

**Jewish Historical Studies**  
Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England

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Obituary:

Ada

David Biale<sup>1,\*</sup>

**How to cite:** Biale, D. 'Ada'. *Jewish Historical Studies*, 2021, 52(1), pp. 278-279.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2021v52.014>.

Published: 03 June 2021

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**Peer Review:**

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal's standard editorial peer review.

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*Jewish Historical Studies* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

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## Ada

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### DAVID BIALE

I first met Ada in the late 1980s or early 1990s. I was working on a study of gender and sexuality in Jewish history that eventually became my book, *Eros and the Jews*. In the course of exploring Hasidic attitudes to these themes, I came across the strange story of Hannah Rokhl, the so-called “Maid of Ludmir”, who had gathered a group of followers and acted as a female *tsadik*. The story struck me not as proto-feminist but instead as profoundly anti-feminist since Hannah Rokhl could only fulfill this role if she was presumed to be a man in a woman’s body. When she was forced to marry, she lost her Hasidim.

As I began to develop my own ideas about this unique story, I read Ada’s article on “Women in Hasidism”, published in the *Festschrift* for Chimen Abramsky in 1988. I immediately wrote to her to share my conclusions, which came very close to hers. In characteristic fashion, she embraced me as a collaborator in this research rather than a competitor.

Our paths – personal and intellectual – crossed many times over the years. At a remarkable conference in Israel in the late 1990s on Sabbatianism, I presented a paper on literary treatments of Sabbatianism from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One striking aspect of that literature was the role the authors often ascribed to women in the movement. I suggested that this dimension of Sabbatianism, largely ignored by Gershom Scholem, urgently needed research. A few moments later, Ada came to the podium and presented the first fruits of her work on that very topic.

Our last collaboration started nearly a decade ago when I was recruited by a group of Hasidism scholars, including Ada, to serve as project director for the first synthetic history of Hasidism. We met several times in Jerusalem and then for four summers in Leipzig at the Simon Dubnow Institute. Ada was a leading member of our nine-person team, although she was unable to be with us for our final summer. The success of our project, *Hasidism: A New History* (published in 2018 by Princeton University Press), owed a great deal to the collegial working relations between members of the team. In this regard, Ada played a key role, her quiet

authority and non-competitive personality instilling an atmosphere of teamwork and mutual respect.

Several of Ada's key contributions to the study of Hasidism shaped arguments in the book: the emergence of the movement only after 1772 when the first opposition to Hasidism arose, and the virtual absence of women from the movement in the eighteenth century. Due to her illness, Ada was only able to write a short portion of the eighteenth-century section of the book, but she did offer criticisms of the whole manuscript, which were invaluable.

I should like to close with a non-academic memory of Ada. During one of our summers in Leipzig, several of us went to the edge of town to a restaurant to celebrate one of our birthdays. By the time we finished the dinner, the trams had stopped running back to the centre of town. We had no choice but to walk. David Assaf, famous for his knowledge of Hebrew songs, began to play some old songs on his phone. He and Ada then regaled us on our long trek homeward, singing loudly in Hebrew as we traversed the German city. She had come full circle back to her singing career in the Israeli army from the 1960s. Her joy was infectious, and we can only hope that, even in her absence, we will continue to remember that joyful enthusiasm that marked not only her work but also her very being.