Anat Helman, *Israeli National Ideals and Everyday Life in the 1950s.*
Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2014. 312 pp.

Anat Helman's *Becoming Israeli: National Ideals and Everyday Life in the 1950s*
regards anecdotes, appropriately, as useful historical sources – so I'll take the liberty
of sharing a couple of my own (albeit from decades later). I was introduced, in
Jerusalem in the 1990s, to a man named Albert. He mentioned that he grew up in the
neighborhood where I had rented a flat in the mid-1980s, and there was a chance I
might have known his mother. She ran a kiosk off Gaza Road. I did, indeed, recall
her. I used to buy my newspaper from her. One of the reasons why Albert's mother
was etched in memory is because she was sweet, gentle, and friendly. Imperfect
French or Hebrew didn't bother her. She always had a warm smile.

Helman's fine study provides the grounds for understanding why Albert's
mother was so special. Among Israelis (with the notable exception of *yekkes*, the
German Jews, who have now nearly vanished), rudeness and generally boorish
behavior, rather than civility, respect, and a notion of customer service, became
entrenched as components of the national public culture. Many Israelis and devotees
of the country maintain that coarseness and aggression in daily life are part of Israel's
charm, or dismiss it as a result of Israel's "tough neighborhood." Yet such cultural
mainstays, along with security concerns and economic motivations, prompt thousands
of Israelis to seek the friendlier climes of Germany, Britain, and America.

Becoming Israeli is a refreshingly brisk and readable interpretation of how the
society emerged, mainly on its own terms, as distinctly Israeli. Along with anecdotes
Helman embraces a rich variety of sources including photographs, cartoons, clothing
styles, and gestures. In a sense, Helman tackles the fundamental question of "what

does it mean to be Israeli," and the extent to which the characteristics comprising Israeliness emerged in the early years of statehood. One of her stiffest challenges, though, is to determine what is uniquely Israeli versus what might be considered generically Jewish, or more specifically, "Askenazi." Nevertheless, this is one of the few books written by an academic historian that has a chance of being appreciated by an educated public beyond academe. It should be recommended for any first-time visitor to the country. It addresses why Israeli Jews act as they do, more through cultural history than social psychology or conventional frames of analysis such as political and religious struggles and the Ashkenazi/Sephardi divide.

Among the book's strengths is Helman's choice of foci. Given its broad canvas, the power of the study derives from its locating spheres that are extremely important but frequently overlooked: the militarized, acronym-laden Hebrew of everyday conversation, the way Israelis confront severe weather, watch movies, spit sunflower and pumpkin seeds at soccer matches, ride the bus, and the character of kibbutz dining halls. Many who have lived in different countries, including Israel, would likely agree that in these realms Israelis seem to be, well, unusual. (In the 1980s I was at a screening of *The Terminator* at Jerusalem's Cinemateque. When the robot-Schwartzenegger went into a gun store and added two "Uzi's" to his copious order, several in the crowd started clapping and cheering).

Perhaps the weakest component of Helman's survey is the notoriously tricky subject of humor. Considering the recent, award-winning novel by David Grossman, *A Horse Walks into a Bar*, one is reminded how difficult it is to excavate and disentangle the origins of, and influences on, Israeli humor, from that which might be called either "Jewish" or even "Russian" or "Polish" or "Berlin" or "American." The work of Alice Nakhimovsky, for instance, would have assisted in drawing

connections between Soviet humor (often centered on scarcity and waiting in **lines)** and what Helman depicts as largely Israeli. Helman also has not availed herself of any of the writing on or about New York – which seems to share many of the same characteristics with the "Israeli" – in terms of brusque behavior and humor. Aren't New Yorkers rude? Blunt to a fault? Sardonic? Certainly, even before Israelis started escaping in droves to the Big Apple, it was on their mental map as the world's thriving Jewish metropolis.

As much as *Becoming Israeli* is well argued, there are a few areas where insights of fellow scholars would have enhanced Helman's study. The theoretical reflections in *The Past in Ruins* (1992) by David Gross would have been especially instructive. Gross shows that contemporary societies are suffused with often archaic holdovers from earlier periods. In that spirit, Arieh Saposnik's book on print culture, *Becoming Hebrew* (2008), would help to contextualize matters that, arising in the 1950s, were actually rooted in earlier decades. Hizky Shoham's research on Israeli consumer culture in Mandate Palestine – much of it directed against the Arab enemy – also had resonance in the 1950s.[1] And perhaps most important: the recent scholarship of Lior Libman, historicizing the culture of the kibbutz, starkly shows that the movement underwent traumatic adjustments amid and after Israel's War for Independence,[2] something that certainly resonated in kibbutz dining halls of the 1950s.[1] The latter work is especially significant for its unpacking of Israeli callousness and defensive-aggressiveness even beyond the confines of the kibbutz, a phenomenon that became so apparent in the 1950s among those who had earlier prided themselves on exemplifying universal, humanitarian ideals.

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[1] See Hizky Shoham, "'Buy local' or "buy Jewish"? Separatist consumption in interwar Palestine," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, 3 (2013): 469-489.

[2] Lior Libman, "'Helem ha-medina' shel ha-kibutz ha-meuchad, 1948-1954: mevim textualim," in *Iyunim Bitkumat Yisrael* 22 (2012): 25-63.

Despite these reservations Helman's work is a perceptive and welcome contribution to the historiography explaining Israeli society and culture, which in so many respects separates it from other countries. While politics per se will never be displaced, the kind of cultural history she has delivered brings us closer to understanding how Israel, in the middle and later decades of the 20th century, assumed the shape it did – for better and or for worse, depending on the beholder. Helman is one of the first to locate and seriously explore key elements of what held the young country together. *Becoming Israeli* also reveals how far academic thinking has advanced. One can only imagine the rolling eyes of an Israeli professor in the 1950s through the 1970s if a student or colleague had floated the possibility of writing a history of Israel expressly through the ways the nation dressed, rode the bus, littered, and watched movies. Jewish scholarship, overall, would be well served to heed Helman's subtle admonition to investigate the persistent bases of Jewish national cohesiveness, which she has accomplished in a highly commendable, original, and creative fashion.

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