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Reviewed by Jacob Baum (University of Illinois)

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Jews Welcome Coffee: Tradition and Innovation in Early Modern Germany

In *Jews Welcome Coffee: Tradition and Innovation in Early Modern Germany,* Robert Liberles examines what the history of coffee can reveal about early modern Jewish life. In undertaking this project, Liberles engages a historical as well as a historiographic problem. With the exception of one very notable piece by Elliot Horowitz, Jewish historians have not considered coffee as a beverage, instead focusing on participation in coffeehouse culture as a component of Jewish assimilation beginning in the eighteenth century.[1] The central thesis of this study is that coffee in the eighteenth century effectively symbolized novelty and innovation. As Liberles puts it, "Coffee didnât make revolutions, but it just might be what revolutionaries were drinking when they did" (p. xiii). He develops this argument using a method he calls "chaotic research," which entails gathering a wide range of archival and printed sources on coffee, regardless of the context in which they belonged. The purpose of taking this approach is to uncover sources that might otherwise be ignored when considering questions about coffee in Jewish daily life, and draw comparisons with coffee in early modern Germany more broadly. He presents his findings in six core chapters. *Jews Welcome Coffee* is a valuable, albeit brief, contribution to the history of Jewish everyday life in eighteenth-century Germany, as well as the cultural, social, and economic histories of early modern Europe more generally.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide a synthetic overview of coffee as a symbol of social and cultural change in early modern Islamic and European societies. The claims presented here are largely based upon secondary literature, which shows that opposition to coffee emerged when its consumption gained in popularity. For example, in sixteenth-century Mecca and Cairo, religious authorities attempted to prohibit coffee when members of the lower classes began to consume it. Grounds for prohibition focused above all on the social threat it posed, particularly the nocturnal lifestyle coffeehouse culture encouraged. In early eighteenth-century Germany, satirical pieces coded coffee as a foreign commodity by associating it with national customs of the French and English. Similar patterns can be found in other European contexts, but increasing critical focus on coffee as a beverage *per se* was a uniquely German development. As coffee's popularity steadily increased, authorities condemned it and attempted to restrict its consumption. The critical turning point occurred around mid-century when the Americas replaced the Ottoman Empire as the new center of coffee bean production, drastically lowering its cost. This coincided with edicts issued by several northern German states following the Seven Years' War prohibiting coffee from rural areas and restricting its consumption to the ruling classes. Frederick the Great's campaign against coffee and advocacy of beer disclosed the overlapping of ethnocentrism and economic interest

in decreasing Prussia's reliance on imported goods. Also unique to Germany was female identification with coffee. Gatherings called *KaffekrÃ¤nzchen* offered women a new social framework with no immediate connection to the household, and incited polemics on coffee's role in the dissolution of traditional social norms. Conspicuously absent from these arguments were the Jews, a point which Liberles acknowledges and problematizes. At the national level, controversies and debates did not explicitly link coffee and the Jews. At the local level, however, a variety of connections persisted.

The following four chapters use a rich cache of rabbinic literature, memoirs, and archival documents to examine connections at the local level. In chapter 3, rabbinic *responsa* indicate a generally positive, even enthusiastic, reception of coffee among the rabbis. As in other societies, rabbinic discussions regularly emphasized coffee as new and unfamiliar. Coffee's newness raised several questions: could a Jew drink coffee on the Sabbath, and if so, how could one prepare and obtain it given restrictions on labor? Could coffee be consumed during Passover? Given its status as a bean consumed in liquid form, what categories of blessing were appropriate to speak over coffee? In answering these questions, coffee presented the rabbis with two methodological challenges: first, they could not refer to earlier rabbinic opinions; second, they often lacked direct experience with coffee. They gradually developed several solutions. Many consulted the views of rabbis in Islamic lands where coffee appeared slightly earlier. Others visited merchants or factories to make inquiries. If these two methods failed to produce enough information, rabbis often erred on the side of caution, advocating a more stringent set of rules for its consumption. In contrast to Islamic and European societies, rabbis in Germany were noteworthy for how quickly they absorbed coffee into a normative religious framework.

Chapter 4 examines the integration of coffee into Jewish daily life in three topical areas: patterns of consumption, petty Jewish trade in coffee, and coffee's effect on religious life. Liberles draws on *responsa* and memoirs in his analysis of consumption, and finds that males and females alike consumed coffee, primarily for its properties as a stimulant. It was consumed in the home and in public establishments, although most evidence of public consumption indicates this was a male activity. Public consumption was fairly common as early as the first decades of the eighteenth century, while private consumption only became more common in the second half of the century. Archival evidence from the Frankfurt Institut fÃ¼r Stadtgeschichte underscores petty trade in coffee as a tactic for dealing with poverty and gendered and age-based restrictions on labor. It also reveals the popularity of drinking coffee on the Sabbath. Liberles considers several cases of Jews selling "Shabbos coffee" from the last quarter of the eighteenth century. These cases reveal that peddling coffee was a common activity among poorer Jews and Jewish widows, most of whom engaged in the practice regularly on the Sabbath. Customers commonly included the sick and elderly, rural Jews visiting the city, as well as local nobility who often placed special orders through their Jewish representatives in the city. In general, peddlers acquired their coffee in small orders purchased from Christian merchants. Turning to religion, Liberles relies only on secondary materials that are representative of Safed (modern-day Israel), and Italy. This literature shows that prohibitions against alcohol before praying were not applicable to coffee, and that coffee and cakes were a critical part of marriage rituals in some Jewish communities by the mid-eighteenth century. Extending the arguments of Horowitz, Liberles also claims that coffee helped spread nocturnal rituals, specifically the *Tikkun Hatzot* prayer ritual of Lurianic Kabbalah, although no evidence is presented for Germany.

Chapter 5 compares controversies over Jewish participation in the coffee trade in Frankfurt and parts of Prussia. In both locations, Christian merchants sought to limit Jewish participation by appealing to secular authorities. Merchants represented Jews as cheaters, and therefore threatening to honest Christian commerce. These arguments reflected traditional anti-Jewish arguments and anxieties about expanded Jewish presence in commerce stemming from changing legal status in the later eighteenth century. In Frankfurt, Jewish legislation passed in the wake of the *Fettmilch* Uprising (1612) became the focus of a series of proceedings on Jewish coffee peddling in the 1760s through the 1780s. Because the original ordinance did not explicitly prohibit its sale, the Jewish community argued that they were allowed to sell coffee, and complained that in other locations in Germany, Jews had greater freedom in commerce. Christian merchants argued that because it was not explicitly allowed, it must be prohibited. As in Prussia, Christian merchants tapped the city's medieval past to harness traditional hostilities towards Jews, praising the 1246 expulsion and murder of members of the Frankfurt Jewish community, and claiming that the Jewish coffee trade posed a threat to Christian health. Despite attempts to circumscribe the Jewish community from the coffee trade, peddling persisted

throughout these decades. Tax evasion and hiding coffee in unauthorized spaces appear in the complaints of Christian merchants and in the Jewish testimonies.

Chapter 6 examines the spatial maneuvering of Jews in Frankfurt under Napoleonic rule. In 1806, authorities issued an ordinance guaranteeing Jews equal access to public space in the city. The Jewish community immediately began to test this ordinance by seeking entry into Christian coffeehouses. Liberles provides evidence from several cases involving a Christian proprietor called Langenberger who on several occasions denied service to Jews. Langenberger claimed that his lease prohibited him from serving Jews, and complained that on multiple occasions Jews had aggressively demanded service and even attacked some of his employees. The case was complicated by the complaints of several French Jews who were denied service. This was primarily an issue because it was illegal to deny service to any French citizen in the city. Langenberger claimed he had not known they were French, and that if they had worn their *cocardes* (ribbons in their caps identifying them as citizens), he would have served them. After this, Langenberger complied in serving French Jews wearing *cocardes,* but continued to encounter conflicts with disruptive local Jews demanding coffee. Liberles interprets the disruptive behavior as an attempt by the Jewish community to break down barriers–what he calls a "battle for expanded space" (p. 129).

There are some problems with *Jews Welcome Coffee.* It is rather brief, and one wonders how much Liberles left out of the narrative. I would have been interested to learn more about how changing medical theories and practices informed understandings of coffee, and how sensual aspects of coffee related to religious practices. Liberles makes tantalizingly brief mentions of these subjects, but does not develop them fully as lines of analysis. Further, in the Frankfurt controversies discussed in chapter 5, the evidence cites Jewish trade in coffee, tea, and sugar–not coffee alone–as problematic. One wonders if Liberles's emphasis on coffee is completely merited here, or if the issue at stake was more generally trade in small highly portable and profitable luxury commodities. This raises the question: why is coffee a better symbol of the new than these other commodities, which appeared in Europe at the same time, and appear to have been controversial in their own right? Similarly, were the conflicts detailed in chapter 6 strictly about space, or might they also reveal a more complicated set of relationships between notions of citizenship and cultural assimilation? Beyond these questions and criticisms, the footnotes do not provide original-language text for block quotations, and explanation of the book's methodology is somewhat disorganized. For example, it is not clear why Prussia and Frankfurt were selected as the primary sites of investigation until page 86. Despite these problems, Liberles has produced a welcome contribution to the underresearched field of Jewish daily life in early modern Germany, and raised many thought-provoking questions for future researchers.

Note

[1]. Elliot Horowitz, "Coffee, Coffeehouses, and the Nocturnal Rituals of Early Modern Jewry," *AJS Review* 14, no. 1 (March 1989): 17-46.

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