

*Jewish Responses to Modernity: New Voices in America and Eastern Europe.*  
By Eli Lederhendler. New York University Press, 1994. 232 pages.  
\$40.00.

Eli Lederhendler, senior lecturer at the Institute of Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University, began his career as a student of East European Jewish history and subsequently shifted his focus to America. Here he draws on both of his specialties as he presents seven papers (three of them previously published) that illustrate in different settings the nexus between culture and politics in modern Jewish responses to modernity. The essays were composed over several years and range widely: the first is a dense theoretical treatment of the interplay between "language, culture and politics" in Modern Jewish history; the second looks at messianic rhetoric among enlightened and pro-Zionist Jews in Russia; the third presents the illuminating memoirs of an "Errant Young Man" in Eastern Europe who breaks with tradition; the fourth traces Orthodox Jewish responses to modernity in Russia; the fifth investigates the Jewish vision of America, which Lederhendler shows to be "a projection of Jewish aspirations, self-image, and values"; the sixth reveals what guides to sex and etiquette teach us about the Americanization of Yiddish-speaking immigrants; and the seventh offers a new interpretation of American Hebraism as seen through the prism of *The American Hebrew Year Book*.

Lederhendler, like most scholars fortunate enough to be able to publish fugitive essays between two covers, insists that a common theme unites his disparate chapters. He defines this overarching theme on page one:

there is a culture of modernity to which social, political, literary, and linguistic issues all are related. Moreover, the nexus between culture and politics, as it may be seen in the Eastern European context, was relevant to the Jewish experience in America as well. Here, the key motif is the ripple effect, or afterlife, if you will, of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment (late eighteenth to nineteenth century), which is discernible in all the texts and topics addressed in this book. That continuity exists even where the impact of Haskalah was negative—that is, where it elicited mainly an opposing reaction or counter-ripple.

This makes for heavy reading, which the mind-numbing theoretical essay that opens the volume does nothing to lighten. Nor does the thesis come as a surprise to those who have read such students of culture as George Mosse. Lederhendler, to be sure, lacks Mosse's engaging style, and (surprisingly) he does not

even cite him in his footnotes. But he has read many other things (even a Yiddish treatise on sex), and those who follow his essays through to the end will find themselves amply rewarded.

Students of religion may be most interested in three of these essays. The first, a suggestive inquiry into the messianic rhetoric of a small group of Jewish nationalists prior to Theodor Herzl, argues that messianic language should be understood metaphorically rather than literally and represents the manipulation of traditional symbols for political ends. "Metaphorical use of messianic terminology," Lederhendler concludes, "was in reality a way of fostering a this-worldly consciousness, not a way to preach Redemptionist theology" (44). Even if this is correct (and I have my doubts), Lederhendler should have noted that later generations took messianic rhetoric all-too-literally—recently with disastrous results.

A second essay, "The Making of a *Maskil*," is more persuasive. It presents in English translation a fascinating 1889 memoir concerning what Lederhendler aptly describes as a "pivotal psychological moment in one young man's transition from the shtetl to the modern city, and from tradition to skepticism." Significantly, this "psychological moment" was shaped by cultural and economic forces that transformed the relationship between the protagonist and his father. It should also be noticed that the religious transformation took place *before* the newly enlightened young man's immigration to North America; it was not, as in so many secondary accounts, a consequence of that immigration.

Finally, in a chapter entitled "Orthodox Jewish Opinion in Turn-of-the-Century Russia and Poland: A Documentary Study in Culture and Politics," Lederhendler makes available in English fifteen well-chosen primary sources (1883–1911) that document the politics of Orthodox Jewish leaders in Eastern Europe. While these documents barely scratch the surface of a fascinating and important subject, they represent some of the first primary sources of this type available in translation and repay careful study. Here, more than in other chapters, Lederhendler's stated themes nicely draw together. Conservative politics in defense of the status quo, he shows, flowed from the Orthodox Jewish community's culture of traditionalism. Together, these two phenomena constituted a response to modernity that echoed on both sides of the Atlantic.

Jonathan D. Sarna  
Brandeis University