

Review of:

A Rich Brew: How Cafés Created Modern Jewish Culture
Shachar M. Pinsker. New York: New York University Press, 2018. Pp. ix + 369, notes, index.

Review by: Nic Hartmann

Whether in university towns or large metropolitan areas, café culture has long been a space for intellectual discussion, social change, and community gathering. Neither work nor home, the café has been described as a “third place.” In the world before globalization commodified the concept of this third place and turned it into a standardized product, the café became simultaneously the middle ground and signifier of local and regional culture. As Shachar M. Pinsker illustrates in *A Rich Brew: How Cafés Created Modern Jewish Culture*, cafés did more than just establish a third place: they shaped religious communities, cultural movements, and creative activity within the Jewish world. A café, according to Pinsker, was “rarely considered a Jewish space,” but nevertheless shaped Jewishness from a very early point in history (6). Combined with being a symbolic space for the development of modern urbanness, the café, according to Pinsker, is a place where tradition and variation emerge, carrying both a symbolic past and a sense of “otherness” with them (7).

Rather than organizing his book thematically by keywords or cultural concepts, Pinsker divides *A Rich Brew* into chapters that demonstrate the power of café culture in specific hubs of the Jewish world. Starting with the relatively young community of Odessa (founded in 1794), Pinsker’s analysis of café culture within the city clearly highlights that Odessa—as a young, multiethnic, and diverse city with a large population of newcomers from around the world, including a large population of Jews—is unlike other cities of the Russian empire. In focusing on Odessa’s dichotomous ways as a city of both deeply devout Jews and of corrupt, vice-laden individuals, Pinsker successfully highlights Odessa’s status as a European-looking, modern Russian city that lured many people to its opportunities, especially its cafés. The discussion of a sociopolitical understanding of the fall of the Russian empire, combined with turn-of-the-century pogroms and the rise of the Soviet Union, draws the reader into the book’s essence: the idea that politics and social change cannot be separated from café culture. Pinsker’s approach remains the same as it proceeds to the discussion of café culture in Warsaw, Vienna, and Berlin: asking how café culture shapes, and is shaped by, social, political, and cultural forces.

The various chapters also highlight the challenges of understanding Jewishness as both religious and ethnically-based, exploring how the intersections of religion and ethnicity shaped popular understandings of Jews and their café culture. Excerpts and anecdotes from literature, theatre, and art of the time bolster the discussion, bringing to light the cultural power of regional culture in a broader understanding of Jews, non-Jews, and the concept of the “other.” This exploration continues in two chapters that focus on communities of exile outside Europe; although the other

chapters successfully discuss the role of cities in providing Jews with new places to live (such as Warsaw), the sections that focus on New York City and Tel Aviv-Jaffa demonstrate the determination of Jewish communities to establish their cultural presence abroad. For New York City, Pinsker demonstrates how cafés helped Jewish people negotiate their status as exiles and refugees, and the simultaneous emotions of community and solitude that arose from being away from their homes. Nostalgia and optimism continue as themes in the chapter on Tel Aviv-Jaffa, where café culture was part of a radical transformation from a largely Arab community to a new Jewish city that became a European city away from home. Pinsker also highlights how, just like in New York, younger generations of Jews with less connection to a homeland shied away from the café culture of the earlier generations, and assimilated more into the community at large. The sense of otherness that built café culture was greatly reduced when the new generations were no longer the other but were accepted as part of the bigger society.

The focus on examining individual cities is one of the book's strongest points, as each chapter is a mini-historiography of class, religion, ethnicity, and gender. More than anything, however, *A Rich Brew* is an examination of the role of nostalgia for home in shaping everything from café discussions to creative output to historical reflection. A welcome addition for anyone interested in the role that coffee culture can play in contextualizing religion and ethnicity, *A Rich Brew* also serves as an interesting counter-narrative to studies of history within larger cities, such as Odessa and Vienna, which have long been places where other, more dominant populations have been able to tell their stories.