Centre for Advanced Study Sofia

# newsletter

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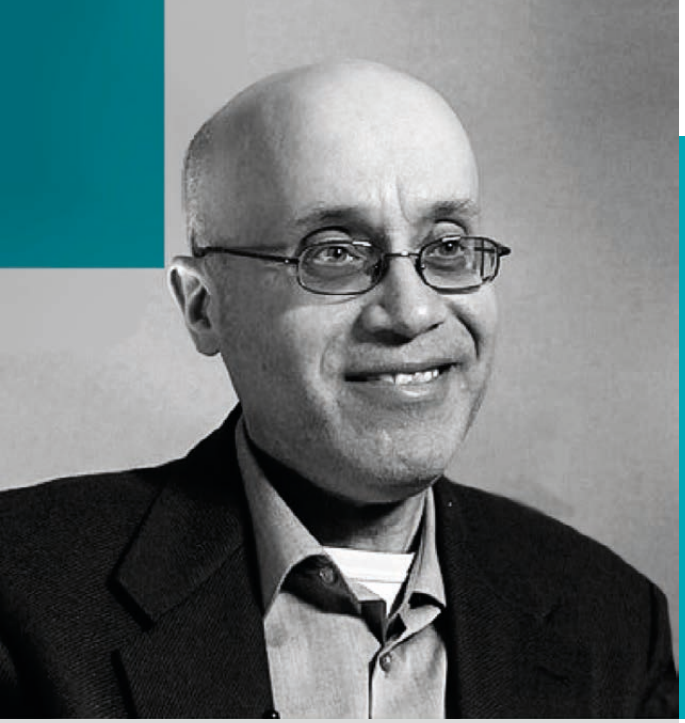


# One Can Be Anti-Racist, Yet Harbor Racist Imagery: An Interview with **Professor Gil Ribak (USA)**

**Professor Gil Ribak** is the Shirley D. Curson Associate Professor (with tenure) at the Arizona Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Arizona. His broader fields of expertise are History and Ethnic Studies. A graduate of Tel Aviv University, Israel (History and Political Studies), he moved to the USA on a Fulbright Fellowship and completed his Doctoral degree at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He held several academic positions, including Director of the Institute on Israeli–American Jewish Relations at the American Jewish University, Los Angeles, and the Lewin Post-Doctoral Fellowship at Washington University in St Louis. He was awarded numerous prestigious honors, amongst which the European Union's Marie S. Curie Senior Fellowship at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies at Freiburg University, Germany, a research fellowship by the Gerda Henkel Foundation, and a fellowship by Fordham University & the New York Public Library.

Prof. Ribak has published widely in scientific journals and books and is the author of *Gentile New York: The Images of Non-Jews among Jewish Immigrants (Rutgers University Press: 2012)* and *Crude Creatures: Confronting Representations of Black People in Yiddish Culture (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming, 2025*.

His research at the Centre of Advanced Studies Sofia focused on the construction and portrayal of Blackness in Eastern European Yiddish culture.

**The Editor: Professor Ribak, your research proposal for CAS bears a shockingly provocative title *Mothers Sell Their Little Children*, which is coupled with an equally controversial subheading, "Imagining Blackness in Eastern European Yiddish Culture". What lies behind such an oxymoronic contradiction – motherhood as an epitome of selfless love, juxtaposed to the utterly materialistic, emotionally void act of sale? And how does it connect with the visualization of Blackness in the public imagination of a geographic collectivity which had never encountered Blackness in its experience?**

**Professor Gil Ribak:** The title is a quote from a Yiddish novel, *Iyey hayam* (Island of the Sea, 1856), by the first modern best-selling Yiddish author, Ayzik (Isaac) Meyer Dik. While that novel condemned the horrors of the Transatlantic slave trade, it presented a harsh imagery of Africans, characterizing them as having defective familial emotions. Such depictions were quite common in European culture at the time and had a few references in earlier Yiddish literature. The larger research question is how does one group of people imagine another group which it has never met, and what can we learn from it about the ways knowledge about race, hierarchy, and difference is created and transmitted? How did Yiddish-speaking Jews in Eastern Europe (Tsarist Russia, Habsburg-ruled Galicia, and Romania), a population bedeviled by grinding poverty and economic and residential restrictions, view another maligned population – Black Africans and African Americans – with whom they had no contact? One of my findings is that although most of them would not see a Black person throughout their lives, East European Jews were not a *tabula rasa*; they already acquired some level of information – however skewed – that served as a basis for imagining Black people.

**Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel walks with Martin Luther King Jr. on civil rights March from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama.** Courtesy of the American Jewish Archives

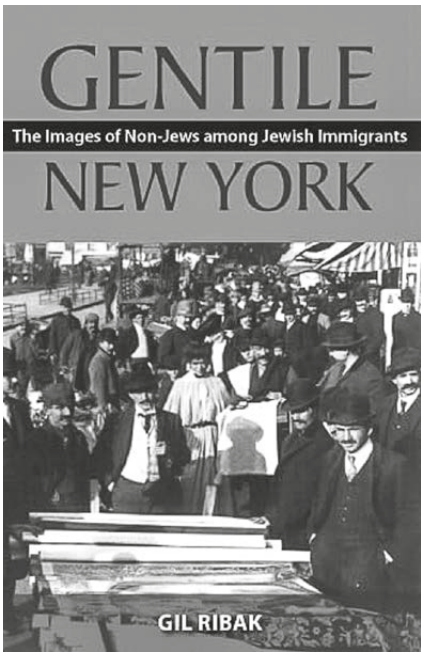
**Your academic research is largely interdisciplinary, encompassing social and cultural history, history of science, media, literature and folklore. How do these fields contribute to explaining the origin/s of racial imagination, especially in a geographic context like Eastern Europe, where, as you pointed out, Blackness had been historically absent? According to your findings, what triggers and "imprints" stereotypical prejudice onto a "blank mental slate"?**

My research utilizes a wide range of materials, including rabbinic exegesis, pious advice, travel narratives (either original or adapted from other languages), folklore, scientific explorations, pulp literature, press reports, political rhetoric, and educational materials. There was not necessarily a "trigger" *per se* for those stereotypes; it is important to remember that Yiddish texts circulated in a Jewish society bedeviled by grinding poverty, living on a meager diet and subject to various economic and residential restrictions. Under such living conditions, the situation of other vilified populations – Black Africans and African Americans – with whom they had no contact was probably the least of their concerns. Yet an examination of the above materials is warranted to dispel the myths and exaggerations about purported Jewish religious or historical heritage that caused Jews to sympathize with African Americans.

**Immigration history – especially Jewish migration from Eastern Europe to the United States – has been a significant part of your research. America has traditionally been described as the land of opportunity, and according to Library of Congress data, between 1880 and 1924, as many as three million Eastern European Jews chose the United States as their new homeland. Who were those people? What did they leave behind, and what were they hoping for? What surprises did the United States hold for them upon arrival? Did they manage to fulfil their American Dream?**

I focused on some of those questions in my first book, *Gentile New York*. East European Jewish immigrants hailed in large numbers, mostly from Tsarist Russia, Habsburg-ruled Galicia, and Romania, especially from the 1870s through 1924. Until at least the late nineteenth century, most of them still resided in towns (*shtetlekh*) where they made up a large part of the population and viewed their Judaism in communal-ethnic terms. There was a complex set of reasons for Jewish emigration: overpopulation, economic dislocations, legal restrictions, and the need to evade the military draft. Already before the pogroms of 1881–1882, the processes of industrialization and urbanization, and the decline of the rural economy hurt many Jews who lived in *shtetlekh* and made a living in small trade. After 1881, the situation worsened: besides the problem of overpopulation, new legal restrictions created overcrowding and pauperization. America offered, of course, tremendous opportunities to the newcomers, who were grateful to their


**"The Punishment for carelessness" (1917)**




new country; what I show in *Gentile New York*, however, challenges any simplistic notions of a happy and linear acculturation. There was an interesting dynamic of initial admiration and high expectations (before embarkation) and then gradual disillusionment and disappointment after the arrival in America. Oftentimes, Jewish immigrants initially attributed the negative sides of American urban life to other groups (e.g., to Irish Americans).

**Throughout history, Jews were subject to discrimination and persecution. Yet, the population of the United States was organically formed by migrants from all over the world. Did this mean that Eastern European Jewish migrants to the United States were finally exempt from racial bias and treated as equals among equals? And how did they themselves react to the colorful "melting pot" they were being absorbed in? What kinds of interethnic and interracial dynamics emerged? What lessons can we learn from their stories, and how do their histories speak to us today – in a world in which societies are increasingly closing off?**

The unique racial, ethnic, and religious mixture within American society indeed contributed to the fact that antisemitic violence and influence have been relatively moderate in comparison to Europe. There were many "Others" – American Indians, African Americans, and even some European immigrant groups (Catholics and later Southern and Eastern Europeans) – to bear the brunt of hatred. But anti-Jewish animus certainly existed, and its ups and downs often paralleled other forms of intolerance and xenophobia, as it happened, for example, during the World Wars. Like other immigrant groups, Jews absorbed contemporary American racial hierarchy, imagery, and vocabulary. My research shows much ambivalence: alongside condemnation of racist violence and discrimination, Yiddish culture reflected internalization of white society's racial codes and assumptions.

The word ambivalence is the key here. Rather than treating racism as a binary, dichotomous concept, where individuals, groups, and cultures are deemed as either racist or not, we need to grasp a much more nuanced reality, with a spectrum of attitudes and values, where one can be genuinely anti-racist, yet harbor racist judgments or imagery. This is especially relevant today, as we live in much more globalized societies, where travel is quite easy; migration and inter-group relations and conflict are becoming more and more prevalent. We need to study further how groups view each other, even before physical contact between them is made.

**Finally, do you consider your stay at CAS to have been fruitful for the completion of your new book? What did you take away with you from Sofia?**

My stay at CAS-Sofia was both socially pleasant *and* professionally rewarding. I got to meet an impressive cohort of fellows and received valuable feedback about my research. I was able to integrate the insights of that feedback when putting the final touches on my manuscript. In addition, I completed a short article on a topic which branches out from my book manuscript – the racial background of an iconic Yiddish lullaby, *Rozhinkes mit Mandlen* (*Raisins and Almonds*). Practically all my interactions in Sofia were excellent, and the period there was both fruitful and exciting.

*Interviewed by The Editor*