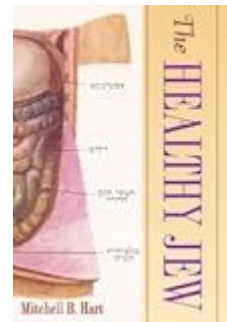


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Mitchell Bryan Hart.** *The Healthy Jew: The Symbiosis of Judaism and Modern Medicine.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 264 pp. \$29.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-87718-3.



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## A New Perspective on Judaism and Modern Medicine

Based on the construction of Judaism in the history of modern medicine (nineteenth and twentieth centuries), and having learned and/or studied Darwinism and eugenics—which formed the “scientific basis” of anti-Semitism in Europe—no educated reader could positively evaluate the Jewish people. By and large, in biophysical terms Jews were considered agents of disease and degeneration, a culturally parasitic group, lacking creativity and genuinely unable to contribute to Christian European civilization.

In his work, Mitchell B. Hart does not intend to minimize or deny such evident rejection of the Jews as members of an inferior race in the history of modern medicine. However, his research tries to bring to the fore a countertradition (p. 8). This tradition presented Jews and Judaism as vital and healthy. Even a few non-Jewish scholars considered Jews and Judaism to be a model for Christian Europe.

Moving his research from *Die Sozialhygiene der Juden und des altorientalischen Volkerkreises* (The Social Hygiene of the Jews and Ancient Oriental Nations), pub-

lished in 1894 by Alfred Nossig, a 30-year-old Polish Jewish intellectual who played a key role in founding the Jewish statistical movement in Berlin, Hart investigates numerous sources (books, articles, papers) which appeared in the first half of the nineteenth century in Europe, and which offered a “reinterpretation of Moses as a sanitarian and physician, and the ancient Jewish ritual laws as a hygienic code, provided one way to cement further a developing collective identity around the notion of special knowledge or wisdom” (p. 97). This process, which transfigured Moses and other ancient Jewish authorities into hygienists and physicians, described Judaism as a religion equipped with a broad understanding of preventive medicine and disease transmission equivalent or even superior to that of modern science. This theme of Moses and the rabbis as men of science and medicine survived into the 1930s and 1940s, and Hart presents several works by Jewish and non-Jewish scholars showing the contribution of the Jews to health and hygiene throughout history.

Hart also investigates the positive image of the

healthy Jew in the United States, particularly with regard to the tuberculosis problem at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the United States detailed discussions of Jewish slaughtering methods and the health benefits connected to *kashrut* were not confined to specialized books and journals, but also appeared in popular magazines. Though for the most part the articles praising Jewish dietary and purity laws—in the United States as well as in Europe—did not really intend to be a dissenting voice from anti-Semitism, they offered appreciation of the hygienic quality of Judaism, a quality which was in danger of being ignored in the face of anti-Jewish rhetoric.

Though every now and then Mitchell B. Hart reminds his reader that the image of the healthy Jew is only a limited counter-tradition, he frequently seems to forget this warning even in the introduction. For example, he writes on p. 4, “The story of Moses and hygiene that grows in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is, I argue, a repudiation, at least implicitly, of the idea that the Jews and Judaism are degenerate and that they require Europe to civilize them”; and further on p. 92: “Jewish and Christian medical and religious authorities, writing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in American and British professional journals and popular forums, propagated equivalence between ancient Jewish laws and rituals and modern forms of scientific medical knowledge.” On p. 103 we read, “If modern medicine and science served to validate the ancient, to counter the disparagement of religion by redefining it in medical and scientific terms, the status and legitimacy of modern medicine was also buttressed by linking it with the ancient biblical tradition”; and on p. 179, “The contributions of Jews to medicine, then, lay in the first place in the past, in Moses having given his own people, and then, through Christianity, the world, this health code. But the Jews still had a contribution to make in the present and future. As John Sutherland’s gloss on Richson’s sermon indicates, health authorities saw in the Mosaic code a very real and prac-

tical guide to contemporary health issues.” Hart’s generalizations frequently stem from a unique work, as in the case of efforts to transform Moses into a microbiologist. This tendency in Nossig’s book is sometimes presented as a general tendency in the European history of modern medicine (for instance on p. 60, 66, 73, and 77).

In Hart’s work, generalizations sometimes move also in the opposite direction: “Over the course of the nineteenth century, medicine and race coalesced around nationalism to produce a coherent anti-Semitic ideology that cast the Jew as essentially different from and dangerous to civilization and culture” (p. 7); “For the most part, however, writers on Judaism, eugenics, and Darwinism felt no compulsion either to celebrate or bemoan Judaism’s relative humaneness vis-À-vis the weak and unfortunate. The main task was to make the case for a correspondence or affinity between Judaism and eugenics, and the positive impact of this on the condition of the Jews” (p. 117). From this point of view, Hart clearly stresses that the invocation of the Hebrew Bible by a Christian physician should not be taken in any case as acceptance of Jews as a model for Christians, but this statement loses its impact in the argumentative structure of the whole work.

In my opinion, the sources presented by the author do not amount to a full-blown counter-tradition, all the same isolated or connected to the marginalization of the Jews (p. 189: “The discourse on ‘the healthy Jew’ was a direct engagement with the interpretative tradition that had marginalized or eliminated Judaism and Jewry’s role in the progress of ‘civilization,’ that is, of Europe and America”), though they surely offer a more complex picture both of the recent history of Jewish and Christian intellectual exchange and of the narrative of medical historiography in Europe and in the United States. In a second edition of this work, correction of the many typos as well as grammar errors present in almost all German citations will be necessary.

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