is not, however, a concern of this book. No chapter gives as much attention to Torah or mitzvot as David Weinfeld’s postscript gives to Montreal bagels and deli food (305–307). When the authors touch on religion, it is as an accoutrement of Jewish ethnicity. Thus, editor David S. Koffman’s introduction lumps together such signs of communal strength as Jewish “clubs, camps, retirement centres, grocery stores, and restaurants” with “an extremely learned body of Torah scholars” (7).

Canadian Jews, whether practicing Judaism or not, are indeed an ethnic minority. (An ethnicity made up of ethnicities, though Yolande Cohen’s “Forgetting and Forging: My Canadian Experience as a Moroccan Jew” is the only full chapter in this book not about Jews of Eastern European descent.) It is a small enough community that it sometimes seems as if

everyone knows everyone. I chuckled when Rebecca Margolis' *"In der heym in kanade: A Survey on Yiddish Today"* mentioned an anonymous couple who have raised their children in Yiddish and Cantonese (268); I was at their wedding.

An important chapter is Koffman's "The Unsettling of Canadian-Jewish History: Toward a Tangled History of Jewish-Indigenous Encounters." Focusing on the concerns that have become so acute in 2021, Koffman argues for going beyond "the story that we know and tell about Canadian Jewish life: the immigrant success story" to recognize that as immigrants, "Jews were among the colonizers in a process that clearly harmed Indigenous peoples" (104).

This applies, of course, to all non-Indigenous Canadians. As recalled in Jack Kugelmass' "Nothing is Forever: Remembering the Centennial," Canadian identity as constructed around the 1967 centennial involved a rather naïve celebration of unity in diversity that glossed over divisions and prejudices, including antisemitism. Kugelmass quotes popular historian Pierre Berton: "Canadians began to realize they had [...] a vibrant and exciting history" (246). We did not seem to realize, collectively, how destructive that history was.

Whether any shared sense of Canadian identity and culture can survive the current reckoning with our colonial past – and present – remains to be seen. Paradoxically, a negative answer might be good for the Jews, following the logic of David Weinfeld's "Postscript: Thin Canadian Culture, Thick Jewish Life." He observes that "Canadian culture feels shallow, flimsy, and unformed" (297), and sees this as beneficial to minorities, like Canadian Jews, who are protected from assimilation into the mainstream by the weakness of the mainstream itself.

What if "mainstream" Canada fades away altogether? Jeffrey Veidlinger's "'To Guarantee Their Own Self-Government in All Matters of Their National Life'" argues that Canadian multiculturalism is a distant echo of a policy advocated by nineteenth-century Jewish activists and put into action for a brief period (1917–1918) in Ukraine. That regime promised Poles, Jews, and other "national minorities" their own governments, not in specific provinces but throughout the country. Could some such arrangement be in Canada's future? As a whole, this book suggests that Canadian Jews would be well positioned for self-government.

The University of Toronto Press did not serve this volume well: It lacks an index, and there are typographical errors on nearly every page. Nevertheless, this book would make excellent reading for undergraduate classes in a variety of fields, and for anyone interested in Jews, Canada, minorities and multiculturalism, or diaspora communities worldwide.