



Elisheva Carlebach. *Palaces of Time: Jewish Calendar and Culture in Early Modern Europe.* Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011. 304 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-05254-3.



Reviewed by Howard Adelman (Queen's University)

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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Playing with Time

Palaces of Time constitutes a pathbreaking presentation in social and cultural history that uses time as a category of analysis, offers a new way of reading history, and introduces a fascinating but rarely studied genre of Jewish literature, *sifre evronot* (singular, *ibur*), books about the calendar. In this review, I would like to put two aspects of the book in a slightly larger context. First, Carlebach's contribution to the study of time, as her title, *Palaces of Time*, suggests, echoes many aspects of Henri Lefebvre's discussion about the production of space.^[1] Following her analysis, it could be said that the production of time represents the interrelationships, combinations, and interactions created by social relations that do not take place in time but produce it and define it. The production of time shows a dialectic between, on the one hand, experienced time—that is material, physical, and natural rhythms (circadian, lunar, seasonal)—and, on the other hand, conceptual time—that is, mental categories and abstractions, which give rise to clocks, calendars, charts, rules, liturgies, codes, commandments, and prohibitions. The synthesis of the two

produces what might be called social time, that is, time lived in daily life.

Explicating conceptual time, Carlebach shows how *sifre evronot* transmitted invented traditions designed to impose ways of measuring time, whether based on a date of Creation, years of biblical kings, years since the destruction of the Temple, Seleucid years of contracts (starting in 312 BCE), or, for other peoples, the time of the incarnation of Jesus and the *hijra* of Muhammad. As an example of conceptual time, Carlebach mentions the rabbinic practice of adding extra days to the length of Jewish holidays in the diaspora and postponing the start of new months. She demonstrates how conceptions of time are fragile and subject to calendar reform and changes in methods of dating events. Carlebach gives many examples that show how social time or lived time, that is, everyday time, is a compromise between experienced time and conceptual time. As an example of the imposition of conceptual time on experienced time, Carlebach devotes much discussion to the *tekufot*, the two longest and two shortest days of the year, and how Jewish custom marked

these four days, perceived as liminal times of danger, by not drinking water and, in many cases, by abstaining from food. Carlebach shows how *sifre evronot* read traditional rabbinic texts in terms of Jewish conceptions of time and highlight the role of the *tekufah* in midrashic analysis of biblical texts, often seemingly contrary to the biblical text. For example, Jacob bar Samson took four shocking biblical stories and, based on midrashic accounts, imagined a connection between the grisly events and blood and water, and linked them with each of the *tekufot* of the year. Thus, he asserted, in the fall, when Abraham came to slaughter his son (Genesis 22), his knife was dripping with blood (often illustrated as such in *sifre evronot*), all the water in the world turned to blood for a moment, and continues to do so at the time of this *tekufah*. Then, in the winter, when Jephtah sacrificed his daughter (Judges 11), all the water of the world turned to blood. Next, in the spring, when the waters of Egypt turned to blood (Exodus 7), so did all the other water in the world. Finally, in the summer, when Moses hit the rock instead of speaking to it (Numbers 20), it spurted blood, and all the water in the world turned to blood for a moment, as it still does at this *tekufah*.

Lived time is often based on the competing demands of enforcing and of blurring boundaries between sects and between religious groups. As an example of competing mental conceptions of time, one Jew struggled with the question of whether he could give a January New Year's gift to local authorities, including priests. If he did so, he might be acknowledging the Christian associations of the holiday that falls eight days after Christmas. If he did not do so, he might upset a delicate balance of relations with his Christian neighbors. One rabbi suggested two solutions that offer insight about the production of time: the man could give the gifts prior to the actual day of the holiday or, if necessary, he could give them on the holiday with the understanding that New Year's Day represented—at least in the mind of this rabbi—a secular civic day rather than a religious holiday. Similarly, classical rabbinic injunctions that attempted to construct Jewish time tried to limit Jews' doing business with pagans immediately before, during, and after their holidays so that they would not contribute to their celebration in any way. Extrapolating from this attitude toward time, medieval Jews would have had to radically curtail their economic activity, which was often the reason that they were granted residence rights in the first place. Medieval rabbis, therefore, tried to present compromises in order to negotiate these conceptual impediments so that Jews could continue to do business with Christians without in-

terruption. One rabbi argued that because the Christian calendar contains so many holidays, Jews might ignore this abstract idea about time and do business on the holidays. Other rabbis worked around the earlier strictures against Jews doing business on pagan holidays by considering Christians not to be pagans.

The second highlight of *Palaces of Time* and its illustrations are Carlebach's depictions of the playful and the grotesque elements in *sifre evronot*. Most significantly, the phenomena that she describes are very much in the spirit of play and the grotesque exemplified in the writings of Christian authors such as Erasmus and Rabelais. According to Johan Huizinga and Mikhail Bakhtin, play is a central aspect of the culture of all peoples.[2] It involves the manipulation of images of reality in the imagination, yet it is very serious. It is a process that can liberate people from their daily lives and transport them temporarily to a different realm. Play was considered a way to purify thought from blind faith and intolerance, to prevent degeneration, and to prepare the way for a new consciousness. Along these lines, *In Praise of Folly* by Erasmus offers a mixture of complex ideas and jest that blurs the line between wisdom and mockery.

The literature of the grotesque often depicts bodily functions such as eating, drinking, sweating, intercourse, pregnancy, and dismemberment as well as the bodily organs involved in sex, digestion, and excretion, and their byproducts. Bakhtin distinguished between two types of culture: the high culture of the church and the state and the open and crude popular culture of the carnival, market, and holidays, especially Christmas and Easter. The boundaries between the two cultures became blurred during the medieval and early modern periods in events such as the mock mass at which the leaders burned excrement instead of incense and then sprinkled it on the participants. Rabelais wrote *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* in this spirit of carnival, satire, and crude mockery of the prayers and holy books. He mixed serious matters with play, including the strange, the grotesque, and the exaggeration. In this context, emptying the bowels was a basic aspect of life and not a private matter.

In *sifrei evronot*, the Rabelaisian aspects include drawings of large and grotesque humans, sometimes with animal limbs and large genitals; bizarre animals; and activities such as genital groping, men exposing their backsides with their heads between their legs, and others defecating. With roots in earlier rabbinic literature, these texts include derogatory and scatological references to Christian holidays and holy figures. For example, in con-

nection with holy days associated with Mary, several *sifre evronot* refer to her with great disrespect and cast aspersions on her sexual purity. They also refer to her as "the hanged one" (*hateluyah*). Since Jewish literature regularly disparaged Jesus as the hanged one (*hatalui*), these books playfully employ the epithet in the feminine to refer to his mother and to distort the Christian narrative. Of course, censors sometimes caught these usages, because they were not *â. c.*, that is, according to Carlebach, "polemically correct."

In another example of the Rabalasian aspects of Jewish concern with Christian time, Carlebach mentions a twelfth-century text that referred to Kalenda, identified in the Mishnah as a holiday for idolaters falling either eight days before the winter solstice or at the winter solstice (*tekufah*), as *niflaltz* and *ti-uv haria*. The latter she identifies with disgusting excrement, and the former she suggests is a corruption of *Nouvel-age*, the New Year. However, relying on at least contemporary Hebrew slang, *niflaltz*, from the same root as *lehaflitz* or *flotz*, seems to involve flatulence, the theme of this passage, and also the Rabelaisian spirit of inversion and mockery that Jews adopted during the Yuletide season.

It was the final chapter about Jewish chronology that originally attracted me to the book, and I was not dis-

appointed. In it, Carlebach traces the different kinds of calendars that Jews once used to measure time before they eventually adopted counting years from Creation, a relatively new aspect of Jewish chronology that dates from the tenth or eleventh century CE. Here she puts the first rabbinic chronology, *Seder olam*, into historical context and establishes a new paradigm for understanding the relations among subsequent Jewish chronicles. Carlebach has advanced the work on these chronicles begun by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, her mentor and predecessor at Columbia, in *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (1982). I look forward to *Palaces of Time* providing a similarly long and fruitful conversation among students of Jewish history. Elisheva Carlebach has produced an eloquently written, attractively designed, and beautifully illustrated book that is a must read for all those in the field.

Notes

[1]. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

[2]. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955); Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

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