

Presenter: David Berger, Yeshiva University

Title: **“Historians and the Blood Libel”**

Panel: Judaism, Jewish Studies and Anti-Semitism

During the course of the nineteenth century, many Jews in Western and to some degree Central Europe believed that in the Age of Reason inaugurated by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, manifestations of Jew-hatred and even the sentiment itself would experience an inexorable decline. This expectation surely applied to the quintessentially irrational blood libel, which appeared to be on the cusp of disappearance.

In the latter part of the century, the revival of the libel in both Eastern and Central Europe along with more plausible accusations against rabbinic Judaism triggered the need for responses. Some of these were popular in nature; Ahad ha-Am’s famous essay Hatzí Nehamah is a case in point. Others, however, were scholarly or quasi-scholarly. In addition to published responses, Ben Tzion Katz and other scholars, Jewish and non-Jewish, served as consultants to the Beilis defense.

Scholarly attention to the libel has experienced a renaissance of sorts in the last several decades. Although the accusation itself has had a mini-revival in some Arab countries, the scholarly development appears largely unrelated. Gavin Langmuir proposed a creative re-definition of anti-Semitism in which the blood libel took center stage. Israel Yuval published a spectacularly controversial article placing the accusation in the context of Jewish hostility toward Christians, a theme that was taken up in Elliot Horwitz’s *Reckless Rites*. Two books--by Hannah Johnson and E. M. Rose—have re-examined the subject in very different ways. And Ariel Toaff wrote a work that was justly excoriated for going so far as to suggest some element of validity in the accusation itself.

These controversies highlight the need for balance between abandoning “apologetics” and mobilizing genuine scholarship to combat falsehood. A powerful case can be made that it is precisely the approach of engaged scholarship that does not hide uncomfortable facts but vigorously contests their misuse that can contribute to the battle against anti-Semitism.