

# Mapping the Contours of a 'New Tanakh'

For Ruth Wisse, Literature Reveals the History of Jewish Modernity

The Modern Jewish Canon  
By Ruth Wisse  
Free Press, 395 pages, \$28.

By ALLAN NADLER

In the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, the Yiddish writer Melekh Ravitch ignited a heated controversy in Jewish intellectual circles by calling for the redaction of a secular Jewish canon that he dubbed "a new *Tanakh*." He proposed the creation of an authoritative anthology of the greatest Jewish literary works of the past two millennia that would serve as a new humanist Torah not just for modern Jewry but for all mankind. Ravitch, who had achieved fame in interwar Warsaw as one of the central figures of the Yiddish literary group *Khaliastre* (The Gang), immigrated to Montreal in 1941 and was one of that city's leading public Jewish intellectuals until his death in 1973. In Montreal, he was close to the prominent Roskies family and exercised great influence on the Roskies children, two of whose scions — David Roskies of the Jewish Theological Seminary and Ruth Wisse of Harvard — are today among the world's leading scholars of Yiddish literature.

Now, more than a half-century since Ravitch's bold but unanswered call for a new *Tanakh*, Ms. Wisse has produced a truly magisterial work about the modern Jewish canon. While Ravitch envisaged a grand, universalistic Jewish canon spanning two millennia, Ms. Wisse's book is devoted to mapping the contours of Jewish national literature in the modern period. The contention at the heart of her passionate and scholarly new book is her insistence not only that a definable modern Jewish literary canon exists, but that it embodies the history, politics and culture of modern Jewry.

This is a very ambitious agenda for a single book, and there are few scholars who could have realized it as well as Ms. Wisse has. She has achieved this precisely by not attempting a definitive descriptive bibliography of the modern Jewish canon (she sees her work rather as "a signpost on an unfinished road") but by presenting those books that, to her lights, best describe the experience of modern Jewry. Through finely tuned summaries and trenchant analyses of some two dozen major literary works, she succeeds dazzlingly in interpreting the story of the Jewish people in the modern age. Beginning with Sholom Aleichem and ending with a tentative evaluation

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of modern Israeli literature (appropriately called "A Chapter in the Making"), she does nothing less than take the reader on a fascinating journey through the intellectual, cultural and political history of Jewry since the late 19th century.

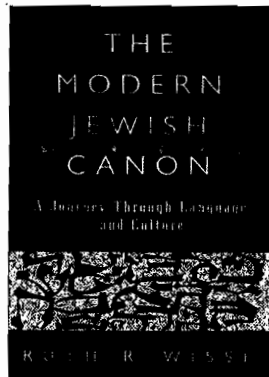
There are chapters on the Yiddish writers of late imperial Russia, the Jewish literature of the Soviet period, the Yiddish literary scene of Warsaw in the interwar years, the literature of the Holocaust, American Jewish literature and, more unconventionally, Jewish émigré writers from Poland (Jacob Glatstein and S.Y. Agnon) and Zionist literature in English. One finishes each of these chapters hoping that Ms. Wisse might some day devote an entire book to their respective themes.

Ms. Wisse casts her net widely, insisting that Jewish literature cannot be limited to works written in Yiddish and Hebrew. The criteria she develops for classifying literature as Jewish are far more subtle and complex, allowing for the daring inclusion of works by gentile writers such as George Eliot's "Daniel Deronda" and James Joyce's "Ulysses." Ms. Wisse has also chosen to deal with some books that she finds deeply flawed, such as Leon Uris's "Exodus" — using them to demonstrate the sad decline of Jewish culture and identity in America over the past century.

Ms. Wisse is particularly insightful when dealing with the complex issue of the relationship between national languages and national identity. By including works written in non-Jewish languages, she demonstrates the dilemmas and limitations facing Jewish writers not writing in Yiddish or Hebrew. The most compelling treatment of this problem is her discussion of Franz Kafka's tortured relationship to the Hebrew and Yiddish languages. She deals in an original way with Kafka and the Hebrew writer Yosef Haim Brenner in a single chapter titled "The Logic of Language and the Trials of the Jews"; she points out that while neither Kafka nor Brenner wrote in Yiddish, its world represented to both of them "a more cohesive Jewry than they could feel a part of." Her description of Brenner's work is a good illustration not only of her insight, but also of her own significant literary talents: "Brenner released in Hebrew the vomit, depression and madness of the sexually crippled, culturally overdetermined, politically hounded Jewish immigrants to Palestine. He developed a poetics of 'negative principle,' whereby only the broken, faltering style of nerves and neuroses could be a trustworthy vehicle of national Jewish recovery."

Ms. Wisse also identifies unifying features that determine the Jewishness of a work of fiction, maintaining

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that certain books written in English are more profoundly Jewish than many a Hebrew novel. Her extensive treatment of the Montreal poet A.M. Klein's masterful work of prose, "The Second Scroll," provides a powerful example: "Instead of accommodating the Jewish subject to the requirements of English," Ms. Wisse writes, "Mr. Klein creates an alienating English to convey the Jewish experience. In the language of the majority he exercises the right to appear alien to others rather than becoming alien to himself."

Sadly, however, Mr. Klein's ability to overcome linguistic barriers turns out to be rare. Often, the use of "gentile" languages at best compromises modern Jewish literature and usually deracinates it altogether. Ms. Wisse has delightfully little patience for the North American Jewish literature of self-loathing parody and national self-immolation. This is evident in her dismissive treatment of another famous Montreal writer, Mordecai Richler.

The weakest part of "The Modern Jewish Canon" may be the presentation of contemporary Israeli literature. Contrasting Israeli writers to their Yiddish counterparts in inter-war Poland, the author expresses concern that "the canonical impulse

itself" is becoming threatened in Israel: "Traditional Jews always begin their study with the earliest sources, which are closest to the word of God. This religious-intellectual discipline not only preserved Judaism for thousands of years, but also ascribed power to words, which retain their influence over time. Moderns who put their trust in progress are prone to substitute the rage of the moment for yesterday's classic."

In her treatment of the literature of the Holocaust, Ms. Wisse points to the irony that, following the devastation of Eastern European Jewry, Yiddish, once the language of Jewish radicalism and cosmopolitanism, assumed the role traditionally assigned to Hebrew: namely, as the repository of Jewish memory and tradition.

These astute observations notwithstanding, she does not sufficiently account for the fundamental and deliberate alienation from traditional Jewish culture and identity found in so much contemporary Israeli writing. In a 1999 essay published in an anthology about secular Jewish identity, A.B. Yehoshua, one of Israel's most celebrated writers, insisted that he did not define himself as a Jew: "If I am asked to present my identity-card as a secular

Jew, I respond immediately that I do not use the term Jew at all, but rather the term Israeli. I propose that we all return to the concept of Israeli as the key and exclusive term for our identity. With no additional terms."

Not only are Israeli writers troubled by their relationship with Diaspora Judaism; many are appallingly ignorant of the Jewish classics. Hence the deep irony that more Yiddish literature is steeped in the traditional Hebrew sources than is contemporary Hebrew literature.

Despite this chasm separating Diaspora Jewish literature from Israeli writing, Ms. Wisse insists that the predicament of Israelis today in their struggle with the Palestinians mirrors the centuries-old predicament of the Jews in their struggles with anti-Semitism. For her, therefore, it is a matter of political principle that Israeli literature will perforce reflect and continue the impulses of earlier Jewish literature. It is here that Ms. Wisse's political thinking seems to me to compromise her sober scholarly judgment. In fact, her own description of the unprecedented strength of Israeli literature unwittingly undermines her insistence that the future of the Jewish canon will be determined mostly by Israeli writers: "Jewish literature in Israel today has what it never had before: the institutional support of schools and universities; a daily press and media in search of new subjects and personalities; a critical establishment of academic and intellectuals that awards prizes and confers ranking," she writes. "Israel will henceforth determine its canonical writings as all countries do."

No doubt. But it is precisely on account of this "normalized" status of the Jews of Israel — the status of a national majority protected by one of the world's most powerful militaries — that the ethos of the Israeli canon cannot but be essentially different from the Diaspora Jewish canon that preceded it.

To be fair, a proper and balanced treatment of Israeli literature would require, as Ms. Wisse herself points out, a separate book. One can only hope that a second volume (one that might well be called "The Israeli Canon") will be forthcoming. For even if one disagrees with the author's political perspectives or does not fully share her list of "canonical" modern Jewish works, there is no doubt that her fine book belongs firmly in the canon of modern Jewish scholarship.

FORWARD, DECEMBER 15, 2000