

Homelands and Diasporas

Homelands and Diasporas:

*Perspectives on Jewish
Culture in the Mediterranean
and Beyond*

A Festschrift for
Emanuela Trevisan Semi

Edited by

Dario Miccoli,
Marcella Simoni
and Giorgia Foscarini

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INTRODUCTION: ACROSS AND BEYOND THE GREAT SEA

DARIO MICCOLI, MARCELLA SIMONI
AND GIORGIA FOSCARINI

In the course of centuries, Jews had numerous homelands and were divided in dozens of different diasporic communities. Some of these were and are located in places far away from the biblical Land of Israel, such as the US, Latin America, Africa, India and China. Other diasporas, many of which nowadays are largely vanished, were instead very close to the ancestral Jewish homeland: think of the Jews of Syria or Iraq. For all, the Land of Israel—and, after 1948, the State of Israel—and its Mediterranean surroundings represent a familiar scenario, in which biblical memories and future hopes are located. But what is this sea all about? And where are its boundaries to be drawn?

For the French historian Fernand Braudel, the Mediterranean is “not a landscape, but innumerable landscapes. Not a sea but a succession of seas.”¹ David Abulafia understands it as a space of many names: *mare nostrum*, *Mittelmeer* or, in Hebrew, *Yam ha-gadol* (Hebrew: “Great Sea.”)² Nowadays, the Mediterranean seems to have lost much of its evocative power as a sea of encounters and dialogue, to become a divisive space, full of visible and invisible frontiers that bespeak both old and new ethno-religious and national struggles. It is true that if one looks at the Mediterranean from the point of view of classical Judaism, one of its alleged key-features—that is connectivity and the existence of social, cultural and commercial exchanges between different people of the region

This introduction has been written collectively by the editors; specifically, Dario Miccoli is the author of pp. x-xii, Giorgia Foscarini of pp. xiii-xv and Marcella Simoni collaborated to the final revision.

¹ Fernand Braudel, “Méditerranée,” in *La Méditerranée. L'espace et l'histoire*, ed. Fernand Braudel (Paris: Flammarion, 1985), 8.

² David Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), XXIII.

—does not seem to be so prominent, since a kind of particularistic identity often dominated biblical Jewish culture. Even though an element of particularism has been always present in Jewish history, early modern and modern Mediterranean Jewish societies took a more ambivalent path when it came to intercommunal and interethnic relations: one of proximity and reciprocity, of exchange and confrontation.³ The Mediterranean and its outer ramifications—that at times include continental Europe, Africa and other territories—were for many both a homeland and a diaspora, a space of refuge and where to build a better life, but also a region of conflict and persecution.

Homelands and Diasporas understands the Mediterranean as a historical and socio-anthropological trope through which looking at a variety of Jewish experiences of dialogue and clash, exchange and enmity, migration and settlement, both inside and outside the spatial boundaries and geographical reality of the Mediterranean region.⁴ The former is a point of departure, from where to start travelling through Jewish history and identity and try answering different questions that are crucial for the field of Jewish Studies in the twenty-first century.

The volume takes ‘homeland’ and ‘diaspora’ as two overarching themes piecing together contributions that, in some cases, have to do with quite different topics and different methodological perspectives. In relation to the notion of ‘homeland’—intended either as the mythical and biblical Land of Israel or, later on, as one of the many empires and nation-states where Jews lived, ending with the advent of Zionism and the birth of the State of Israel—the volume looks at it as a space where Jewish identities develop and are discussed. It can be a real, physical territory or an imagined one, or in some cases take the contours of a city, a nation, a feeling of belonging or else.

Secondly, there is no need to acknowledge to what extent the ‘diaspora’ has been crucial in the formation of a Jewish cultural identity, both before and after the diffusion of the Zionist movement. Considering the boom in Diaspora Studies and the recent advancements of the field, it might be useful to conceive this category in a nuanced manner as “a synchronic cultural situation applicable to people who participate in a

³ See: Seth Schwartz, *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society? Reciprocity and Solidarity in Ancient Judaism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), esp. 21-44. Consider also the five-volume work by Shlomo D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Cairo Geniza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967-1988).

⁴ David Abulafia, “Mediterraneans,” in *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, ed. William Vernon Harris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 64-93.

doubled cultural (and frequently linguistic) location”.⁵ More than of one Jewish diaspora, one should perhaps talk of many diasporas, each experiencing Jewishness in its own way—so as to confirm that Jews, Amos Oz wrote, always have been “a plural noun with numerous singularities.”⁶ Thus, in the volume we reflect upon how different Jewish communities communicated and exchanged ideas, what kind of traditions and customs developed in Jewries far away from the ancestral homeland, and that came in contact with other religions and ethnicities; how Jews remember and express themselves in the literary arena or, finally, how the birth of the State of Israel modified the idea of diaspora itself and what consequences this has at a sociological, political and cultural level.

The organisation of the volume

This volume is divided in three parts. Part I—made of nine chapters—is a collection of essays by various scholars who have worked and researched with Emanuela Trevisan Semi, or who have been inspired by her research and intellectual travels to carry their studies further.

In the first chapter, Tudor Parfitt, linking his work to that of Emanuela Trevisan Semi on Jews and their presence in the African continent, treats the question of settlement of Jews in West Africa. In particular, he deals with Jewish influences along the coast of Africa from the sixteenth century on. The second chapter by Shalva Weil, spans over Emanuela Trevisan’s interest on Ethiopian Jewry, and more specifically on the figure of Jacques Faitlovitch—one of the first scholars to research on the situation of the *Beta Israel* in Ethiopia—and then on the life of Eremias Essayas, one of his forgotten disciples. The third contribution by Yolande Cohen and Nouredine Harrami originates from yet another of Emanuela Trevisan’s research path, that on the memory of the Jewish communities in North Africa, notably Morocco. Dealing with the history of a former synagogue in Meknès, this chapter sheds light on a number of interesting ethnological aspects of Jewish life in the *mellah* of Meknès in colonial and contemporary times. On the same line, dealing with the memories of Jewish communities outside Israel, the fourth chapter by Giorgia Foscarini turns to Poland, to analyse the history and activities of the Grodzka Gate as the case of a cultural institution preserving Jewish memory and material

⁵ Daniel Boyarin, *A Travelling Homeland: The Babylonian Talmud as Diaspora* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 19.

⁶ Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Jews and Words* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 176.

cultural heritage in what once was a central corner of the Ashkenazi world. The following four chapters shift the focus from the Diaspora to the State of Israel. In the fifth chapter, Dario Miccoli discusses an Israeli rabbi and writer, Haim Sabato—born in Cairo in the 1950s and nowadays known as the ‘Sephardic Agnon’—to see how the Diaspora and the Land of Israel are portrayed in his literary works. The sixth contribution, by Ilan Greilsammer, deals with the present day Israeli socio-political situation, regarded from the standpoint of the relationships between religion and secularism, in a state defined since its inception as ‘Jewish’. The seventh chapter of this collection, by Marcella Simoni, follows up on another interest of Emanuela Trevisan Semi, the role of museums in processes of national identity formation in Israel or in a diasporic context. Simoni’s paper on the role of toys in the formation of national identity in the 1950s and 1960s in Israel was inspired by various exhibitions at the Eretz Israel Museum and other centres in Israel. The eighth contribution by Uri Ben-Eliezer treats the case of the so-called ‘new wars’ as a mode of waging war in the post-Cold War era. Using the Gaza Wars as an example, Ben-Eliezer frames a new theory to explain such events, discussing the Israeli civil society as well as more traditional actors such as political leaders and institutions. Finally, the last contribution is by Oren Yiftachel who wrote a paper in collaboration with Ravit Goldhaber and Roy Nuriel. Here, they explore the relations between recognition and justice, in the context of the unresolved land and planning disputes between Bedouin Arabs and the Israeli state in the area surrounding the city of Beer Sheva, in southern Israel.

For reasons of time, diverging academic interests or family matters, not all the friends, pupils and present and former colleagues of Emanuela have been able to write a scholarly piece of research to be included in this volume on *Homelands and Diasporas*. Despite its geographical breadth, it still maintains a focus on Jewish history and Israel Studies and Emanuela Trevisan Semi’s research can hardly be contained in one box, regardless of how stretched. For this reason, in Part II, the editors have collected a set of testimonies of people that, in a more informal tone, tell their personal and professional encounter, intellectual exchange, friendship and the fruitful cooperation developed in the course of the years (and decades) with Emanuela Trevisan Semi. Finally, the volume ends with Part III, that we have called ‘the crop’, i.e. a bibliographical appendix listing the publications of Emanuela Trevisan Semi from the journal articles published soon after her graduation in the early 1970s up until today. We are sure that the list will continue to grow even more rapidly now and we are looking forward to new exciting discoveries and debates.

For the editors and for all those that, in various ways, contributed to *Homelands and Diasporas*, this is our way to honour Emanuela's academic itinerary and her great contribution to the field of Jewish Studies. For all of us she is a colleague, a mentor, a professor and most of all a sincere friend. This volume is a collective and much heartfelt thank you for the rigorous training, the generosity and the kindness that we all received over her long career, across and beyond the shores of the Great Sea.

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