בס״ד

*Goy*: The State of the Question, the State of Discussion

Adi Ophir and Ishay Rosen-Zvi, *Goy: Israel's Multiple Others and the Birth of the Gentile*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. viii + 333 pp.

Ishay Rosen-Zvi and Adi Ophir, *From a Holy Goy to a Shabbat Goy :The Emergence and Persistence of the Jews' Other*, Jerusalem: Carmel, 2021. xiv+ 185 pp. [Hebrew]

The question of “Who is a Jew?” is one of the basic questions in Israeli society. Ishay Rosen-Zvi and Adi Ophir, however, think that the basic question for Israel and for the Jews is really “Who is a goy?” or more precisely “*What* is a goy?” Rosen-Zvi and Ophir have been working on this question for a decade. Their first publication on the subject, it seems, was an article in *Haaretz*.[[1]](#footnote-1) This was followed by a number of scholarly articles, finally concluding in two books, one in English in 2018 (*Goy: Israel's Multiple Others and the Birth of the Gentile*; hereafter *Goy*) and the other in Hebrew (*From a Holy Goy to a Shabbat Goy: The Emergence and Persistence of the Jews' Other*; hereafter *Goy Kadosh*), published a year ago. The tremendous intellectual effort they have devoted to their *goy* project has generated not just scholarly discussion but a quite stormy public discussion as well. The two books are written for different audiences and have different emphases, but the same purpose. *Goy* is a thoroughly academic book that examines in detail the meanings of the term *goy* from the Bible through Tannaitic literature. *Holy Goy*, by contrast, is a significant work of public scholarship. Its first nine chapters present, succinctly and fluently, the main arguments of the English book. The highlight of the book, and its heart, are found in the final three chapters, which deal with the *goy* in post-rabbinic literature, and in particular with the ways that the cultural inheritance of rabbinic literature is expressed in the laws of the State of Israel and in the ways that the state and Jewish society relate to non-Jews.

The goal of the following survey is not to present Ophir and Rosen-Zvi’s main arguments along with a measure of (respectful) criticism, as is customary. Such surveys already exist in abundance, and due to these many responses to the book one can assume that the readers of this publication know them quite well.[[2]](#footnote-2) In what follows, I intend to indicate the state of discussion about the *goy* in light of the claims and questions that Rosen-Zvi and Ophir have raised. I have deliberately chosen to say “the state of discussion” and not “the state of the question,” because Rosen-Zvi and Ophir’s work is not intended only to present a scholarly proposal about the history of *goy* as a legal and cultural category but also and perhaps especially to expose the concept of the *goy* in such a way as “to change the thinking and behavior of the public” (*Goy Kadosh*, 180). Just as Ophir and Rosen-Zvi’s work has a two-fold format, scholarly and popular, the following survey too will examine the state of discussion in both realms.

Let me begin with a brief description of Rosen-Zvi and Ophir’s most important new idea: Non-Jews became *goyim* only at a comparatively late stage in Jewish history. The Bible tells the history of the people of Israel; according to the Bible, it is a people (*am*) among many other peoples (*ammim*), with whom it has a complicated relationship. Rosen-Zvi and Ophir argue that the Bible does not have a single, explicit, exclusive category for everyone who is not a Jew, and therefore there is no single way to treat those who do not belong to the people of Israel. The Bible recognizes different levels of connection between the people of Israel and other individuals who reside in the land. There are biblical verses that describe the obligation to worry about the economic well-being of the *ger* or “resident,” that is, of one who is not part of the Israelite community but resides in the land or nation of Israel (*Goy*, 28-31). Similarly, the non-Jews themselves do not fit into a single mold. There is a broad range of relationships to the various other peoples, from the obligation to expel or exterminate the seven nations who dwell in the land of Canaan (*Goy*, 42-45) through the prohibition to hate the Egyptians who enslaved the Israelites for centuries according to the Bible (*Goy Kadosh*, @). The biblical world, then, is a complex one, with no explicit dichotomy between Jew and *goy*.

According to Ophir and Rosen-Zvi, the complex, non-uniform relationship toward non-Jews continues into Second Temple literature. Real change begins with Paul. The efforts of the apostle to the Gentiles to bring the good news about Jesus to the non-Jewish masses led him to formulate anew the status of non-Jews who abandoned paganism but neither accepted nor needed to accept the yoke of the commandments which obligated the Jews (*Goy*, chapter 5; *Goy Kadosh*, chapter @). In Tannaitic literature, with or without connection to Paul, the distinction between Jews and non-Jews was fully crystallized.[[3]](#footnote-3) The latter are called *goyim*, and under this name the differences between the various non-Jewish peoples are blurred and vanish. More significantly, the characterization of non-Jews as an entity defined negatively opened the door to the creation of a series of rules whose goal was to keep them far apart by drawing an unbridgeable boundary between Jews and *goyim*. Alongside drawing this line in all realms of life (business dealings, purity and impurity, neighborly relations, marriage, and so on), there was instituted a closely supervised, one-way street leading across the line – conversion (*Goy*, chapter 6; *Goy Kadosh*, chapter @).

In the Hebrew volume, *Goy Kadosh*, the authors added three chapters that deal with the relationship with the *goy* after the mishnaic and talmudic periods. Chapter 10 briefly describes the approach of R. Menahem b. Solomon Meiri, the 14th-century commentator and halakhic decisor. Meiri argues that the rabbinic *goy* no longer exists, since the Sages were dealing with idolaters. The religious reality of his period demands a new, more positive relationship with Christians and Muslims. The second half of Chapter 10 briefly describes a halakhic-cultural controversy among contemporary Orthodox Jews around the question of whether the prohibition of violating the Sabbath in order to save the life of a non-Jew is still in force today. The next chapter critically describes how Israeli law and the discussion in Jewish-Israeli society are in fact warped by the Jew-*goy* binary created by the Sages.

1. Adi Ophir and Ishay Rosen-Zvi, “Did St. Paul Invent the Goy?”, *Haaretz*, October 12, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A detailed survey can be found in Jeffrey P. García, “The Rabbinic Goy Takes Center Stage,” *Hebrew Studies* 60 (2019), pp. 473-487. *Ancient Jew Review* posted a forum about the book in which scholars from diverse fields examine the authors’ claims; see <https://www.ancientjewreview.com/read/2019/2/18/goy-an-ajr-forum>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The authors refrain from historical explanations for the changes that occurred in the specification of the term *goy* (*Goy*, 22, 266-266; *Goy Kadosh*, @). On a possible connection between Paul/Christianity and the Sages see Ishay Rosen-Zvi, “The Creation of the Goy in Rabbinic Literature,” Teuda 26 (2014): 361-438 at 423. [Perhaps also in *Goy Kadosh* @.] [↑](#footnote-ref-3)