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Joshua N. Azriel, Enduring Jewish Communities Around the World: Models of Effective Communication

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Joshua N. Azriel, *Enduring Jewish Communities Around the World: Models of Effective Communication* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2023), 198 pp., ISBN: 978-1-66691-324-8.

Examining the diverse manifestations of Jewish-ness in an ever-evolving twenty-first century milieu has been a discussion across academic circles since global access to information first became increasingly immediate. As Kennesaw State University professor of journalism and emerging media Joshua Azriel examines in his new book: “Jewish communities on every continent around the world” (2). Their stories of endurance and perseverance are an inspiration through the monumental challenges faced collectively by world Jewry, and as Azriel’s comprehensive investigation demonstrates: “Judaism is a religion with communication at its core. That communicative act exists as prayers, symbols, rituals, holy texts, and community organizations” (157–158). It is this religious and cultural tradition of communication that Azriel identifies as the sustaining core value that continues to strengthen Jewish communities individually and as a global collective. The publication is engaging and an accessible read with plenty of narrative to support Azriel’s scholarly insights.

The analysis is separated by geographical community: St. Thomas (U.S. Virgin Islands), Halifax (Canada), Guatemala City (Guatemala), San Jose (Costa Rica), Sefwi Wiawso (Ghana), Bene Israel (India), Belmonte (Portugal), Sofia (Bulgaria), and Iași (Romania). Azriel bases his scholarly approach in organizational communication theory. He notes: “Specifically, systems theory can guide us by explaining how a religion can endure in challenging environments, maintaining their cohesiveness” (3). Although Azriel routinely cites the religious perspective, he does remark on the cultural component that is not necessarily connected to spiritual ideology, but without notable emphasis. “Parents, grandparents, and extended family play a key role in influencing the religious and spiritual lives of their children over their transformative years” (10). There is a universal quality to this postulation, as such dynamics are the foundation for any culturally or traditionally unified society. There is an element of oral tradition that Azriel identifies through many of the interviews he integrates within the broader text.

When one considers the hubs of Canadian Jewish life, the three locations are Winnipeg, Toronto and Montreal. Azriel’s research emphasizes the port city that was the initial point of entry to Canada for many Jews, making possible the flourishing of subsequent communities. “Between 1928 and 1971, nearly one million immigrants were processed in Halifax at the Pier 21 entryway on the harbor. This included 740,000 immigrants between 1945 and 1972, and Holocaust survivors who rebuilt their lives as new Halifax residents” (31). For the Canadian reader, it is striking that Halifax has played such an influential role in building Canada’s Jewish civilization

since 1750. The seeds of the Jewish community were being planted in Halifax when their brethren living under the Hapsburgs existed in a state of constantly shifting policies of semi-tolerance and outright antisemitism under the Hapsburgs and Eastern European Jewry was accustomed to heavy restrictions and hateful prejudice. To get a sense of the current Jewish religious and cultural scene in Halifax, Azriel interviewed locals and amassed knowledge through the tradition of storytelling, learning that in terms of affiliated congregants there have been ebbs and flows, but that a core community base has ensured a modest but thriving community. At present, the activities of their local Chabad *shluchim* (emissaries) guarantees that Jewish students, who tend to be unaffiliated can access a supportive community that will facilitate the observance of holidays and traditions. “The main challenge for the Jews living in Halifax is not whether there will be a community, but what it will look like in coming years, specifically whether an Orthodox synagogue will exist. [...] The unknown component regarding the future of Halifax’s Jewish community is the Israelis who immigrated here. They are raising their children in Halifax. While most Israeli families are unaffiliated, most will seek Bar and Bat Mitzvahs for their children” (41–42). Azriel believes that the need to observe key lifecycle events will help to fortify the Jewish community of Halifax in coming times. “As the Jewish population looks toward the middle of the twenty-first century, it needs to continue having strong communications to engage with its current residents and new arrivals” (44).

Azriel’s investigation into the Jews of Sefwi Wiawso is particularly intriguing. This small settlement is located in western Ghana. “The Jews of Sefwi Wiawso, also called the House of Israel, learned their religious by oral tradition” (75). This chapter in particular illustrates Azriel’s thesis that communication networks sustain Jewish identity across time and space. Much of what Azriel has to impart to his reader comes from the stories told to him by residents emphasizing the preservation of identity through intergenerational communication. “While the Sefwi, through oral tradition, have community memory of the past few centuries, there is no common agreement about where they originated from” (76). They nevertheless maintained their Jewish traditions, practices, and rituals by passing this knowledge from generation to generation and did not get enveloped by the sea of colonialism that overtook this region and subsequent missionary efforts after the country liberated itself from British rule in 1957.

The text also delves into Bene Israel of India: “India’s Jews are a micro-sized community, with an over-sized national impact” (85). Azriel notes the many influential and high-ranking officials of the country with Jewish origins. His scholarly contribution to Jewish studies contains countless interviews and photographs collected through exhaustive research. The assertion that Jewish-ness and religious communities survive as the result of communication might seem elementary, since storytelling is at the heart of Jewish values, but Azriel’s analysis is meticulous in doc-

umenting not that communication has facilitated this endurance, but how it has achieved this. "Practicing Judaism is a communication act. It exists as both individual and group communication. Internal and external communication exist through worship, synagogues, symbols, publications, education, and organization structures. [...] It is all embodied within the written Haggadah, the book families read and follow for the Passover seder. [...] In fact, nearly every holiday employs verbal communication to tell specific stories of God's miracles to save the Jewish people. That act of communication was key to creating the ethos of religion" (151). The text is almost like a whirlwind tour around the globe with stops in lesser-known corners of the Jewish world. The text presents a wonderfully detailed and insightful portrait of each community. Azriel's book will appeal to both scholars of Jewish studies and travel enthusiasts. Academics within the fields of anthropology, sociology, and history would also find significant value in Azriel's nuanced examination of sustaining diverse Jewish communities through communication. There is a multidisciplinary blending of historical contextualization, sociological examination, and testimony gathered through fieldwork. The resulting publication is an accessible text and leaves the reader with a preliminary foundation for understanding how identity is transmitted through oral traditions and other communications.

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