Evaluation of prof. Lior Libman’s research record.

It is with great pleasure that I write this evaluation for prof. Libman for a tenure position in Judaic Studies at Binghamton University. I have known prof. Libman for the past two decades and I had the opportunity to observe, with admiration, her remarkable scholarly development from a brilliant student to one of the outstanding young scholars in the field of Israel Studies. In fact, after reading prof. Libman’s work it is my strong opinion that she is one of the most gifted, original, and knowledgeable scholars I know, whose studies present a rare combination of precision, depth, creativity, and innovation. Prof. Libman’s research on Zionism, the Kibbutz, Hebrew Literature, and the history of Israel is pioneering. Her various works offer not only new insights into well-researched themes but also more profoundly challenge some of the most taken-for-granted assumptions regarding them.

Prof. Libman's enormous value to the overlapping fields of Israel History, Hebrew literature, and Zionism lies, to my mind, in three interconnected novelties. First, Prof. Libman’s various studies address the kibbutz as an image (or an icon) as it is represented in the works of leading kibbutz members. Addressing the “iconization” of the kibbutz by kibbutz members is not only a novel approach in the history of the kibbutz. This approach also provides a fresh perspective on Zionist political imagination, particularly how the representation of one of its central icons (the kibbutz) functioned as an ideological apparatus. I am not aware of any study that examines the kibbutz from this perspective or for this reason. Second, prof. Libman demonstrates how kibbutz members experienced the establishment of the State of Israel as a trauma. This is a new perspective on the internal division within Zionism that completely reconfigures our understanding of the kibbutz’s engagement with Israeli statehood. None of the works in the field provide such an understanding of internal Zionist discord, and most fail to deduce the political implications that Prof. Libman foregrounds in her studies. Third, Prof. Libman is the first, as far as I know, to address the conflict between the political theology of the state and that of the kibbutz. Her scrutiny of political theology in this context is brilliant, and it represents, to me, the most revealing aspect of her work. Prof. Libman teaches us how to understand the Hassidic foundations underpinning the political iconization of the kibbutz, and she explicates how this Hassidic theology is anchored in “immanent” mystical symbolism that remains foreign to the “transcendent” authority of the state (akin to Carl Schmitt’s schema). Prof. Libman persuasively argues that without an understanding of political theology, any historical understanding of the kibbutz lacks an essential component. Particularly, the kibbutz actively negates the messianic moment symbolized by the state. This is a revolutionary argument. Most works in the field (recently, Dror’s Kibbutz and Judaism, Omer-Sherman’s Imagining the Kibbutz, and Pauker’s When the Pioneers Wanted a Home) tend to reinforce rather than challenge not only the secular image of the Kibbutz but also a simplistic, arguably narrow interpretation of what such a secular self-perception signifies. None offer an exhaustive analysis of the Hassidic roots of the “secular” perspective of the kibbutz or highlight the discord between the Schmittian theo-politics of the state and the secularized Jewish messianism of the kibbutz. Prof. Libman is the first to indicate that there exist two distinct political theologies that are at odds regarding the mechanism of redemption and the fulfillment (or non-fulfillment) of the messianic moment.

Her manuscript “State of Shock: The Kibbutz in Israel from Avant-Garde to Fetish, 1948–1955”, which I have read in full, is the most recent example of the interlocking of the issues I briefly outlined above. In this wonderful book, prof. Libman displays her originality and excellence by critically examining the representation of the kibbutz in the writings of kibbutz leaders and intellectuals during the decade following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. She meticulously analyzes a remarkable range of primary sources and illustrates, indeed, the trauma that was associated with the state’s founding; the consequent shift in the representation of the kibbutz (perceiving it as an ahistorical, stagnant, and idolized totem); and the clash of two different political-theologies (state and kibbutz). Subsequently, she examines a variety of contexts in which these issues were exhibited, such as the distinction between “land” and “state,” attitudes towards militarism and war, resistance to state control, and alignment with the Soviet Union. These diverse yet intersecting domains of dynamic discussions and fervent debates indicate how adherence to the image of the kibbutz led to lamenting the founding of the State of Israel as a failed realization of the messianic moment that resists realization. To my knowledge, this is the first instance where the interplay between these various issues is presented in academic work in such a comprehensive and compelling manner.

Given that the kibbutz is one of the most prominent Zionist icons, there is a great deal of literature about it. Yet, no other book that I am aware of presents such a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the vicissitudes in the kibbutz’s image, their theo-political sources, and their social and political implications. Essentially, prof. Libman explores a well-studied theme (the kibbutz) through an entirely fresh lens, thereby illuminating completely new issues. The book thus invites a comparison to Henry Near’s seminal study of the kibbutz movement. Despite their distinct approaches, prof. Libman’s book echoes Near’s work in seeking to identify key questions and issues related to the history of the kibbutz. However, in her book, prof. Libman highlights the kibbutz’s mission, and specifically its ethos of “hagshama,” as engaged in a continuous dialogue with theological legacies that Near’s study downplays. This accentuates the fact that prof. Libman’s book delivers a more pertinent analysis of social and political elements that, in my opinion, are conspicuously present in the current Israeli political crisis.

The book also exhibits prof. Libman’s unique interdisciplinary approach which draws from Historical analysis, Literary theories, and Political Science. The academic world tends to be entrenched in disciplines that cultivate a sort of “insider” discourse within each one. Prof. Libman’s work is unique also in its presenting an antithesis to this norm. In many of her papers (“Shadow over the Land without Shade”; “A Symbol which fails to Symbolize”; “The ‘State of Shock’ of Hakkibutz HaMeuchad”), she integrates historical analysis with critical literary theories. Her paper, “A Symbol that Fails to Symbolize,” is particularly commendable because it introduces the relation between aesthetics and theology into the study of Hebrew Literature. In her book prof. Libman goes even further. By analyzing an extensive corpus of primary and secondary sources that include archival materials alongside literary texts from different genres (many translated into English for the first time), she adeptly brings historiographic insights to bear on a critical evaluation of literary texts that are central to the Israeli literary canon.

I believe that the range, scope, and quality of Prof. Libman’s publications (as mentioned above) are equivalent to a book. She has completed a manuscript that is under review at the prestigious UPenn Press and her papers are published or accepted for publication mostly in peer-reviewed journals that are central publishing platforms in her field (for example, Eyunim Betkumat Israel and Mikan). The fact that she has already established a name in the field at this early stage of her academic career is remarkable. She serves as co-chair and co-director of the field’s central conferences (AIS, EAIS), where she also presents her work regularly. Many of her lectures are invited by distinguished institutions (Yale, University College London, UMass Amherst), and she serves as a reviewer for several journals. Prof. Libman also presents rich and promising future trajectories. She outlined two different monographs that are already on her agenda. These, no doubt, indicate the ingenuity, breadth, and richness of Prof. Libman’s intellectual world and I do not doubt that Prof. Libman has the expertise and familiarity with the subject matters of these planned monographs. To avoid overstretching, however, I would recommend focusing on one project at a time.

In conclusion, I strongly support Prof. Libman’s promotion for a tenure position at your institution. I cannot overemphasize the quality of her work and her contribution to the fields of Hebrew Literature, the history of Israel, and Zionism. Her scholarly work is outstanding and demonstrates why Prof. Libman is securing a position as a leading voice in Israel Studies. Prof. Libman is a fount of knowledge, as she is a source of innovative and revolutionary scholarship. I am certain of her bright scholarly future.