

Jonathan Frankel and the Study of Russian Jewry

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On Wednesday, 7 May 2008, Israel's 60th Memorial Day, Jonathan Frankel, the British-Israeli scholar of Russian and Jewish histories, passed away after a long and courageous battle with prostate cancer. A full four years later, the void left in Israeli and Jewish academia remains gaping. This essay offers a few preliminary thoughts regarding Frankel's career as a brilliant scholar, inspirational teacher, dedicated mentor, trusted friend, and exemplary human being.

Born in London in 1935, Frankel was educated at Cambridge at the height of the Cold War, where he studied with the legendary historian of Russia and the Soviet Union E. H. Carr. Soon after completing his doctorate in 1961, Frankel moved to Israel, where he became a central figure in what will one day be defined as the third generation of Jerusalem scholars, those who, for the most part, were born outside of Eastern Europe, who came of age in the shadow of World War II, and whose work and careers paralleled critical transformations in Israeli society in the aftermath of the war that changed everything and nothing, the Six-Day War. In addition to his pivotal role in a number of key institutions and circles in Israeli academia, Frankel was also a central figure in the post-World War II school of Jewish studies that helped bridge the intellectual gap between earlier generations of European-born scholars like Abramsky, Baron, Dinur, Ettinger, Goitein, Halperin, Mosse, Shmeruk, Slutsky, Talmon, and Weinreich (and in the field of Russian and East European histories Deák, Haimson, Lewin, Pipes, Raeff, Riasanovsky, and Wandycz) and a later generation of scholars who were very often born in America or Israel, came of age in eras of relative stability, and begin to mature and flourish in the last quarter of the 20th century across the globe from Palo Alto to Petersburg.

Frankel's first book is an often overlooked analysis of the Russian political theoretician Vladimir Akimov (*Vladimir Akimov on the Dilemmas of Russian Marxism, 1895–1903*, 1969). Written as part of a post-doctoral project under-

Research for this paper was made possible through the generosity of the Israel Science Foundation. It was written while I was a research fellow at the Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. A much earlier version appeared in *Jewish History* 21: 3–4 (Fall 2007): 263–78. I thank Gillian Kaye for her editorial assistance.

Bounded Mind and Soul: Russia and Israel, 1880–2010. Brian Horowitz and Shai Ginsburg, eds. Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2013, 3–10.

taken at Columbia University's Russian Institute (today the Harriman Institute), this study reflects much of what would characterize his academic work: close readings of political texts, with particular attention to ideological debates, an agile and sharp pen (a testimony to the fine art of writing in pencil?), a firm belief in the power of ideas, and an unwavering faith in the role of the individual.

Frankel's analysis of the early theoretician Akimov enabled him to solidify his position at the Hebrew University, where he helped establish the Department of Russian and Slavic Studies and contributed to the newly founded Institute of Contemporary Jewry. His arrival in Jerusalem in 1964 with his new wife, the scholar of Russian literature and culture Edith Rogovin Frankel, marked the true beginning of his academic career. It was in Jerusalem that Frankel would flourish as a central figure in both Jewish and Russian studies. More than anything else, his joint appointment in Jerusalem in Russian and Jewish studies offered Frankel the opportunity to pursue his true passion: the intersection of European, Russian, and Jewish histories. It was here that he rewrote his Cambridge dissertation into the mammoth masterpiece *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism and the Russian Jews, 1862–1917*; completed and published *The Damascus Affair: "Ritual Murder," Politics and the Jews in 1840*; served as one of the cofounders and coeditors of the annual *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*; edited or coedited 12 volumes on various aspects of Jewish and Russian histories; and penned at least 45 articles in English, German, Hebrew, Italian, and Russian.

For many scholars of modern Jewish studies, *Prophecy and Politics* was one of the first books that they read on modern Jewish history, and in the eyes of many, it remains one of the finest books of Jewish history ever written. Dedicated to the dramatic changes in Jewish life that took place in the wake of the pogroms of 1881 and 1882, *Prophecy and Politics* is a historical tour de force. In over 600 pages of tightly bound prose, Frankel argues that the years 1881 and 1882 were a turning point in modern Jewish history that led to the birth of modern Jewish politics, the migration of millions of Jews to the New World, and the early waves of organized settlement in Ottoman Palestine that would eventually lead to the establishment of the state of Israel some six decades later. Using a staggering amount of source material in German, Hebrew, Russian, and Yiddish, Frankel traces the impact of the pogroms on two generations of Jews across three continents. Almost 30 years after its publication in English in 1981 (followed by editions in Hebrew in 1989, Italian in 1990, and most recently Russian in 2008), it is hard for me to think of many books that rival Frankel's ability to construct a narrative that allows the reader to see both the forest and the trees.

While the book has since been criticized, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of *Prophecy and Politics*. A cursory review of the past two generations of scholarship on East European Jewry shows how books by the next generation engage and in many cases respond directly to *Prophecy and Politics*.

Prophecy and Politics centered around many of the themes that would occupy Frankel in his next major work, *The Damascus Affair: "Ritual Murder," Politics and the Jews in 1840*. Here, as well, Frankel focused on one particular moment—the blood libel cast upon the Jewish community of Damascus in 1840—that he believed changed the course of modern Jewish history. Again taking a transnational perspective on Jewish history—long before the term was even in vogue—Frankel shows how the response of Jewish communities in England, France, the United States, and German lands to the events in Damascus led to a series of ideological and institutional changes that would irrevocably alter the course of modern Jewish society and history. Here, as well, the nascent Jewish and European press, international Jewish organizations like the British Board of Deputies, and determined leaders like Sir Moses Montefiore and Adolphe Crémieux serve as anchors around which Frankel weaves a complex historical narrative that recognizes the roles played by larger political forces, key individuals, and government officials, as well as the very details of daily life in Paris and London alongside Damascus and Jerusalem. The vision, the details, and the fluid narrative unfold as Frankel takes the reader deep into a fateful chapter in modern Jewish and European histories.

If *Prophecy and Politics* helped redefine the study of East European Jewry, *The Damascus Affair* played a critical role in two additional academic discourses: the first on blood libels and the second on Jewish politics. Frankel's study of Jewish responses to the Damascus blood libel contributed manifoldly to the underdeveloped yet growing body of scholarship on the topic. Meanwhile, *The Damascus Affair* was pivotal in further defining the subfield of Jewish politics and its big brother, the study of Zionism. In response to some of his critics and in an admirably bold act of academic courage, Frankel turned to the mid-19th-century roots of modern Jewish politics in *The Damascus Affair*, simultaneously substantiating and subverting much of what he wrote in *Prophecy and Politics*. Indeed, how many of us would be bold enough to write a book that challenged one of the fundamental tenets of an earlier book, in this case the extent to which Jewish responses to the crisis of 1881–82 represented a completely new chapter in the course of Jewish history. Frankel's two major studies helped define the subfield of Jewish politics.

That said, *The Damascus Affair* was not as influential as *Prophecy and Politics*, and I admit that I am puzzled as to why this is the case. I am tempted to say that the book's narrative brilliance put it too far outside of any clearly recognized academic box for it to fit any one particular, geographically-focused historical discourse. If that is, indeed, the case, then I can only hope that the recent turn to transnational history and the growth in studies of Jewish communities in North Africa and the Middle East will lead to a new interest in this masterful work.

While it may seem obvious to many of those living and writing in America or Israel in the early 21st century, Frankel anchored his approach to the

study of Jewish history in two key concepts: autonomy and agency. The two informed each and every piece that he composed and serve as foundations of what should certainly be referred to as “the Frankel School” of Jewish history. In both *Prophecy and Politics* and *The Damascus Affair*, Jews are not helpless victims; they are autonomous actors whose moment of redemption occurs when they take responsibility for and control over their individual and collective (always Jewish) fates. In both cases, triumphant heroes respond to potentially tragic events by organizing, acting, and overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles and, through a combination of vision and commitment, are able to transform both “the Jews” (however construed) and Jewish society. As Frankel wrote of early Zionist pioneers in *Prophecy and Politics*: “If nonetheless the Palestinian idea took root, it was because of the grim, fanatical, determination of a small body of men. Those few settlers who had actually gone to Palestine in 1882, and who subsequently insisted on staying there against heavy odds, prevented the cause from simply withering away” (115). Combined with his own optimism and faith in humanity, Frankel’s methodological conception of crisis and turning points repeatedly lead him to construct historical narratives that were deeply redemptive. In 1840 and in 1881–82, the solution to scurrilous blood libels and violent pogroms was political reorganization and action—or, as one of the guiding spirits of *Prophecy and Politics*, Judah Leib Pinsker, would have had it, auto-emancipation. Forever the optimist and the Zionist, Frankel believed in a world of solutions and responsibility, and in a leadership that searched for and found collective solutions to whatever problems faced “the Jews.”

Frankel’s intellectual interests were vast and he must have realized the need to cooperate with others in these pursuits. Together with Peter Medding, Ezra Mendelsohn, and other colleagues at the Hebrew University’s Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Frankel helped found the Institute’s annual, *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, and was instrumental in the annual’s publication until his final days. Starting in 1984, *Studies* served as a central forum that scholars of modern Jewish history, society, and culture could use to debate key academic and political issues in an era that predated the renaissance of older American journals like *Jewish Quarterly Review* and *Jewish Social Studies*, as well as the advent of the Internet. Frankel himself edited or coedited seven volumes that reflected his own diverse interests; they included collections on World War I, messianism, historiography, World War II, and gender and communism. In many cases, these collections remain definitive statements on these issues.

In addition to serving as editor of his own journal, Frankel also coedited collections dedicated to Russian and Jewish histories including a volume on the Revolution of 1917 that he coedited with his wife Edith Rogovin Frankel and Hebrew University colleague Baruch Knei-Paz; a volume on *Assimilation and Community* edited with colleague Steven J. Zipperstein; a collection of essays dedicated to his colleague from the Hebrew University’s Department of

Russian and Slavic Studies, Theodore (Ted) Friedgut, on post-Soviet society and politics; and a volume entitled *Insiders and Outsiders: Dilemmas of East European Jewry* that was dedicated to his longtime colleague and friend from Hebrew University Ezra Mendelsohn. In addition to these edited volumes, a collection of Frankel's major essays has been published posthumously under the title *Crisis, Revolution and Russian Jews*. Frankel's colleagues and students reciprocated by presenting him with a volume on *The Revolution of 1905 and Russia's Jews* several weeks before he passed away.

Nor was this spirit of academic cooperation limited to his peers. In another example of how he practiced what he preached, Frankel repeatedly honored teachers and scholars of earlier generations by writing graceful introductions to different collections. He did so for a volume of essays in Hebrew by the Jerusalem historian Shmuel Ettinger (cowritten and coedited with Israel Bartal), a collection of essays by the economic historian Arcadius Kahan, and the memoirs of Simon Dubnow's daughter, Sofia Dubnov-Erlich. In these texts as well, Frankel's ability to paint the big picture without losing track of the details is striking. To this day Frankel's introduction to the Dubnow memoir remains the best work on the scholar's life available in English.

In addition to his commitment to academic excellence, Jonathan Frankel lived his life according to a set of core values: community and the Jewish people, Zionism and humanity. Frankel was a committed believer in the importance of community. This was abundantly clear in his relationships with colleagues from the Hebrew University, as well as his relations with other people who composed his daily world. Together, they formed a community of scholars who brought out the best in one another and in their students. Nor was this dedication limited to colleagues from Jerusalem. The Frankel family regularly hosted Friday night dinners in their modest Nayot apartment, and these gatherings served as informal salons where scholars and students who came for a summer, a semester, or a year could meet locals and quickly become members of the academic community that Frankel valued so dearly. There, natives, visitors, and those who were a little bit of both would mingle and meet, laying the foundation for longtime friendships and cooperation. Frankel also left a deep imprint at his home institution. Even a cursory visit to any of the departments or programs with which he was involved at the Hebrew University was enough to feel the impact of Frankel's soft-spoken ideology of excellence, community, and respect.

Nor was this without a political message. And how could it not be political in a land like Israel, on a campus like Mt. Scopus, and in a department like the Institute of Contemporary Jewry that revolved around the Holocaust, the State of Israel, and the Jewish people. As a child, Frankel was evacuated from his home in London and spent part of the war in Wales; the experience was not without impact. He certainly did not end up in Israel by accident; no one does. Frankel was a firm believer in the Zionist project and had a seemingly indefatigable faith in the ability of Israeli society to extricate itself from the

fine mess that it found itself in after June 1967. That said, Frankel's deep faith in Zionism was not one of table-thumping speeches, angry newspaper articles, and vitriolic talk show diatribes. Rather, it was one of a calm, deeply ingrained belief in fate and destiny, prophecy and politics. A British liberal to the very end, Frankel's Zionism was a liberal nationalism that envisioned the Jewish people in Zion as a welcomed and contributing part of humanity. His efforts to create a thriving scholarly community in Jerusalem—one that was open to all—was certainly fueled by these and other articles of faith.

But for all of his commitment to political principles, Frankel, it is worth repeating, believed in the individual above all. This became abundantly clear in his relations with students, graduate and undergraduate, local and visiting. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the opening of archives in the former Soviet bloc, and the arrival of over one million immigrants to Israel from the former Soviet Union led to a resurgence in East European and East European Jewish studies in Jerusalem and throughout the world. These and other factors led to a wave of doctoral students supervised by Frankel (often in cooperation with other faculty at the Hebrew University) over the last two decades. Dissertations like those written by Shmuel Barnai on Jewish society in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union, Semion Goldin on the Jews and the Russian army in World War I, Mordechai (Motti) Inbari on messianic movements in contemporary Israel, Artium Kirpichenok on Serbian settlements in early modern Ukraine, Vladimir Levin on Jewish politics in the Russian Empire, Tsvi Sadan on the image of Jesus in Zionist thought, Natan Shifris on early expressions of Jewish nationalism, Rafi Tsirkin-Sadan on the relationship between Russian literature and the works of Yosef Hayim Brenner, and my own on the Revolution of 1905 in Warsaw all reflected Frankel's own interests in Jewish politics and culture in Russia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East.

Advising graduate students is no easy task, for it demands endless levels of patience, and Frankel was known throughout Israeli academia as a dedicated teacher and a committed advisor. Here, as well, his faith in humanity and dedication to Zionism played a role, as Frankel believed that Hebrew University was the best place to undertake graduate work in Jewish studies and was deeply committed to ensuring that that remain the case. His door was always open, and his ability to create a community of scholars was unparalleled. To this day, many of Frankel's Ph.D. students remain close friends; and the same can be said of many of the bonds that Frankel helped forge between his students in Israel and visitors from abroad. As one American-based colleague said: "We were all Jonathan's students."

Only now after having advised and worked closely with graduate students on their MA theses and doctoral dissertations can I begin to appreciate the seemingly endless hours and innumerable meetings that Jonathan invested in my own dissertation as it progressed from its origins as a seminar paper on the First Duma elections to a Master's paper on Jewish experiments with democracy to a dissertation on the Revolution of 1905 and finally to a

book on the intersection of urban society and modern politics. Meeting over coffee or lunch, Frankel would have a tuna sandwich and a *café hafukh* or perhaps an orange juice that he would carefully open with his gargantuan hands. We would then proceed to go over every page that I had written as he would point to suggestions about things large and small that he had made in pencil throughout the draft—draft after draft. He was always one of my first readers and I still, even right now, find it hard to believe that we won't be meeting later this week over coffee in the basement of Givat Ram's National Library or in the Maiersdorf Faculty Club on Mt. Scopus to discuss where I use a phrase incorrectly, when I am being repetitive, why I use so many adjectives, and what I think I really gain by using the first person so often.

Frankel's passing is, of course, also symbolic of larger transformations taking place in Israeli academia and society. Many of the institutions that Frankel worked so hard to establish have been significantly downsized in the past few years. While Jewish and Israel studies programs have expanded across the globe over the last decades from Melbourne to Munich, the Hebrew University's Institute of Contemporary Jewry was recently merged with the Department of the History of the Jewish People. As part of the same institutional reorganization, Frankel's other home department, the Department of Slavic and Russian Studies, was essentially divided in half and rehoused in the Germano-centric Department of History and the newly formed Department of German and Russian Languages and Literatures. In conjunction with these reforms, the Mayrock Center for Russian and East European Studies, the university center that supported so many projects on Russian and East European history and thereby ensured the place of Israeli academia in the world of Slavic studies, has now been made part of the university's European Forum. While many will claim that these realignments reflect larger changes in the humanities throughout the world and in Israel, this does not dissolve the bitter irony that many of the institutions to which Frankel tirelessly dedicated his adult life have—one after another—been reconfigured and absorbed into larger academic institutions.

Jonathan Frankel was a rare model of all that was, can, and should be good about our academic world: a brilliant scholar whose erudition, analytical skills, and ability to express himself were without peer, a dedicated and loyal friend and colleague who believed in and created a thriving academic community, and a supportive advisor who treated his students with respect and dignity every time they walked into his classroom, knocked on the door to his office, or picked up the phone to ask for "just one more letter of recommendation." In an age of growing cynicism and narcissism, Frankel was a man who consistently lived by a clearly articulated set of principles that effortlessly flowed between the personal, academic, and political. In everything that he did, Jonathan Frankel was an exemplary model of human behavior: a deeply ingrained optimist, a committed Zionist, and a firm believer in the

inherent beauty of the human species whose endless generosity will inspire his colleagues, students, friends, and admirers for generations.
May his memory be for a blessing.