

JBN Book Reviews

Isaac Mozeson, editor

HARDCOVER

BRITAIN AND THE JEWS OF EUROPE 1939-1945

Bernard Wasserstein

Oxford University Press, \$17.95

There are no heroes in Bernard Wasserstein's *Britain and the Jews of Europe 1939-1945*. At best, the story of Britain's policy towards Jewish emigration to England to avoid the gas ovens of Nazi concentration camps is one where the survival of England came first and the fate of the Jews took a back seat. At worst, it is the story of vitriolic anti-Semitism. Either way Britain does not come out looking compassionate.

The book, which was sponsored by the Institute of Jewish Affairs of Britain, is not the first to document the fate of Jews in relation to immigration policy. A.J. Sherman's *Island Refuge* (1974) was probably the first and fullest account on the subject. However, Wasserstein, who gives credit to Sherman, has gone beyond the first work in more than one way. For instance, he was able to use documents that have only recently been made public by Britain's Foreign Office.

The picture that Wasserstein paints is a gloomy one. Prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, Jews were allowed to emigrate to England, but under a strict quota system. In fact, for many, England was not the final destination, but rather Palestine. But under the White Paper of May 1939, three months before the war, Britain set an even stricter quota for Jewish emigration to Palestine.

Once the war began the number of Jews who were able to escape Hitler's madness were very few indeed. The escape routes were effectively sealed. Men such as Sir John Shuckburgh, the Deputy Under-Secretary at the Colonial office, could write of the Jews of Palestine nearly one year after the outbreak of war: "I am convinced that in their hearts they hate us and have always hated us; they hate all Gentiles"

The case of the Struma is another example used by Wasserstein to show Britain's Foreign Office's lack of concern for Jewish human life. Here a ship of 769 Rumanian refugees were attempting to flee, and Britain refused to allow the ship to travel to Palestine. The ship sunk, killing all but one of its passengers. —F.B.

THE CANONIZATION OF THE SYNAGOGUE SERVICE

Lawrence A. Hoffman

University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana 46556, \$15.95

The title of this book would lead us to expect a discussion of the major liturgical units and an exploration of the manner in which they became mandatory religious practices, or authoritative for doctrine. Instead, we are presented with a detailed analysis of a number of textual issues, which the Geonim discussed in their responsa, as well as a theoretical schema which attempts to clarify the motivations behind changing Geonic attitudes in three distinct historical periods. The author emphasizes the varying external challenges which different Geonim had to face, and does not see halakhic decisions as a result of the unfolding of the system's own internal dynamic and inner logic. The real focus of the book is the Geonic attempt to standardize and fix the liturgical text; thus a title which invokes the logically and historically distinct notion of canonicity did not seem apt to this reviewer.

That having been said, we can turn to the book's considerable merits, which include valuable discussions of the political, economic, and theological challenges which assailed the Geonim from Yehudai to Hai, and the nature of their responses. In fact, the book could serve as a good introduction to the Geonic period. Complex and involved textual issues are clearly delineated and presented; the reader learns much about the structure and history of the liturgy. The author has evidently taken great care to present his material in an accessible and engaging manner. He is, in short, a good teacher. This book would be highly valuable for anyone interested in either the Geonic period or the history of Jewish liturgy. —N.P.

DICTIONARY OF THE JEWISH RELIGION

Dr. Ben Isaacson;

Edited by David Gross

SBS Publishing, 14 West Forest Avenue,
Englewood, N.J. 07631, \$12.95 hc;
Bantam Books, \$2.50 pb.

Encyclopedias of the Jewish religion are usually formidable, multi-volume

Reviews by:

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works, and even one-volume dictionaries of Judaism usually run to at least 500 pages of complex definitions. Dr. Isaacson's dictionary, with 500 definitions in 200 pages, fills the need for an attractive and affordable one-volume reference work. It explains the basic beliefs and practices of Judaism and its most important people, places, events, books, ceremonial objects and phrases for readers knowing little about the subject. The dictionary is based on Dr. Isaacson's multi-volume encyclopedia, available only in Hebrew.

Its format, with large, clear type, single columns of text and large, fascinating photos throughout, invites usage and browsing. Such topics as the Hebrew alphabet, important dates in Jewish history and worldwide Jewish population figures are discussed in an appendix. A reading list suggests further exploration beyond this volume.

Definitions are clear and carefully distinguished when necessary among Orthodox, Conservative and Reform viewpoints. No definition exceeds eight sentences, yet the essential meaning and significance to Judaism are conveyed. The brevity of this dictionary, a drawback for the very knowledgeable reader, is actually its merit for the reader with little background. The uncluttered discussions are excellent for quick definitions, for browsing, and as an overview of Judaism for the beginner. The foundation given whets the appetite for further study. Although small, this volume successfully conveys the essential meaning of and a feeling for some of the world's weightiest concepts. —J.W.

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