



Pierre Birnbaum. *A Tale of Ritual Murder in the Age of Louis XIV: The Trial of Raphaël Lévy, 1669.* Trans. Arthur Goldhammer. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. 178 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-7404-8.



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From Ritual Murder to Treason: Antisemitism in Early Modern and Modern France

In the past, historians have traced the modernization of French Jews to emancipation, the Napoleonic Sanhedrin, and the creation of the consistorial system. Recently, Jay Berkovitz and others have offered evidence of prerevolutionary Jewish acculturation and integration in France during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Similarly, in his *Tale of Ritual Murder in the Age of Louis XIV*, Pierre Birnbaum locates the origins of nineteenth-century anti-Semitism in the hostility toward Jews in the early modern period. Just as Berkovitz found shades of the “modern” in the early modern, Birnbaum has found shades of the “early modern” in the modern, and he associates modern French anti-Semitism with the medieval and early modern blood libel.

Birnbaum examines the relatively unknown story of the trial in Metz of Raphaël Lévy for the ritual murder of four-year-old Didier Le Moyne. His book begins with an account of Le Moyne’s brother’s last descendant’s poignant apology to the sole surviving descendant of Lévy in 2001. Its final chapter addresses the resurgence of the ritual murder charge during the Dreyfus af-

fair and the association of Alfred Dreyfus with Lévy among both Dreyfus’s supporters and detractors. The body of Birnbaum’s work focuses on the background of the Lévy trial, the trial itself, and the ramifications for Metz Jewry.

In his introduction, Birnbaum gives a brief history of ritual murder and host desecration allegations during the medieval period. In his attempt to understand these accusations, he cites the well-known theories of Gavin Langmuir and Israel Yuval, though he does not fully explain them. He demonstrates that the seventeenth-century public in Metz was fully aware of famous stories of host desecration, which were simply a variation on the ritual murder charge.

In his first chapter, Birnbaum explains the contradictory ages of Louis XIII and Louis XIV with both the flourishing of arts and sciences and the most superstitious and intolerant of beliefs. On the one hand, the absolutist monarchs formally granted their protection to the Jews. On the other hand, these absolutist kings often

failed to protect the Jews against a growing intransigent Ultramontane Catholicism that blamed society's ills on witches, Protestants, and Jews. As Birnbaum later notes, the vertical alliance between the king and the Jews had its limits.

It is in his second chapter that Birnbaum begins the story of Lévy and the trial, which he does not relate in chronological order. Lévy, a small-scale livestock dealer from Boulay traveled to nearby Metz on the eve of the Jewish New Year in 1669 to purchase a shofar for the holiday. Shortly afterward, he was summoned to Metz to answer questions about the disappearance of a Christian child who had vanished on the road from Boulay to Metz on the day of Lévy's travels. Relying on trial documents and the journal of an anonymous Jew, Birnbaum painstakingly reconstructs the contradictory, hateful, and irrational testimony of the prosecution's witnesses and the vehement defense of the accused, who was tortured. He also reconstructs the trial of Meyer Schwabe, a trial within a trial. Several non-Jewish witnesses testified that Schwabe, a Jewish resident of Metz, who had defended Lévy, had mocked the crucifixion of Jesus on a Good Friday several years earlier. The testimony against Schwabe, like the testimony against Lévy, grew increasingly bizarre and contradictory. Unlike Lévy, however, who died at the stake, royal help arrived in time to save Schwabe and the other Jews implicated in their alleged crimes.

In the wake of the conviction of Schwabe and other accomplices, the intendant of Metz, who represented the king, protected the Jews from would-be rioters riled up by the trial. Furthermore, the king's Council of State prohibited the Metz parlement from carrying out its death sentence. The king himself prohibited future trials for ritual murder and forbade even the belief in the charge. Nonetheless, as Birnbaum relates, new accusations of ritual murder arose well into the modern period. Even Abbé Grégoire, who championed the emancipation of the Jews, refused to dismiss the possibility that a few Jews in the past had committed ritual murder. Birnbaum's focus, however, is not on Grégoire or even on the Damascus affair, but on the intense role that blood libel played during the Dreyfus affair.

Both prior to and during the Dreyfus affair, some Ultramontane Catholics blamed Jews for the secularist policies of the republican government evoking the Ultramontane Catholic attacks on Jews during the seventeenth century. Thus, an irrational hatred of Jews for alleged crimes against Catholicism persevered long after their emancipation. Moreover, during the period of the Dreyfus affair, the Catholic journal *La Croix* specifically associated Dreyfus with Jewish ritual murder. If ritual killers had murdered Christian children in the past, the Jews today, symbolized by Dreyfus, were destroying the soul of France through their supposedly radical secularist anti-Catholic agenda. Even the defenders of Dreyfus did not deny the association between him and ritual killing. For them, however, the charge of treason against Dreyfus and the allegations against French Jewry were just as false and irrational as the charge of ritual murder. Indeed, before publishing his history of the Dreyfus affair, Joseph Reinach wrote about the judicial crime against Lévy. As Reinach had hoped, the Supreme Court finally stepped in and rehabilitated Dreyfus much as the king had finally stepped in to refute the charge of Jewish ritual murder. Of course, for Lévy himself, unlike Dreyfus, help came too late.

In examining the Lévy trial, Birnbaum, who has written profusely on the history of the Third Republic, has demonstrated the need to look well beyond emancipation to understand the place of Jews in modern French society. While a fuller explanation of the origins of the blood libel charge and a more straightforward chronology of the Lévy trial would have been helpful, Birnbaum's narrative is coherent, and his arguments are persuasive. Though they do not detract from the work, as in any book, a few errors have crept in. Hippolyte Prague, not Henri Prague, was the editor in chief of the *Archives Israélites de France* cited by Birnbaum. Technically there were no "orthodox" Jews in Metz because orthodoxy did not formally emerge until the nineteenth century. Abraham bound Isaac, not Jacob, for sacrifice. These minor errors aside, Birnbaum has made a formidable contribution to both the history of the Jews in early modern and modern France and has successfully demonstrated the intrinsic link between the two periods.

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