

Penny Schine Gold, *Making the Bible Modern: Children's Bibles and Jewish Education in Twentieth-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), xv + 269 pp.

Historian David Ruderman recently suggested that Jewish life in America be viewed through the prism of translation. Extrapolating from his study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Jewish thought in England, he writes, "The process of translations of Jewish classical texts into the English language not only continued on American soil, it flourished in a way unimaginable to the first compilers of Jewish works in English."¹ Simply put, Jewish culture rendered in the English language emerged as strikingly different from other Jewish cultures. In many ways, Penny Schine Gold's study of children's Bibles in the United States brings rich historical material to Ruderman's proposition. *Making the Bible Modern: Children's Bibles and Jewish Education in Twentieth-Century America* is a book about acts of cultural translation. Its strength rests on Gold's ability to understand translation as a creative and multidirectional endeavor. She argues that children's Bibles published from 1915 to 1936, mainly through the Reform movement, translated Judaism into American modernity and translated American values into Jewish terms.

The heart of Gold's argument is a close analysis of children's Bibles' retelling of a handful of biblical stories, including Cain's murder of Abel, God's commandment that Abraham uproot himself and move to a new land, the binding of Isaac, and Jacob's stealing of the birthright from Esau. In each of these cases, Gold shows that children's Bibles deleted, revised, and simplified the biblical text according to American norms. In general, the editors were wary of telling stories that drew attention to moral inconsistency, supernaturalism, and sexuality. For example, many children's Bibles resolved the sticky Genesis passage about Isaac's blessings for his sons by explaining that Jacob was more deserving of the blessing than Esau. Mendel Silber, who wrote a two-volume children's Bible in 1916, instructed his young readers: "When the two boys grew up, one could tell just by looking at them what sort of fellow each was. Esau was covered with hair all over and looked rough, just like one who hunts all the time and leads a wild life.

Jacob always looked neat and genteel.” (149) Children, then, instead of learning about duplicity or questioning the motive of personal gain, were assured that good people are rewarded with good things. Other biblical passages that could not as easily be finessed into moral consistency were often skipped, and those that focused too much on God and miracle working tended to be rewritten to focus on human heroics. I wonder what Gold would have found had she extended her analysis beyond the 1930s; did the anti-communism and so-called religious revival of 1950s America, for example, encourage a new focus on God in children’s Bibles?

Three overlapping concerns drive Gold’s inquiry into children’s Bibles. First, she is interested in the problem of modernity in Jewish life. Delving into the scholarship about Jewish responses to European Enlightenment and emancipation, Gold concludes that the Bible became the crucial sacred text that Jews brought with them into conversations about modernity. This conclusion, although not original, enables Gold to assert that Jews who were invested in being modern would have shunned an earlier Jewish fixation on the Talmud in favor of the more universal (at least in a Western context) messages of the Bible. She points out the irony in the fact that even with the rise of historical criticism, which called into question single and divine authorship of the Bible, Jews favored the Bible as proof of their modern and universal values. Of course, the fact that the Bible provided a literary common ground between Judaism and Christianity made it an attractive symbol for Jews wishing for acceptance in mainstream European society.

Closely tied to Gold’s inquiry into the place of the Bible in Jewish modernity is her concern with the changing role of Jewish education in the modern period. Gold chronicles the ways in which the theory and practice of Jewish education shifted between the pre-modern and modern eras. Whereas Jews who lived in insular communities focused on memorizing sacred materials (particularly rabbinical texts) in their original languages, those Jews who came into greater contact with non-Jews were intent upon drawing parallels between Jewish values and modern ideals and used sacred text more as a vehicle for mainstream correspondence than differentiation. In the United States, the

professionalization of Jewish education grew apace with the expansion of American pedagogical theory and public education. Thinkers like John Dewey, who argued for an experience-based, functional approach to education, influenced Jewish educators to rethink the traditional Talmud-Torah and *heder* style of Jewish education. Not only was the meaning of childhood re-envisioned in twentieth-century America, scientific understandings of how people learned and how moral values were created also underwent transformation. Children's Bibles, then, reflected the desire to expose children to ethical teachings without resorting to authoritarian methods or rote memorization. The experience of reading about the heroes of the Bible and identifying with them, educators hoped, would naturally instill in children a moral sensibility and a love of their tradition.

Finally, and most personally, Gold is concerned with the story of Jewish assimilation in the United States, a story illuminated, she believes, by her inquiry into children's Jewish education. Here, her voice of judgment is audible. Although one could argue that the authors of children's Bibles were spinning modern-day midrash, the genre of biblical commentary codified in the Talmud in the centuries after the destruction of the Second Temple, Gold is not so inclined. She explains that while the "originating impulse" of midrash is "to *explain* the difficulties in the text," the aim of children's Bibles was to efface the difficulties and replace them with more palatable stories. (189) Her disappointment with the content of children's Bibles may drive her toward a restrictive definition of midrash. For Gold, however, mid-century children's Bibles are just one measure of how neglectful American Jews have been of the "deep and complex Jewish way of life," favoring instead simple explanations of the parity between American values and Jewish ones. (206)

A reader may notice that Gold's analysis of actual children's Bibles, while the most fascinating and novel element of the book, is rather short. Her admirable impulse to contextualize — her inquiries into modernity, education, and questions of assimilation — in certain ways occludes her story. For a newcomer to Jewish history, these long context sections may be useful; for a specialist they are less so and also introduce a few questionable generalizations.

Still, there is much to admire in this book. Gold insists that Jews in the United States participated in acts of cultural translation. She ably illustrates one way that Jews translated America — and modernity — into Jewish terms and metaphors. The “Englishing of Jewish culture,” to use Ruderman’s phrase, was not simply a matter of turning Hebrew words into English ones, it was also, as Gold shows, a process of reflecting anew American culture and values.²

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Notes

¹ David Ruderman, “Reflecting on American Jewish History,” *American Jewish History* 9, no. 3-4 (2003): 376.

² *Ibid*, 374.