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# Nordisk judaistik / Scandinavian Jewish Studies

Forty years of academic dialogue

RUTH ILLMAN

**ABSTRACT** • This review article describes and analyses the development of the journal *Nordisk judaistik / Scandinavian Jewish Studies* (NJ) since its founding in 1975. It discusses the editorial policies and practices of the journal as these have taken shape over the decades, focusing on the thematic and disciplinary points of emphasis that have been central to NJ. The article also discusses the challenges related to digitising the journal and rejuvenating it as an open-access peer-review journal, posing the question of how NJ can meet the requirements of transparency, critical analysis and technical excellence set by the current scholarly community and the international financing bodies within the field of Jewish studies.\*

## Nourishing the Nordic networks in Jewish Studies

*Nordisk judaistik / Scandinavian Jewish Studies* was established in 1975. It was for several decades the leading academic journal in its field, well regarded not only within the Nordic countries but also in the international research community. The journal published 26 volumes between 1975 and 2008. As a result of the discontinuation of funding and staff, the journal slumbered for a number of years, but in 2016 it was again revived, this time as an open-access e-journal. While the journal now publishes its issues online the aim is to digitise all previous volumes and post them on this site before the end of the year 2018.

Together with senior lecturer Karin Hedner Zetterholm (Lund University), I have had the privilege to act as the editor of this journal

since its re-establishment in 2016, and we have worked together eagerly to rejuvenate the journal to once again become the hub of the various Nordic Jewish studies networks that exist today and a well-regarded dialogue partner in the international scholarly community too. This article presents the scholarly visions and goals that formed the editorial work of the journal in previous decades. It also describes the challenges faced today by the editorial team, the authors and the readers of *NJ* as part of the contemporary, instant and incalculable scholarly landscape of digital publication.

As the director of the Donner Institute for Research in Religion and Culture in Åbo (Turku), Finland, I have been heavily involved in arranging international symposia and seminars pertaining to various aspects of the study of religion; one of the main objectives of the institute is also to promote scholarly publications in the field. Since the 1960s, the Donner Institute has edited the series *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis*, which was turned into an open-access e-publication in 2014. In 2011, the scholarly e-journal *Approaching Religion* was

\* The article is based on a presentation given at the conference 'The Jewish Tradition – Does it Matter?', arranged at the University of Oslo, 4–5 March 2018.



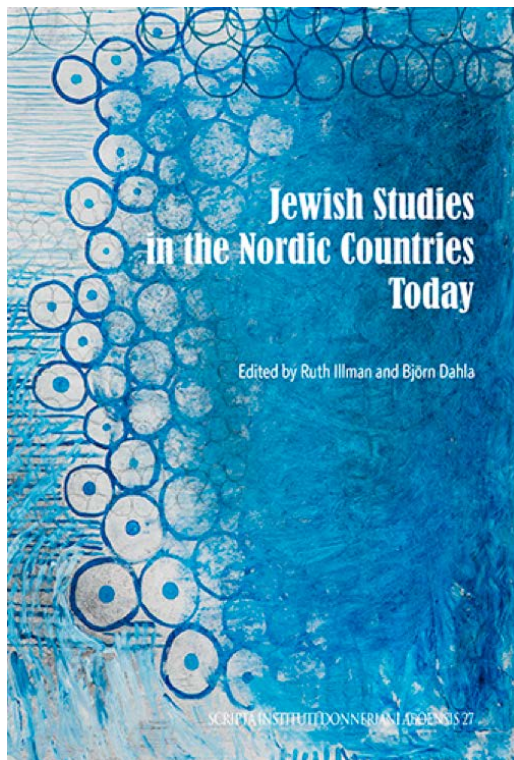
Participants in the seminar 'Jewish Studies in the Nordic Countries Today' at the Donner Institute in March, 2015 (to the right, editors Karin Hedner Zetterholm and Ruth Illman). Photo: Björn Dahla.

established to aid research groups in the field to publish their work in a high-quality, accessible and approachable scholarly manner. This was my gateway into my current engagement with *Nordisk judaistik / Scandinavian Jewish Studies*.

Some years ago, we were contacted by several Nordic colleagues working in the field of Jewish studies, independently of each other, who expressed their worries about the current situation: it seemed to them that the Nordic networks in the field were deteriorating. Indeed, Jewish studies has formed a central part of the academic work within faculties of theology and the humanities in the Nordic countries for many generations. Research relating to Judaism has been conducted from a broad spectrum of theoretical perspectives, ranging from historical and exegetic approaches to cultural and linguistic studies as well as ethnographic investigations spanning diverse cultural and geographic areas, time periods and communities. Thus the field is thoroughly interdisciplinary, combining methodologies from the humanities, theology and the social sciences and often involves researchers who reside in quite different departments and

faculties at our Nordic universities. The contacts between Nordic scholars in the field have always been an important source of academic exchange, debate and learning, but it seemed to many that the new generation of scholars did not know each other and thus could not engage in this exchange, primarily because the most important platform for a specifically Nordic scholarly dialogue, this journal, had been resting since 2008 as a result of discontinued academic positions and funding.

At the Donner Institute, we felt that nourishing these networks was vital both for individual researchers in the field of Jewish studies and for the professionalisation of the academic discipline as such at our Nordic universities. Thus, as a first step, we decided to organise a roundtable seminar, inviting some twenty scholars working with Jewish studies in the Nordic countries to present their ongoing research to each other, to get to know each other and together ponder how the Nordic networks could be rebuilt for the future. In March 2015, we gathered for a three-day workshop in Åbo; as the first outcome of the renewed co-operation, we



*Jewish Studies in the Nordic Countries Today*, published in April, 2016.

published a volume of the Scripta series based on the presentations at the workshop, offering a substantial overview of what is going on (Illman and Dahla 2016).<sup>1</sup>

At this scholarly meeting, the slumbering journal *NJ* was repeatedly brought up in the discussions and the vital role it had played as a source of information as well as a platform for dialogue, critical conversations and advancing of the research field in general among scholars of Jewish studies in this part of the world. Rejuvenating the journal was set up as the most important goal for the future, and it was agreed that it should be turned into an open-access e-journal, following the gold open access

1 *Jewish Studies in the Nordic Countries Today*, eds. Ruth Illman and Björn Dahla, Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis, 27 (Åbo, Donner Institute, 2016), <<https://journal.fi/scripta/issue/view/4663>>.

model, that is, providing free access to all its content without cost or restriction.

At the Donner Institute, we had recently both established a peer-reviewed open-access journal (*Approaching Religion*) and had recently finalised the digitisation of our Scripta series, published in almost thirty volumes since 1965, and hence we were entrusted with the task of re-establishing the journal *NJ*. I stepped in as editor and was joined by Dr Karin Hedner Zetterholm, whose expertise represents a different part of the Jewish studies landscape and a different Nordic country, so our competences and networks complemented each other.

This is not the place to dwell on the tiresome and cumbersome details pertaining to our trials and errors in re-establishing the journal, and all the IT-support needed and cups of coffee consumed in order to get it going. Rather, I want to reflect on a few central issues relating to the scholarly relevance and quality of the journal, its appreciation within the scholarly community and also, importantly, among the funders. Finally, I wish to give some thought to the prospects for the future of *NJ* as well.

### **Nordisk judaistik: what is it all about?**

The first issue of *NJ* was published in December 1975. The Scandinavian Society for Jewish Studies had been founded two years before, and in May 1975, the society arranged its first Nordic conference in Stockholm, at which an editorial committee was appointed. Svante Hansson, active in Stockholm, stepped in as the first editorial secretary, soon renamed editor, and the editorial board consisted of the following scholars:

- Librarian Boris Beltzikoff (Nacka, Sweden)
- BA Jacques Blum (Copenhagen, Denmark)
- Dr Laszlo Hamori (Stockholm, Sweden)
- Director Göte Hedenquist (Uppsala, Sweden)
- Adjunct Professor Karl-Johan Illman (Åbo, Finland)

CEO David Köpniwsky (Stockholm,  
Sweden)

Professor Bertil Mahler (Stockholm, Sweden)

Lecturer Oskar Mendelsohn (Oslo, Norway)

Professor Helmer Ringgren (Uppsala,  
Sweden)

Professor Magne Sæbø (Oslo, Norway)

Adjunct Professor Bernhard Tarschys  
(Stockholm, Sweden)

The journal was inspired by two predecessors: *Tidskrift för jødisk historie och litteratur*, published in Copenhagen in the years 1919–25 and *Judisk tidskrift*, Stockholm, published 1928–67. The opening letter from the editorial committee states their aims and visions in the following manner (*NJ* 1975, vol. 1(1)): ‘Jewish studies is understood to be knowledge and research relating to the Jewish people, its history, religion, culture, and social conditions.’ The committee noted that the journal would publish articles by Scandinavian and Finnish authors, or by non-Scandinavians, who wrote on Nordic topics, normally in Scandinavian languages with an English summary. Furthermore, it is stated: ‘The editors do not take any particular stand as regards issues of religion, politics, and culture. Any manuscript will be judged for its scholarly merits only.’ Finally, and quite dramatically, it is stated: ‘This is a trial issue.’ Thus, the editorial board underlines, the continuation of the journal was dependent on subscriptions and grants from cultural foundations.

It is indeed striking how well this short declaration set the tone for the journal in an enduring way. Today, more than forty years later, the principles of the journal are roughly the same. The editorial statement posted on the journal website today is basically defining a similar programme: *NJ* should ‘promote Jewish studies in Scandinavia by publishing scholarly articles, surveys and documents, by reviewing recent literature, and compiling bibliographies’. As for

the subjects treated in the journal today, a more elaborate description is given: ‘The journal is multidisciplinary and welcomes articles from a vast range of research fields within which Jewish themes are analysed, e.g. history, religious studies, linguistics, theology, anthropology, social sciences and the arts. ... The journal publishes open issues and thematic issues in co-operation with guest editors from all over the world, representing a broad span of academic disciplines and traditions relating to Jewish Studies.’ The use of different languages in the journal is more specifically expressed in the current editorial statement: ‘The contributions are published in one of the Scandinavian languages, or in English, German or French, with an abstract in English.’ As for editorial policies, however, the same caution is aired: ‘The journal is strictly academic and does not pursue any special religious, political or cultural policy.’

What, then, are the largest differences and lines of development when considering the editorial policies and publishing profile of *NJ* over the past four decades? The themes treated in the early years of the journal can be summarised as follows: articles pertaining to the history of Jews in the Nordic countries are found in every issue of the first five volumes. So too are articles focusing on Bible research: most often the Hebrew Bible, but also New Testament exegesis. Another notable strand is the research on the Holocaust – witnesses and testimonies as well as personal destinies but also literature and the arts are analysed. Volume 8(2) (1987) is a good example, where almost all these strands are represented, as well as the emblematic vivid review section where new titles were brought to the attention of the scientific community.

Thematic issues were introduced already at an early stage. Volume 4 (1982) offers a pertinent example. It focuses on the Holocaust and is based on a conference on the same theme arranged in Copenhagen the year before. A genre that has not survived the evolution of time

is conference reports and reiterations of debates carried out in media or at learned institutions. This is quite understandable: such scholarly conversations and quarrels are reported in real time nowadays, in online forums, on e-mail lists and in social media. In some of the early issues, however, one can find some quite heated debates that could stretch over several issues (which in the 1970s and 1980s could mean several years). Imagine keeping the conversation alive and interesting over such long timespans!

What can be said in relation to themes treated in *NJ* today? Overall, they are roughly similar, although the number of all other forms of contributions save peer-reviewed articles has diminished drastically. Perhaps this, too, is a sign of the times? There is no time among the members of our scholarly communities to engage in academic writing that does not reward you strongly in the on-going academic race, and therefore, scholars are more strategic in choosing where and what to publish. A peer-reviewed article in an international open-access journal where you stand as first author will not only credit you personally as a prominent scholar; often it will also bring substantial amounts of government funding to your university, which is both encouraged and demanded.

Since the re-establishment as an e-journal two years ago, *NJ* has published five issues, out of which one is a thematic issue on the theme 'Ethics and Aesthetics of Holocaust Memory' – a theme that merited a special issue also in the early 1980s, as mentioned above. Language-wise, it is clear that *NJ* is tilting towards an increasing number of articles in English, but thematically there is still a strong focus on historical themes, biblical research and literature. A growing trend seems to be articles engaging in contemporary, ethnographic analyses and questions of dialogue and interreligious relations, mirroring, I believe, the growing diversity and multi-disciplinarity both within academia and in our Nordic societies at large.

From the onset, *NJ* has been a truly Nordic journal: the first editor Svante Hansson edited volumes 1 to 5 from Stockholm, then the editorial office moved to Åbo in 1985, where the editorial responsibilities were taken over by Nils Martola. In 1993, the journal moved to Aarhus, where Peter Stensgaard Paludan stepped in as editor, and finally, in 1998, the editorial office once again moved to Sweden, to Lund University, where Hanne Trautner-Kromann assumed the editorial responsibilities. Today, *NJ* exists primarily on the internet, and physically, the editorial office materialises over the Skype-lines between Lund and Åbo.

Also the collective of authors has been marked by diversity from the beginning, both in terms of nationality and academic residence. The 'Nordic' seems to have been interpreted rather loosely from the start: having participated in a Nordic conference qualified you for inclusion in that category. This criterion is applicable to this day, and in a positive way, it seems that inclusive view of what constitutes 'Scandinavian Jewish studies' has countervailed the creation and maintenance of artificial boundaries in this diverse and dynamic, utterly transnational



Volumes of *NJ* between covers in the Donner Institute library. Photo: Ruth Illman.

research field. Among previous authors, we find mostly representatives of the academic communities in the Nordic countries but also members of the Jewish communities; in particular a number of Nordic rabbis figure prominently in the tables of content, along with librarians, teachers and some persons active within cultural and political scenes in the Nordic countries.

A visible trend in the editorial aspirations of the journal is the growing attention directed at questions of increasing the professional handling of the entire publication process as well as the standards and requirements set by the international scientific community. This includes for example transparency of the editorial process, which has led to the far-reaching formalisation of the procedures for reviewing manuscripts we have today: a step-by-step process carried out electronically via our digital publishing system. Today, the articles are selected on the basis of a double-blind peer-review process where two independent experts in the field review each article; both the reviewer and author identities are concealed from each other.

Transparency is required also in the form of greater personal responsibility for editors and editorial board, which is today appointed for a three-year period, not for an unforeseeable future. Needless to say an all-male panel, as in the early days of the journal, would be inconceivable today. Despite the growing internationalisation of the corpus of authors over the years, paradoxically the use of language has become more and more streamlined: more English, less and less Scandinavian languages (and even less German, French or Italian). This trend mirrors the development of academic publishing all over the world and in all fields of research, I believe.

### **The continuous concern: financing**

Funding the journal continues to pose a problem. Throughout the journal's history this aspect of the publication work seems to have presented the editors with a struggle, and thus

*NJ* has often been published at irregular intervals, especially during the early years, when the journal at times appeared only once every other year. The publication pace today is much swifter. On the one hand, this evidences the enormous advances of digital technology over the four decades that *NJ* has existed and how much easier all phases of the editorial work is today thanks to digital communication. On the other hand, this also reflects the changing publication climate within academia: for good or ill, the pace is much swifter today and scholars need to produce text quickly to be relevant competitors in the academic race. This has benefits, but also downsides – a debate we will have to leave aside for the moment, however.

Lack of funding, along with the discontinuation of the professorial chair in Jewish studies at Lund University, were the most important reasons why *NJ* was put on hold in 2008. When preparations were made to re-launch the journal in 2015, the 'money business' was therefore one of the most important issues to solve. The society that once had been formed to support the journal did not exist any more, and creating a subscription-based paper journal seemed passé.

We, the editors, worked hard and with determination to secure a publication grant from the Nordic Board for Periodicals in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NOP-HS). This Nordic board presents many demands concerning the quality of the journals to be funded, among them strong encouragement to publish on open access. Hence, this was an important impetus for us as we decided to go online and to develop an open-access publication. Transparency, open science, scientific rigour, continuity, excellence – those were the leitmotifs of NOP-HS, and thus the editorial endeavours have focused on these aspects of *NJ* over the past two years. We were delighted to note that our efforts seem to have been successful in this respect: first, *NJ* received a one-year grant for 2016, then another one for 2017 and currently, we have secured a three-year

grant for the period 2018–20 which gives financial security for long-term planning.

Thus, funding was an important reason why the current editorial board chose to re-establish *NJ* as an open-access online journal in 2016. But not only that; the editors of *NJ* firmly believe in the free distribution of knowledge to the academic community worldwide, in providing equal opportunities to take part in the research dialogue for all scholars, no matter whether their universities are wealthy enough to purchase the ever more expensive licenses for journals published by the major publishing houses. Therefore, we opted for gold-standard open-access publishing: no restrictions, no publishing fees, no need for subscriptions or even registration to access all the material.

*NJ* was constructed in the Open Journal System publication platform, OJS, which is the most widely used platform for scholarly open-access publishing worldwide. First, it was published under the auspices of Åbo Akademi University, but in the autumn of 2017, *NJ* moved to the platform Journal.fi maintained by the Federation of Finnish Learned Societies. This is the most professionally monitored and managed publication platform in all the Nordic countries, which has greatly improved not just the interface of the journal but also the technical qualities of all aspects of the publication process. During the spring of 2018, we completed the digitisation of previous volumes: all articles for which the authors have given their approval for digital republication will be posted as searchable PDF-files online so that the entire journal is available in the digital platform no later than by the end of 2018.

An important caveat for any e-journal is, however, that it is not enough to merely *exist* on the internet. Our presence must be professional in every sense, and we need to solve the question:



how will potential readers find us in the flood of information? Our answer to this dilemma has been to focus on indexing the journal in relevant scholarly indexes and databases. The benefits are many: it provides us with an additional channel to readers with robust metadata to aid discovery of our content. It is also a mark of quality for a journal to be included in these indexes, and thus an advantage in the competition for qualitative manuscripts. Currently, *NJ* is indexed, for example, in EBSCO, ERIH+, JuFo, DBH, BFI and Relbib. The journal is currently under evaluation for inclusion in AHCI (which is part of the Web of Science) and in early 2018, an important agreement was signed with ATLA (American Theological Library Association) for inclusion in their Full-text Religion Database. During 2018, *NJ* will also merit inclusion in DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals).

### Looking to the future

Over the last few years, the multidisciplinary field of Jewish studies has been rejuvenated in the Nordic countries and the re-establishment of *NJ* as a platform for networking and co-operation between the new generation of scholars that was urgently needed is, we hope, at least burgeoning. The strong academic reputation of the journal and its thorough Nordic profile, established over its forty-year history, guaranteed that the re-establishment was well received among scholars in the field, and our journal has received widespread acknowledgement in





Ruth Illman lecturing at the seminar 'The Jewish Tradition - Does it Matter?' at Oslo University in March, 2018.

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the Nordic countries, Europe and the USA. At the moment, we are striving to confirm *NJ* as the cutting-edge open-access journal within its field over the coming three-year period and to strengthen its impact.

The question of forming a Nordic society yet again has been raised, and at the moment, members of the editorial board are mapping the interest and possibilities of launching a Nordic sub-section under the European Association for Jewish Studies. This would indisputably offer strong support and a network for the continuation of the journal as well. Above all, however, this journal is dependent on you, the scholarly community. Therefore, we encourage you to flood us with high-quality, exploratory and innovative manuscripts that can be submitted for peer-review and eventually published in the journal. In the long run, this is the only key to success! ■