

Dana Evan Kaplan
Jews and Latinos — Exploring Common History and Culture

The Scroll and the Cross: 1,000 Years of Jewish-Hispanic Literature, edited By Ilan Stavans. New York: Routledge, 2002, 239 pp., \$95 (hardcover), \$26.95 (paper)

The Scroll and the Cross is an addition to the relatively small library of works on Hispanic (Latino) Jewish literature. It is an eclectic collection of reading focusing on Spanish Jewish literature. The editor has collected 41 documents spanning from the 10th to the 20th centuries. Nineteen of the documents were written in Spain and 22 in Hispanic America. The book includes religious manifestos, philosophic statements, Jewish-Christian disputations, prayers, stories, poems, correspondence, and reports.

Editor Ilan Stavans explains that he organized The Scroll and the Cross “as a double-faceted mirror.” (p. 2) What he means by this is that he is interested in exploring how Jews have reacted to living in Hispanic countries and how non-Jews in those same countries have reacted to the Jewish presence. The Scroll and the Cross is therefore not just a collection of Hispanic literature written by Jews but also includes a substantial selection of non-Jewish writers, including Gonzalo de Berceo, Francisco de Quevedo y Villaegas, Miguel de Unamuno, Federico Garcia Lorca, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortazar, and Mario Vargas Llosa. This decision further broadens the scope of an already broad collection.

The editor stresses that the book “is not an anthology of the Sephardic tradition.” (p. 2) Rather, it focuses on Sepharad, Spain. The direction of the collection is pretty predictable up until the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. But after that date, it does not follow the Sephardim into exile in the Ottoman Empire, North Africa, various Arabic countries, and certain Western European cities. Instead, the anthology includes literally works from the Spanish-speaking New World. This is a rather surprising decision because it means that Eastern European Ashkenazic Jews write many of the selections. Some of them will even write partially or wholly in Yiddish rather than in Spanish.

The selections were written not only in Spanish but also in six other languages: Hebrew, Arabic, Latin, Ladino, Yiddish, and even English. All of

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the foreign language works were previously translated into English and are being reprinted here. Stavans explains that because of limited continental circulation, South American readers may have difficulty finding books published in neighboring countries. “Ironically, a reader in English today has far more Jewish-Latin American literary works at his disposal than does his or her counterparts south of the Rio Grande.” (p. 27)

Stavans argues that “the largest challenge for scholars today is the articulation of a sensible, panoramic context through which to help non-Hispanics understand the dilemmas faced by Jews in the Americas.” (p. 27) These challenges are very different from those faced by American Jews. Latin American history and culture is very different from American history and culture, and this is reflected in literature written by, and about, Jews.

The documents are not broken down into sections, but it becomes clear that they can be grouped thematically as well as chronologically. The reader will need a great deal of imagination in order to conceptualize the collection as a unified whole. The authors cover an unbelievably broad spectrum ideologically, culturally, and in virtually every other way possible.

The collection begins with a number of selections written in medieval Spain, including Samuel Hanagid’s “Short Prayer in Time of Battle,” Solomon ben Gabirol’s “Night Storm,” Moisés ben Ezra’s “The Two Sons,” and Yehuda Halevi’s “My Heart is in the East.” All four of the works were written in Hebrew and had been translated previously by T. Carmi. By beginning with Hebrew poetry written during the Golden Age of Spain, the anthology attempts to unify more modern Hispanic Jewish literature with its medieval roots.

The collection moves on to medieval Jewish prose. Selections are included from Benjamin of Tudela’s “Jerusalem,” Yehuda ben Tibbon’s “On Books and on Writing,” Maimonides’s “Epistle to the Jews of Morocco,” and Maimonides’s “Guide for the Perplexed.” This last document is, like some of the other selections, a small excerpt from a much larger work. Stavans also includes an excerpt from the medieval Jewish mystical work *The Zohar*. These writings are classical works, but can they be claimed as part of a long tradition of “Jewish-Hispanic literature”?

The next set of documents reflects on the state of Jewish-Christian relations in medieval Spain: Gonzalo de Berceo’s “The Jews of Toledo,”

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Nahmanides's description of the disputation of Barcelona, and Alfonso X the Wise's "Concerning the Jews: Las siete partidas." These documents certainly highlight the scroll and the cross of the book's title. There is an assortment of other medieval and early modern documents, including a long autobiographical essay by the crypto-Jew Luis de Carvajal the Younger. Born in Benavente, Spain, he moved to Mexico, where he was burned at the stake by the Inquisition in 1596. The autobiographical essay is written in the third person and describes Carvajal's experiences in rediscovering Judaism and suffering at the hand of the Inquisition in New Spain (Mexico). Carvajal was a *marrano*, a term that is usually used pejoratively. Normally, historians prefer the more neutral term New Christian; some use the Hebrew term *anusim*, meaning those who are forced (to convert to Christianity).

Editor Stavans reflects on the nature of *marrano* identity in his introductory remarks. He does not discuss the historical debate over the extent to which the New Christians secretly maintained their Jewish identities, but reflects on the literal meaning of the word *marrano*. He suggests that in intellectual circles today, the word *marrano* — meaning a secretive, concealed, closeted person — implies "a sense of infatuation." (p. 6) Stavans writes that "To have a secret and keep it for centuries is to be the owner of an ancestral treasure. In a society such as ours, easily prone to superficialities, such ownership makes for astonishing riches." (p. 6)

Stavans is struck by Elaine Marks's argument in her book, *Marrano as Metaphor: the Jewish Presence in French Writing*. Marks uses the term *marrano* to indicate an assimilated, modern Jew, especially the *intelligentsia*. Many Jewish writers are *marranos* in the sense that their cultural, political, and even sexual identity shifts depending on circumstances. "This elasticity is infuriating. Isn't modernity as a whole a state of mind ruled by inner doubt?" (p. 7) Stavans suggests that the transformation of the meaning of the word *marrano* is part of a larger obsession with "the hidden Jewish self." (p. 7)

This obsession takes different forms. Stavans points out that many authors have written on the lost ten tribes, frequently suggesting that they are in one place or another. Others suggest revisionist theories of the origin of the Jewish people. Arthur Koestler, for example, argued unconvincingly in *The Thirteenth Tribe* that the Jews are descended from the Khazars. Stavans wants to see all of these interests as reflections of the obsession with the hidden Jewish self. He argues that we are interested in the *marrano* because it is an exotic subject.

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Stavans writes that there are many books that search for possible marranos in New Mexico or Arizona but few that focus on Sephardim and Sephardic culture. He suggests that the nature of marrano identity is an enigma to us and serves as the vehicle for us to work out our own identity issues. “The marrano has the potential of ‘coming out,’ and that potential is fascinating only because our own Jewish identity is too flat, too normal, without any secrets left.” (p. 8)

Stavans writes that “Jews have been guests, huéspedes, in the Hispanic world for over a thousand years.” (p. 27) During certain historical periods they have flourished intellectually, while at other times they have been forced to hide their identities. But in the final analysis, Stavans does not see their worldview as that of marranos. “In fact, it is closer to the mestizo: a mixture of ancestries, a plentiful ground for cross-fertilization.”(p. 28)

The most interesting documents are from the 20th century. Indeed, one could argue that the collection would have made more sense if it had included only Hispanic Jewish literature from the 20th century. The editor admits that the *Encyclopedia Judaica* states that Alberto Gerchunoff’s *The Jewish Gauchos of the Pampas*, published in 1910, was “the first work of literary value to be written in Spanish by a Jew in modern times.” (p. 18) There may have been works of literary value written by Jews in Spanish-speaking countries, but they were probably written in other languages. This could be seen as narrowing the scope of the project; however, the editor sees this limitation as a challenge. He uses this historical reality as a justification to broaden his search. In addition to the extensive use of non-Jewish authors, he also looks for literature written by crypto-Jews whose ancestors were converted and who hid their religious beliefs and practices from the Inquisition.

Gerchunoff is a pioneering figure; the collection might have started with his works rather than with Samuel Hanagid. Gerchunoff was raised speaking Yiddish and Russian, but when he moved to Argentina he began using Spanish. He became a noted writer and influenced others, including Jorge Luis Borges. The editor explains that Gerchunoff’s lifetime project was “to turn Spanish into a home for the Jews, to acclimate the language not only to Hebraisms and Yiddishisms but to a Weltanschauung totally alien to it.” (p. 18) Gerchunoff’s selection is from his autobiography, which was unpublished at the time of his death in 1950 and was only printed in an English translation in the anthology, *King David’s*

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Harp, edited by Stephen A. Sadow. In the excerpt, Gerchunoff reflects on the impact of living in Argentina:

In Argentina, Jews, redeemed from injustice and religious stereotypes, will lose their characteristic profile. On this soil they will gradually be freed from the whip of persecution. This can be seen already. From the city and the countryside Argentine Jews are deeply, sincerely patriotic, as are their elders, born in Odessa or Warsaw and immigrants to this land. Argentina can be proud of this and show it to older civilizations. What would the Russian people say about such a transformation, for instance? As I carry out many official functions, I come across Jews who are university professors, which neither shocks nor irritates anyone. These Jews are Argentine citizens; nobody cares which temple they pray in or if they are Catholics or not.” (p. 149)

Pinkhes Berniker is included, even though he only lived in Havana between 1925 and 1931. Nevertheless, his stories portray his impressions of Jewish life in Cuba and how Cuban Catholics reacted to Jewish immigrants. Berniker’s story “Jesús” tells of a Lithuanian Jewish peddler in Cuba who is encouraged to sell religious images:

He didn’t even take it seriously, the first few times his roommates suggested that he start peddling images of Jesus, of Yoshke, as he preferred to call him. He thought they were kidding. How could they have been serious? Were they fools? What could they have meant? How could they possibly think that he should shlep the goyish icons through the streets of Havana? What was he, a boy, a young lad, who knew nothing of the world? How could they imagine that he — a middle-aged Jew with a beard and side curls, who had been ordained as a rabbi, who had devoted all the days of his life to Torah and to divine service — could all of a sudden peddle icons and spread word of Jesus of Nazareth? (p. 169)

Some of the selections are overtly political. The anthology includes an excerpt from Jacobo Timerman’s *Prisoner without a Name, Cell without a Number*, which was published in 1981. Timerman argues that Argentine military officers who arrested and interrogated him believed that he was part of an international Jewish conspiracy.

I was kidnapped by the extremist sector of the army. From the outset, President Rafael Videla and General Roberto Viola tried to convert my disappearance into an arrest in order to save my life. They did not succeed. My life was spared because this extremist sector was also the heart of Nazi operations in Argentina. From the very first interrogation, they

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figured they had found what they'd been looking for for so long: one of the Sages of Zion, a central axis of the Jewish anti-Argentine conspiracy. (p. 196)

Salomón Isacovici wrote an account of his move from Romania to Ecuador after the Holocaust. Born in the town of Sighet, where Elie Wiesel was also born, Isacovici describes his experiences in Quito as a hacienda administrator on a mountain named Pasocahoa. His job required him to oversee the staff, including a foreman and 22 Indian peons. The peons lived on the land with their families. Isacovici explains that “they worked for nothing.” This observation — coupled with his memories of the Holocaust — causes him to obsess on the nature of human behavior.

The tormented peons and the foreman who was always exploiting them had made me see reality. I had sought refuge at the end of the world, and I had wanted to forget the past, but I had to come to understand that the past is never completely swept away and forgotten. It is with us always, for better or for worse. Suffering and misery were as much part of those barren plateaus as the past in my soul. The past can never be forgotten or erased permanently; it only allows for certain distractions. Simply put, I had seen up close another facet of humanity, just as terrible as the concentration camps, even though the situation was relatively unknown by most people and of little concern to others. In much the same way that no one wanted to recognize the existence of the concentration camps in Europe, Ecuadorans were denying the fact that some of their fellow citizens were being tortured by the stinging whip of exploitation. (p. 207)

Stavans stresses that Latin America has not spoken about the Holocaust in the same way that North America has. Latin American writers likewise have generally ignored the Holocaust and other Jewish themes in their writings. One supposes that he hopes that *The Scroll and the Cross* will make it easier to locate the Jewish element in the Hispanic literary tradition.

Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer's “Thoughts on Latin America” is one of the few modern documents to address the Latin American religious situation directly. The anthology reprints a speech that Meyer delivered to the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly in the mid-1980s. Meyer argues that many Latin American Jews support military dictatorships, which gives them the illusion of stability, rather than popular liberation

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movements of the exploited masses. He warns that such a myopic view could have terrible consequences.

As a result of my association with human rights, I have been called the Pink Rabbi, or the Communist Rabbi. I have been called almost everything. Of one thing I am certain. Jews can become involved in the democratization. Jews have the potential of getting involved in the overthrowing of the fascist regimes and in the stabilization of the popularist democratic governments throughout the area. I believe that the future of the Jews in Latin America will depend upon their participation in these democratic processes. (p. 213)

The Scroll and the Cross has a great deal of fascinating material. Some of the documents are better than others, and different readers will find their attention drawn to certain ones as opposed to others. Many will find the overall conceptualization of the volume problematic and may want to consult Stavans's other writings — and in particular, *The Essential Ilan Stavans* — to think through his reasoning.

The book is marred by many typos and small factual errors. The historians of Sephardic Jewry are reported to have written a history of the Judeo-Spanish community from the 14th to the 29th centuries, which would qualify them as prophets rather than simply historians. (p. 29) *The Guide for the Perplexed* is described as having been translated from the Latin (rather than from the Arabic) by M. Friedlander. (p. 70) That same book is listed as having been published in *New Yorker* [sic]. (p. 325) In the Chronology, it is written that “Jewish emigration from the island [Cuba] will takes [sic] place during the sixties, mainly to Florida. (p. 37) The introduction to Rabbi Marshall Meyer’s “Thoughts On Latin America” describes the piece as having been delivered to “an American Rabbinial [sic] assembly [sic].” (p. 208) The organization being referred to is the Rabbinical Assembly. Josef Menguele [sic] is identified as a Nazi fugitive in Latin America. (p. 25) While all scholarly presses are under tremendous budgetary pressures, it is nevertheless incumbent upon them to make sure that manuscripts are carefully proofread. While some readers may find the experience of discovering typos amusing, most will be annoyed.

In recent years, a number of initiatives have been taken to generate dialogue between Latinos and Jews in the United States. Latinos recently became the largest minority in the entire country and Jewish political lobbying groups are understandably eager to form alliances with them.

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According to recent estimates, Hispanics now account for 12.5 percent of the American population, numbering approximately 35.5 million people. Latino groups are likewise eager to learn from the vast and successful political experience of AIPAC and other Jewish organizations.

The American Jewish Committee's David A. Harris argues that "it behooves us to get to know one another on more than a superficial level, and to come to understand what issues are seen as critical to the interests of each group." This is not going to be easy, because there are major socio-economic differences between the two groups. Latinos and Jews differ in their attitudes towards a wide range of issues, including bilingual education, abortion, school vouchers, foreign aid, and capital punishment. Yet both Latinos and Jews can benefit from a strategic partnership that emphasizes stressing areas of commonality. But beyond the potential for building strategic bridges, it would be nice to believe that Jews and Latinos can build an intellectual dialogue based on an intersecting common history and culture. It is here that books such as *The Scroll and the Cross* can provide source material for cultural interchange. •

Dana Evan Kaplan is a visiting research scholar at the Miller Center for Contemporary Jewish Studies and the Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies at the University of Miami. His books include *American Reform Judaism, Platforms and Prayerbooks*, *Contemporary Debates in American Reform Judaism*, and *The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism* (forthcoming).

Midstream — July/August 2003