

# Speaking volumes

*New Jewish Time encyclopedia's English edition will be the 'crème de la crème' of cultural Judaism publications*

• BY BENJAMIN GLATT

Looking to enlighten Hebrew-speaking youth on Jewish identity, a group of secular Jewish scholars began writing an encyclopedia nine years ago to help Israeli youth realize that Judaism was more than just mitzvot.

After working on the project for four years, they finally finished their creation – *New Jewish Time: Jewish Culture in a Secular Age – An Encyclopedic View*. The encyclopedia consists of five volumes, spanning the modernization and secularization of Jewish culture and society in the past three centuries.

“This was an opportunity to reveal all of the wealth of Jewish culture,” says Prof. Menachem Brinker, one of the encyclopedia’s initial planners and the editor of the work’s Modern Jewish Thought section.

The main readership of the publication is high school students and their teachers, Brinker says, but other professionals and the general public who are looking to explore the culture of Jewish secularization will also find the encyclopedia educational.

New Jewish Time was initiated by former Meretz minister Yair Tzaban. Prof. Yirmiyahu Yovel and the late author David Shaham were editor-in-chief and deputy editor-in-chief, respectively. Produced by Lamda-Association for Modern Jewish Culture, in conjunction with the Spinoza Institute in Jerusalem, and with funding chiefly provided by the Posen Foundation, the five-volume work is divided into sections on the changes in Jewish lifestyle, modern Jewish thinkers, the religious society’s struggle with secularization and modernization, and Jews and non-Jews in the new age.

The encyclopedia also deals with Jewish life in the Diaspora, Jewish memories, myths and history, literature and art, nationalistic and socialistic movements, the State of Israel as a modern Jewish enterprise and Hebrew and the languages of the Jewish people. Among its almost 250 authors, both secular and religious, and all from varying

backgrounds and with different perspectives on life, there are four Israel Prize laureates.

Unlike alphabetically ordered encyclopedias, *New Jewish Time* is divided into topical sections. The 10 sections each open with the section editor’s preface, outlining the importance of the subject at hand and explaining the reasoning why this particular topic of Jewish culture was chosen to be included in the encyclopedia. Each entry is well-researched, ranging from hundreds to thousands of words in length, and in several sections there are also short topical entries on personalities who played an important role in the development of Judaism.

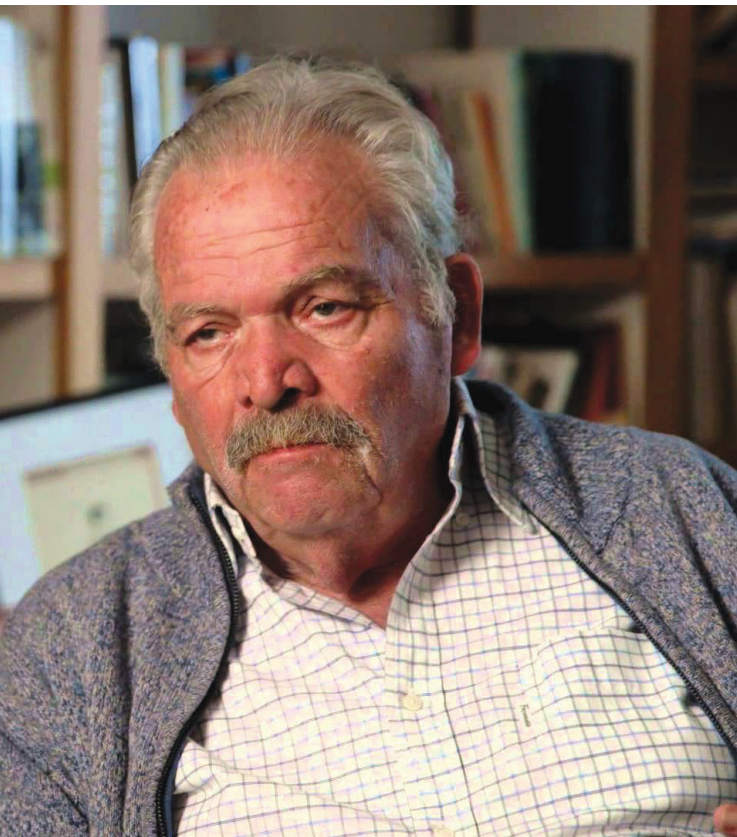
Brinker, professor emeritus of literature and philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and winner of the Israel Prize in Hebrew and General Literary Research in 2004, says the encyclopedia was written from a critical academic perspective. By not forcing Judaism into a corner and by accepting that there is no one specific secular Jewish identity, the authors produced a creative, diverse and unbiased publication, he says.

In Brinker’s section on modern Jewish thought, the reader will find entries on Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook, Israel’s first Ashkenazi chief rabbi, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsh, one of the Jewish community’s earliest adversaries of Reform Judaism, and Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, considered one of the leaders of Modern Orthodox Judaism.

“The encyclopedia is very objective and it is very deep – it delves deep into every subject and is enlightening thorough the different angles of each subject,” Brinker says.

The fifth volume contains a content and name index,





MENACHEM BRINKER: Already youth have ‘more knowledge, fewer stereotypes and a deeper and more thoughtful understanding of what Judaism as culture means.’ (Courtesy)

more details on the editors and the authors and the complete sources for all of the publication’s photographs. Altogether, almost 800 photographs from Israel and the Diaspora displaying Judaism as culture and the secularization of the religion adorn *New Jewish Time*, many of them being published for the very first time.

Now, seeing the success the encyclopedia has had in schools across Israel, the Posen Foundation is preparing to publish an abridged English version of the encyclopedia on the Internet.

Brinker was charged with choosing the best selections of the Hebrew encyclopedia and compiling it into an English version, and he says this new publication will be more succinct and have a far greater effect, without the extraneous material bogging it down.

“We didn’t always fulfill the ideals of the [Hebrew] project,” Brinker says. “There is a lot of information that you can find in other sources, a lot of information that is basic, that could have cut our work in half and sped up the process of finishing the encyclopedia – simple information, such as how many Jews live in certain cities and how many synagogues there are.

“The ideal was for the encyclopedia to contain information that couldn’t be found in other sources,” he says. “In a

sense, this new English online version will do just that – it’s the crème de la crème – the most original information that we put into the encyclopedia.”

The first volume will be titled “Jewish Modernity – The Present,” and the second part will be called “Jewish Modernity – Looks at the Jewish Past.” The English work will include approximately 25 percent of the original Hebrew encyclopedia. Jewish Modernity – The Present will be divided up into major themes and concepts of Jewish modern thought, modernization and secularization of Jewish everyday life, modernization and secularization of relationship between Jews and non-Jews and the response and reaction of religion and Orthodoxy to modernization.

The encyclopedia’s second volume will look at the following: Jewish history, myth and memory; the new evaluation of the Bible and the biblical period; modern schools of Jewish historiography; and centers of Jewish modernization, such as Baghdad, Thessaloniki, Berlin, Warsaw, Vienna, Vilna, New York, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

Brinker says Posen Foundation President and co-founder Felix Posen not only allowed for the original encyclopedia to be completed, but was a full partner who passionately approached the project and anticipated its completion.

“Posen has a utopian idea that if we can distribute this information and make it relevant than it will stop the assimilation trend,” Brinker says. The professor isn’t sure that it’s going to work, but he only sees the positive from Posen’s labor.

“If someone is willing to invest his time and his effort and his strength in order to achieve a utopian goal, it can only be for the good. It may not achieve the maximum but it will certainly accomplish lofty goals. And it’s already achieved that youth have more knowledge, fewer stereotypes and a deeper and more thoughtful understanding of what Judaism as culture means.” ❖