

## **Review of Ofer Idels, *Zionism: Emotions, Language and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024)**

**Roni Cohen**

Recently, there has been a new interest in the history of emotions in the field of Israel Studies. Derek Penslar's *Zionism: An Emotional State* (2023), Orit Rozin's *Emotions of Conflict: Israel 1949-1967* (2024) both appeared only in the last two years, and made an important contribution to thinking about Israel and modern Jewish history through the lens of emotions. In that context, it is also important to mention the latest volumes of the Israeli journal *Zion* (edited by Hadar Feldman, Orit Rozin, and Emma Zohar), which were also dedicated to the use of theories connected to the history of emotions in the context of Jewish history. In this context, Ofer Idels' new book *Zionism*, as a part of the *Cambridge Elements Histories of Emotions and the Senses* tries to suggest a new perspective towards the engagement of emotions in the study of Zionism. However, unlike other studies in the field, which mainly focus on specific emotions, emotional terminology, and emotional regimes, Idels aims to offer tools for engaging in a historical discussion on what people felt.

Typically to the *Cambridge Elements* series, Idels' book is based on a concise introductory discussion. You will not find in it an elaborated analysis of sources about emotions and feelings in the Zionist movement in the first half of the 20th century. Instead, Idels describes the main trends in the study of Zionism in the last decades, point to methodological problems, and shows how his own point of view, which emphasizes the importance of understanding not only how Zionists in Palestine behaved or what their daily lives looked like, but mainly how they themselves *experienced* their lives. According to Idels, living in Palestine, speaking Hebrew daily and consuming Hebrew culture constated, for those who chose to do it, a completely new and different living experience.

Idels points to a specific, recurring lacuna in current studies about the Jewish Zionist community in Palestine in the first half of the twentieth century (*Yishuv*). According to Idels, one of the main trends in the study of the *Yishuv* in the last decades is to undervalue the importance of the ideological factor in the lives of the Jewish communities in Palestine before 1948. Scholars such as Gur Alroey or Anat Helman focused on the “non ideologic” daily lives of such communities, highlighting their interest in wealth, leisure and well-being, and underplaying the relevance and influence of ideals regarding the importance of creating a new Jewish ethos or building a new state. According to Idels, while Post-Post-Zionist research has made a critical contribution to understanding the richness and complexity of the lives and daily existence of Palestine’s Jewish residents beyond such ideological questions, their research tends to overlook the major differences in the role that ideology in the Modern period played in lived experience. Idels claims that such scholars imagine life in the *Yishuv* as similar to contemporary life in its suspicion towards ideologies. These sentiments, Idels claims, which may be typical of current global-neoliberal tendencies, but do not necessarily go hand in hand with perceptions of ideology in the first half of the twentieth century. Idels claims that shifting the scholarly focus towards studying the experience of living in the *Yishuv*, in a revolutionary atmosphere, allows us to provide a more sensitive and nuanced image of that past. Therefore, if previous scholars distinguished between “real life” and the ideological expressions that may today be perceived as propaganda or empty textual clichés and gestures, according to Idels, we should instead read such materials as an inseparable part of the emotional experience of Jewish life in Palestine.

The book contains five short chapters, all focusing on one specific case study. After a brief introduction that includes a historical survey on the history of Zionism and Jewish life in Palestine before 1948, Idels moves towards an explanation of the history of emotions and history of experience, and the importance of the concept of experience in studying Zionism. The third chapter of the book is dedicated to the

examination of one case study: the Hebrew Revival. One of the most prominent cultural expressions of the Zionist movement, and especially the Zionist activities in Palestine, was making Hebrew the main language for all kinds of communication. Although Hebrew was always an inseparable part of Jewish life and was part of religious rituals and curricula, it was not the spoken language of the majority of the Jews after the Second century. Idels begins by addressing the different scholarly perceptions regarding the new use of Hebrew during the 20th century, and the discussion regarding the extent to which it was a revival of an ancient Semitic language, or rather the creation of a language that was completely new. However, the main aim of this chapter is to move from these historical-linguistic discussions towards a focus on how the speakers themselves experienced the use of Hebrew. Idels highlights the fact that for the people in the *Yishuv*, being surrounded daily by a language that was previously used only for specific ritualistic purposes, and that was not any of the speakers' mother tongue, was a completely different and unique lived experience from of their previous life. Even if the Hebrew language was, for many, a struggle, the possibility of saying "I love you" in Hebrew for the first time created a human experience that cannot be summed up only through discussions about wealth or well-being.

The fourth chapter of the book focuses on the methodological potential of the history of experience. In this chapter, Idels challenges the tendency to "read against the grain" and highlights the dangers of being automatically suspicious when reading sources. Such a method, according to Idels, fails to understand major features when discussing the past. Focusing on the history of experience helps the scholar to be open not only to historical trends or forces, but also to the ways historical periods felt in real time. Such a reading also opens a window to a much more empathic understanding of the past.

While Idels brings a smart and clear analysis of major trends in the current historiography of Zionism, as well as bold methodological innovations to the field, it would have been great to have a more elaborate discussion on the

relationships between Idels' use of history of emotions and experience and the use of his peers in the field. It is clear that works like Rozin's latest book, or the double *Zion* issue are not mentioned due to the fact that they were published after Idels' book was already complete. However, reading Idels' analysis raises questions regarding the connections between the new interest in the history of Zionism and the history of emotions in Post-Post-Zionist historiography. Unfortunately, Idels leaves us to think about these connections by ourselves.

Nevertheless, Idels' short book makes an important contribution to the field of the history of Zionism and the study of the history of emotions and experience in the past. While leaving the reader looking for more, it opens a challenging conversation regarding the ways in which we historians need to think about the past, a conversation that should not be overlooked.

## Author Biography

Dr Roni Cohen is a Minerva postdoctoral fellow at Goethe University. His book titled *Carnival and Canon: Medieval Parodies for Purim*, is soon to be published via Magnes Press. Roni's research focuses on European Jewish popular culture in the late Middle Ages and early modern period, as well as the relationships between textual pieces and communities.