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*Björn Siegel, Markus Krahl, Oskar Czendze (Eds.)*

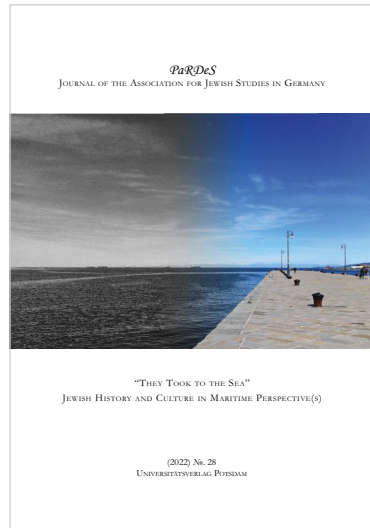
### **“They Took to the Sea”: Jewish History and Culture in Maritime Perspective(s)**

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# “They Took to the Sea” – Jewish History and Culture in Maritime Perspective(s)

by Björn Siegel

This issue of PaRDeS draws attention to the “sea” and gives new insights into an often neglected and forgotten part of Jewish history and culture. The volume was inspired by the book *They Took to the Sea* by Samuel Tolkowsky, in which the author wanted to “present an account of Jewish maritime activities since the conquest of Canaan by the Hebrew tribes till the present”.<sup>1</sup> With his attempt to collect and present stories of Jewish maritime activities Tolkowsky did not claim to have done more than shed light on “a hitherto neglected and practically unknown aspect of Jewish history.” And he continued: “It is his hope and fervent wish that others may follow in his footsteps and endeavor [*sic*] to fill in the gaps left in his story.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, this issue of PaRDeS takes up this task and follows in the footsteps of Tolkowsky. While he focused in his work on the Biblical seafaring tribes, the role of Jewish merchant seamen in late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, the influence of Jewish seafarers in the Age of Discovery, as well as the “Marranos”, who sailed the Seven Seas – as he argued –, the articles in this volume will offer new perspectives on Jewish maritime history and culture in modern times. The volume, therefore, not only follows Tolkowsky’s wish to uncover more aspects of Jewish maritime activities but also takes a closer look at his lifetime.

Tolkowsky, who was born in Antwerp (Belgium) in 1886, migrated to Palestine in 1911 and became a citrus farmer and exporter there. Early on he got engaged in Zionist affairs, became a member of the Zionist Political Committee in London during the First World War (1916–1919) and served as Secretary of the Zionist Delegation to the Peace Conference at Versailles. Thus,

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Tolkowsky, *They Took to the Sea: A Historical Survey of Jewish Maritime Activities* (New York, NY/London: Thomas Yoseloff, 1964), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Tolkowsky, *They Took to the Sea*, 9.

he not only became one of the first researchers on Jewish maritime history and culture but also an important figure in the field of modern Jewish seafaring. He held several positions in connection with shipping and marketing citrus fruits from Palestine and became the first chairman of the Israel Maritime League. After the Second World War he was elected as chairman of ZIM Israel Navigation Company, the first national shipping company of Israel.<sup>3</sup> His biography does point to the important developments in the modern era, which he also described in a short chapter in his book. Under the title “Maritime Revival in Modern Israel” he emphasized the significance of the developments in the 1930s and 1940s and offered a historical narrative, which linked his present to the past.<sup>4</sup> Thus, his work illustrates that Jewish history and culture took place and was made in different maritime spaces.

Consequently, the contributors of this issue study different maritime spaces and examine their embedded narratives and functions. They follow in one way or another the discussions which evolved in the last decades and focused on the importance of spatial dimensions. These questions opened up possibilities for studying the production and construction of spaces, their influences on cultural practices and ideas, as well as structures and changes of social processes.<sup>5</sup> The spatial turn did enable an interdisciplinary debate which led to a rich discussion on “What exactly is space/place?” and “What can we learn from using such categories in our analyses?” Yi-Fun Tuan, for example, answered these questions with the following quote:

<sup>3</sup> Tolkowsky published widely on the Jewish colonization process and the history of one of the main maritime gateways, the port of Jaffa. Cf. Samuel Tolkowsky, *Achievements and Prospects in Palestine* (London: English Zionist Federation, 1917); Samuel Tolkowsky, *The Gateway of Palestine: A History of Jaffa* (London: G. Routledge, 1924). For a personal account, cf. Raphael Patai, *Journeyman in Jerusalem: Memories and Letters, 1933–1947* (Lanham, MD/Boulder, CO/ New York, NY: Lexington Books, 2000), 28–30.

<sup>4</sup> Tolkowsky, *They Took to the Sea*, 261–289.

<sup>5</sup> Susanne Rau, *Räume: Konzepte, Wahrnehmungen, Nutzungen* (= Historische Einführungen 14), (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus Verlag, 2013), 8. There is a rich literature on the spatial turn, thus the following titles are just a small selection: Cf. Charles W. J. Withers, “Place and the ‘Spatial Turn’ in Geography and in History,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70, no. 4 (2009): 637–658; Jörg Döring and Tristan Thielmann (eds.), *Spatial Turn: Das Raumparadigma in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2008); Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Vered Shemtov, “Introduction: Jewish Conceptions and Practices of Space,” *Jewish Social Studies* 11, no. 3 (2005): 1–8; David Cesarani, Milton Shain, and Tony Kushner (eds.), *Place and Displacement in Jewish History and Memory: Zakor v'Makor* (London/Portland, Oregon: Vallentine Mitchell, 2009); Barbara Mann, *Space and Place in Jewish Studies* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value ... The ideas ‘space’ and ‘place’ require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa.<sup>6</sup>

The growing awareness of spatial dimensions and research perspectives also influenced Jewish studies and led to several initiatives which offered new perspectives on Jewish history and culture. The research group (‘Graduiertenkolleg’) *Makom* at University of Potsdam, for example, aimed at introducing the categories “space/place” to Jewish studies. Initiated by Julius H. Schoeps and Joachim Schlör as well as supported by Anna Lipphardt, Julia Brauch, Alexandra Nocke and others, the research group reexamined Jewish history and culture and established narratives which worked against the notion of a lack of spatial dimensions in Jewish history due to the long-standing non-existence of a Jewish state. Furthermore, the group studied the concept of the Jewish people as the people of the book and the idea of the book as the portable homeland, and counterbalanced the stereotype of the wandering Jew, which implied a lack of belonging and being rooted.<sup>7</sup> Charlotte E. Fonrobert also disputed these stereotypes and stated that “the effect and meaning of uprooting and dislocation, the significance of belonging to a place (or to various places), the emergence of diaspora communities [...]”<sup>8</sup> were central issues in Jewish history and culture and therefore had to be revisited and reexamined according to spatial research questions. In a similar vein, Richard Cohen wrote in his edited volume on *Place in Modern Jewish Culture and Society* that ‘place’ is a key “to explore the tensions that characterize Jewish culture in modernity – namely, between the sacred and the secular, the local and the global, the historical and the virtual, and Jewish culture versus other cultures.”<sup>9</sup> Simone Lässig and Miriam Rürup furthermore emphasized in *Space and Spatiality in Modern German-Jewish History* that such questions and perspectives are

<sup>6</sup> Tuan (1977) cited in Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Anna Lipphardt, Julia Brauch, and Alexandra Nocke, “Exploring Jewish Space: An Approach,” in *Jewish Topographies: Visions of Space, Traditions of Place*, eds. Anna Lipphardt, Julia Brauch, and Alexandra Nocke (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 1–23.

<sup>8</sup> Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, “Review Essay: The New Spatial Turn in Jewish Studies,” *AJS Review* 33, no. 1 (2009): 155–164, here 155.

<sup>9</sup> Richard I. Cohen, “Preface,” in *Place in Modern Jewish Culture and Society*, ed. Richard I. Cohen (Studies in Contemporary Jewry: An Annual XXX), (Oxford/New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), VII–XI, here VII–VIII.

important to understand Jewish history and culture, especially in the context of migration and minority studies.<sup>10</sup>

Despite all of these discussions on “space” and “place”, the maritime realm remained an often neglected and forgotten one. Early attempts to study and draw attention to this specific space did not lead to further reflections. Some rare examples were Max Grunwald’s book *Jews as Shipowners and Seafarers* [Juden als Rheder und Seefahrer, 1902] or Raphael Patai’s study on *Hebrew Shipping* [Ha’Safanut ha-Ivrit, 1938].<sup>11</sup> Despite Tolkowsky’s book in 1964, the interest only grew stronger at the turn of the century, when Raphael Patai’s study was translated and republished under the title *The Children of Noah: Jewish Seafaring in Ancient Times* (1998), and Nadav Kashtan’s special issue of *Mediterranean Historical Review* on “Seafaring and the Jews” (2000) gave new insights into maritime Jewish history and culture.<sup>12</sup> Joachim Schlör supported this new interest in maritime spaces, which he had already introduced and discussed as part of *Makom*, and called for the establishment of Jewish Maritime Studies at a conference in Southampton (2009). In so doing, he aimed to not only provide new ideas for Jewish historical and migration research but also strengthen the link between literary and historical studies as well as diaspora and migration studies. Moreover, he also promoted a stronger link to the newly evolving field of mobility studies.<sup>13</sup> The growing interest led to a new research field, which flourished in the following years and continued to illustrate the importance of maritime perspectives on Jewish history and culture.<sup>14</sup> Several research projects, such as Todd Samuel Presner’s study on *Muscular Judaism* or Dimitri Shumsky’s essay on “This Ship is Zion”, demon-

<sup>10</sup> Simone Lässig, Miriam Rürup, “Introduction: What Made a Space ‘Jewish’?” in *Space and Spatiality in Modern German-Jewish History*, eds. Simone Lässig and Miriam Rürup (New York, NY/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2017), 1–20, here 1.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Max Grunwald, *Juden als Rheder und Seefahrer* (Berlin: M. Poppelauer, 1902).

<sup>12</sup> In 1998 an English version of Patai’s book was published: Cf. Raphael Patai, *The Children of Noah: Jewish Seafaring in Ancient Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Nadav Kashtan, “Seafaring and the Jews: Introduction,” *Mediterranean Historical Review* 15, no. 1 (2000): 1–4. In 2001 the special issue was republished as an edited volume, Nadav Kashtan (ed.), *Seafaring and the Jews* (London/Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Joachim Schlör, “Towards Jewish Maritime Studies,” *Jewish Culture and History* 13, no. 1 (2012): 1–6. Cf. Joachim Schlör, “Tel Aviv: (With Its) Back to the Sea: An Excursion into Jewish Maritime Studies,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 8, no. 2 (2009): 215–235.

<sup>14</sup> This is just a selection of some of the newer research, cf. Maoz Azaryahu, “The Formation of a ‘Hebrew Sea’ in Pre-State Israel,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 7, no. 3 (2008): 251–267; Gilbert Herbert, “A View of the Sea: Jews and the Maritime Tradition,” in *Jewish Topogra-*

strated how fruitful the inclusion of a maritime perspective could be.<sup>15</sup> Their research expanded the knowledge on the “Jewish sea” and Zionist thinking and revealed the economic, ideological and social role of maritime spaces in Jewish history and culture. Other research projects demonstrated the importance of the Mediterranean Sea. These studies revealed and discussed the different meanings and values that were attributed to this specific maritime space.<sup>16</sup> One of the latest important research projects is Kobi Cohen-Hattab’s detailed study on *Zionism’s Maritime Revolution*. In his book he demonstrated that the “revolution”, which took place in Mandatory Palestine, was crucial to understand Jewish and Zionist history and culture at the time. He also stated that these developments had “reverberations that continued to be felt today.”<sup>17</sup>

The use of maritime spaces, the endowed value and given ideological power as well as the fusion between past, present and even the future also became visible in some of the older research studies. Raphael Patai, for example, linked his contemporary experiences of the riots in Palestine in April 1936 to his research on Jewish maritime activities. He used the story of his visit to excavations carried out by the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society in Sheikh Abreikh (Beit Shearim), where sketches of ships and other symbols of seafaring were discovered, to explain his interest in the history of the Jewish sea. Moreover, he declared:

- phies: Visions of Space. Traditions of Place*, eds. Julia Brauch, Anne Lipphardt, and Alexandra Nocke (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 181–199; Hannan Hever, “The Zionist Sea: Symbolism and Nationalism in Modernist Hebrew Poetry,” *Jewish Culture and History* 13, no. 1 (2012): 25–41.
- <sup>15</sup> Todd Samuel Presner, *Muscular Judaism: The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration* (London/New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 155–186; Dimitry Shumsky, “‘This Ship is Zion!’ Travel, Tourism, and Cultural Zionism in Theodor Herzl’s *Altneuland*,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 104, no. 3 (2014): 471–493.
- <sup>16</sup> Cf. Alexandra Nocke, “Israel and the Emergence of Mediterranean Identity: Expressions of Locality in Music and Literature,” *Israel Studies* 11, no. 1 (2006): 143–173; Alexandra Nocke, *The Place of the Mediterranean in Modern Israeli Society* (Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2009); Yaacov Shavit, “The Mediterranean World and Mediterraneanism: The Origins, Meaning and Application of a Geo-Cultural Notion in Israel,” *Mediterranean Historical Review* 3, no. 2 (1988): 96–117; David Ohana, *Israel and Its Mediterranean Identity* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Matthias B. Lehmann and Jessica M. Marglin (eds.), *Jews and the Mediterranean* (Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press, 2020).
- <sup>17</sup> Kobi Cohen-Hattab, *Zionism’s Maritime Revolution: The Yishuv’s Hold on the Land of Israel’s Sea and Shores, 1917–1948* (Berlin/Boston, MA/Jerusalem: De Gruyter Oldenbourg/Magnes, 2019), 8. Cf. in general also Kobi Cohen-Hattab, “The Test of Maritime Sovereignty: The Establishment of the ZIM National Shipping Company and the Purchase of the Kedmah, 1945–1952,” *Israel Studies* 20, no. 2 (2015): 110–134.

that there were Jewish shipowners, captains, sailors and crews, who were not only keen seamen experienced in all the dangers, pains, excitements and pleasure of seafaring, but having a deep personal affection for the sea, developed the same attractive properties of imaginations, fantasy and romanticism, which are known to us as being characteristic to all other seafaring peoples, both ancient and modern.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, Patai's remarks take us back to the discussions on maritime spaces and the embedded narratives mentioned at the beginning and, hence, to this issue of PaRDeS. In this volume the different contributors offer case studies of their current research that all look at narratives, functions and ideas connected to different maritime spaces. The projects reflected in the articles of this volume range from the 1930s to the present. They illustrate how the "sea" became a space in which being Jewish and being a refugee was discussed. They demonstrate how the maritime space was endowed with value and gained not only economic but also ideological importance. They show how Jewish maritime history was written from a male perspective and discuss how influential the "sea" remained in the creation of a "Jewish future". Lastly, they demonstrate how maritime aspects did influence literature, which documented Sephardic-Jewish networks and family structures but also fueled imaginations and fantasies of Jewish seafarers and pirates in the past. Thus, all articles in this volume offer different maritime perspectives on Jewish history and culture and demonstrate the great potential of such a maritime turn.

Despite the different perspectives and case studies in this volume, the issue cannot and does not claim to cover all aspects of Jewish maritime history – similar to Tolkowsky's intention. Nevertheless, it offers new insights into Jewish history and culture by taking us out to "sea" and, in so doing, inviting us to revisit Jewish history and culture from different maritime perspectives.

<sup>18</sup> Raphael Patai, "Jewish Seafaring in Ancient Times," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 32, no. 1 (1941): 1–26, here 1–2; 26 [citation].