

## THE OTHER WITHIN/THE MARRANOS: SPLIT IDENTITY AND EMERGING MODERNITY

Yirmiyahu Yovel. Princeton University Press, 2009

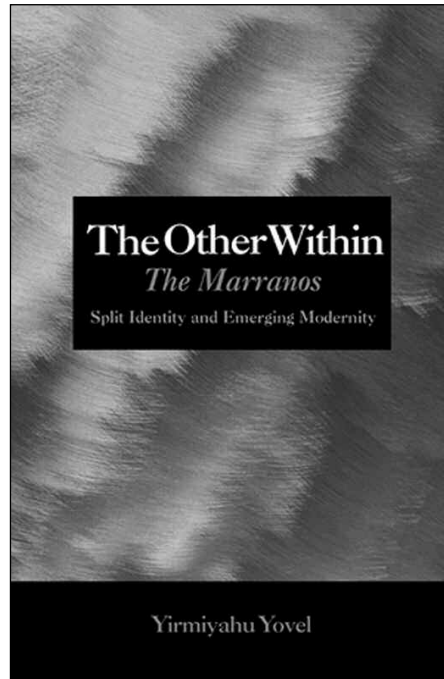
Reviewed by Marty Roth

Yirmiyahu Yovel has produced an impressive and far-reaching study of the Marranos, Conversos, or New Christians: Spanish and Portuguese Jews who “converted to Christianity [mainly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries] under coercion or hard pressure, and their descendants in later generations,” a story which lasted four centuries and spilled into three continents (ix, xiv).

As Yovel presents it, the Marrano inheritance is quite the opposite of Massadan heroism; the former bend to survive rather than die a brave death. *The Other Within* describes in detail the formation of identity in a secular, deeply divided Jew, prototype of the Diasporic wanderer. Yovel’s Marranos are an unhappy people caught between two religions, two identities, and eventually became the “other” to both. He has written this book partly against a “Jerusalem school” of interpretation: Marrano folklore, he writes, was a staple of Jewish childhood depicting a people “leading a covert Jewish religious life under the nose of the Inquisition, engaging in clandestine fraternities,” “often dying as martyrs for their forbidden faith,” their Christianity “merely a superficial mask, while in their minds and hearts, they were purely and untaintedly Jewish” (x). These are not his converts.

Before the author is done Marranoism will have reconstituted Spanish Catholicism, created the picaresque novel, and given birth

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to Protestantism and to the modern secular Jew. Marranos also created that “mystical and messianic movement” known as Kabbalah (31): the book reminded me of a list of Jewish “firsts.” The “stars” of Yovel’s account include Moses Maimonides, St. Teresa of Avila, Luis de León, Miguel de Cervantes, Baruch Spinoza, Michel de Montaigne, and possibly Columbus’s navigator, the first European to set foot on the Western continent. This is not to say that Yovel fails to make these grand claims credible or at least worth considering. And whether “true” or not (as if generalizations these large could ever be either true or false), Yovel is very good at taking his generalizations into the complexities of lived experience.

By the eleventh century, Spain contained the culturally richest pocket of Jewish civilization in Europe, triumphing over Jewish Mesopotamia, until then the cultural and religious centre of the Jewish diasporic world. At first

the Spanish Jews could play the warring Christian and Muslim regimes off against one another, but they eventually fell victim to the growing religious intolerance of their overlords. The turning point came with the Black Death in the fourteenth century, when fear and panic led to a re-demonization of Jews, resulting in a momentous pogrom in 1391.

Between 1391 and 1415 more than 100,000 Jews were converted to Christianity. It was told in Valencia that so many Jews awaited baptism that only a miracle made the sacrament possible. By the autumn of 1492, Spain had no more “official” (i.e., unconverted) Jews. These converts were divided between earnest or willing Christians and Judaizers (converts from convenience only).

In a neat twist, Marranos could not renounce their conversion and become Jews again; to the church they could only be considered heretical Christians and thus subject to the rigors of church punishment. The Royal Inquisition was another “first,” set up just for the Marranos by Ferdinand and Isabella. And of course many of the investigations and trials were motivated by personal or economic motives. Tomás de Torquemada crafted this instrument which would endure for centuries and burned an appalling number of people, whether they were Judaizers or earnest converts.

Thus the Marranos were split—belonging and not belonging, rejected by Jews as renegades and by most Christians as Jews. The ambiguity of their position can seem comic: early Conversos vowed to eat nonkosher food but begged for the king’s understanding if, “because of natural revulsion,” they abstained from pork, although they “humbly promised to eat everything else cooked in the same pot” (7).

The new Christian religion born out of the fires of forced

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conversion was above all, Yovel argues, a religion of inwardness, most notably represented by the Converso St. Teresa, whose father and grandfather had been humiliated by the Inquisition. But the twists of fate went further: Spanish society forced the Jews to convert and then persecuted and executed them as Christians because they did not meet new racist standards of “purity of blood,” another first for Yovel: “The first racial theory of modern times” (73). There was another twist: Marranos, who were identifiable as such, were nevertheless able to rise in the government service. Given their fixed position in society, they were less able to turn their government posts or access to information into personal power.

The Jewish past of these converts led them to prefer the inner to the outer world: “intentions over acts, silent mental prayer over verbal utterance,” and this tendency would produce new forms of spirituality in Catholicism (84). For an advanced group of these converts, “the only way they could accept their new religion was by **changing it**” (93).

One of the great cultural fruits of the splits, divisions and otherness of Marrano identity was the picaresque novel, which Yovel

virtually claims as their creation (and in doing so gives them credit for the novel as a whole). This was Spain’s great literary form and Yovel hands over to Marranos the founding novel, *Lazarillo de Tormes*, the final novel, *Guzmán of Alfarache*, and the supreme novel, *Don Quixote*. The *picaro* is the essential outsider and anti-Hidalgo who through his travels and adventures exposes the absurdities of Spanish aristocratic society.

Finally, Marrano culture was one of the major influences on modernity (and in the margins of the book, of post-modernity as well). By the seventeenth century, these people were dispersed worldwide, first as intrepid international traders (remember that each Marrano networked with similar groups all over the known world), producing the very first global economic system. Ironically this marked the return of the Jews to Western Europe after centuries of banishment. Conversos could become Jews again, but new Jews who were free to choose from both of the religions they had lived through. Yovel gives us 23 connections between the Marrano phenomenon and Western modernization (338).

Marranos also anticipated major aspects of Jewish moder-

nity, including political emancipation, multiple models of Jewishness, secularization, and cultural enlightenment and assimilation. “What happened to the Conversos in the confines of the Iberian experience as an **exceptional** phenomenon in their times prefigured the **fundamental** condition of Jews everywhere in modern times” (377). “Everywhere but Israel,” I hear readers exclaiming.

Yovel imagines ships leaving Spanish harbours on July 31, 1492: three of them, under the leadership of Christopher Columbus, driving West; the others bringing exiled Jews to hard ports in North Africa and the Middle East. For a price, Portugal granted them a two-year refuge.

*The Other Within* is extremely lucid and well-written, but for all its dense historiography it smacks of the fantasy of Jewish exceptionalism. Of the three players, the Jew occupies all the interesting historical positions; the Catholic is frozen in stereotypical gestures and actions; and the Muslim is almost invisible. These melodramatic proportions made it harder for me to commit to Yovel’s marvellous story, and yet his tale of the Wandering Jew is compellingly told. ♦

## NAZI MARCH...

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blamed on leftist opponents of the bar, but the police are now convinced the bombs were thrown by disgruntled neo-Nazis, either because of turf quarrels or simply because the doorkeepers didn’t let them in.

The march, the number of pro-Nazi young people, the blaring and the clear dedication to a fearful past, made for a frightening event stirring up countless recollections, here in the middle of Berlin—and my own East Berlin, at that. The Nazis are not a major threat at the moment—on a national scale, the three “official” parties combined got

only 1.9 per cent in the last election. But they have established pockets of strength, especially in the east, and have the potential to grow. The left and many others want to outlaw the NPD (National Democratic Party), the most extreme of the three, to deprive them of their large government subsidy (which they receive as a “legal” party) and to take away their right to march freely in one town after another.

The media are currently overflowing with recollections of the heroic weeks twenty years ago when the oppressed people of East Germany chose freedom and forced the fall of the Berlin Wall. As ever, the blatant over-simpli-

fication of a fearfully complicated matter, told in a completely one-sided way, rules the roost. But on Saturday I could somehow not help recalling how we in the GDR scoffed or laughed when the party officialdom rejected the word *Mauer*, used almost universally for the Berlin Wall, and insisted, quite in vain, on the unwieldy term “anti-fascist protective barrier.” Of course we all knew that it was erected, not to keep people out, but to keep them in, which was why so many rejoiced at its fall. But watching this menacing parade near my home made me wonder: was it perhaps in a way, and in the historical long run, also indeed a