
Elliott Horowitz, a professor of Jewish History at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, has written extensively on Jewish social, cultural and intellectual history from an original, interdisciplinary, and unapologetic perspective. In an important article published in 1989, Horowitz analyzed early modern Jews’ customs on the eve of circumcisions, exploring what he called the “sacralization” of popular religious rituals. That same year, another of his pieces cleverly connected the spread of nocturnal pietistic practices in early modern Venice and Safed with the increased availability of coffee and the spread of venues that served it. Throughout his scholarly oeuvre, Horowitz has specialized in drawing unexpected parallels between Jewish and Christian religious life, and has consistently highlighted episodes of cultural cross-pollination that other scholars either missed or, worse, deliberately elided.

*Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence* fits squarely into this pattern. A courageous book that has won as many detractors as champions, Horowitz’s work narrates a history of Jewish anti-Christian violence stretching from late antiquity to the present day, showing how Jews were often perpetrators as well as victims of inter-religious hostility. The book aims to counter the image of the Jew as a defenseless victim of Christian state policy and mob violence through the ages, which has come to dominate historiography of the Jews.

The book is divided into two parts. Part One, entitled “Biblical Legacies,” examines various exegetical and hermeneutic perspectives on the biblical book of Esther ranging from second-century Aramaic paraphrases (*targumim*) to twentieth- and early twenty-first-century commentaries. After a surprisingly personal and confessional introduction, successive chapters treat eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century, mostly English, analyses of Esther; divergent critical views of Esther and Vashti, the “pair of queens” (46) of the ancient tale; Mordechai’s refusal to bow before King Ahasuerus and its political, moral, and practical implications across the centuries; Haman as the incarnation of evil and the subsequent efforts of post-biblical scholars to interpret (artistically and verbally) his final suffering at the hands of victorious and vindicated Jews; the story of Amalek, and his attack on fatigued Jews fleeing Egyptian servitude recounted in Exodus 17 and Deuteronomy 25, and the typological readings Jews and Christians have performed on the Bible in medieval and modern times, conflating
modern-day anti-Semites such as Hitler with Amalek. As Part One proceeds, Horowitz’s narrative picks up speed and confidence, moving (in reverse chronological order) from Victorian biblical critics to medieval Jewish exegetes.

Part Two shifts focus away from an analysis of biblical readings of the book of Esther and towards an historical treatment of Jewish violence. Chapter Six, “The Fascination of the Abomination,” studies Jewish desecration of the cross and host in medieval and modern Europe, and posits that these acts carried sexual connotations for pre-modern Jews. Chapters Seven and Eight scrutinize, respectively, Christian views of innate Jewish passivity and antipathy to violence and Jewish historians’ own treatments of Jewish aggressiveness around the time of the Purim festival. Chapter Nine connects the occasionally overlapping celebrations of Purim and Christian Carnival with the violence that often ensued. Chapter Ten investigates traditions of “local Purims,” whereby Jewish communities marked the passing of religious danger by typologically conflating events of their own lifetimes with Mordecai and Esther’s triumph over Haman and his genocidal ambitions. Curiously, the book lacks a conclusion; the reader is implicitly asked to synthesize the book’s content and to draw his or her own conclusions from the work’s amply-documented chapters.

Reckless Rites rests on a solid and substantial foundation of primary sources and secondary scholarship. Reading Horowitz’s examples of Jewish violence toward Christians and Muslims, from Jews’ complicity in a massacre of Christians during the seventh-century Persian conquest of Palestine to Baruch Goldstein’s slaying of twenty-nine Palestinians in Hebron during Purim of 1994, one gets the feeling that the author is merely sampling, not exhausting, his sizeable supply of historical data. Beyond his manifest and at times playful display of erudition (the author has the uncanny ability to mention, in the midst of a single paragraph, a memoir of Lyndon Johnson’s presidency alongside Rabbi Solomon ben Samson’s 1096 Crusade Chronicle (165)) Professor Horowitz challenges renowned historians. An example of this is Horowitz’s treatment of Cecil Roth’s The Jews of Medieval Oxford (1951). Horowitz believes that Roth, in his discussion of a Jew who trampled a processional cross in Oxford on Ascension Day, 1286, excused the Jew’s behavior by labeling him a “demented iconoclast.” Horowitz then asks “could only a demented Jew have intentionally seized and destroyed a processional cross in thirteenth-century Europe?” (150). Acknowledging that in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust Roth’s apologetic stance was understandable, Horowitz nonetheless states