

Interpreting Jewish History in Light of Zionism

BY JACOB J. STAUB

How seriously should the Zionist reading of Jewish history affect the way that we interpret the meaning of the Jewish past and hence the significance of contemporary events? It turns out that the growing distance between the perspectives of Israeli and non-Israeli Jews both emerge out of and are affected by the way we understand the history of the Jewish people.

History and Memory

Jewish identity and meaning centers on our collective memory. Our festival calendar moves us from Egyptian slavery (Pesach) to the revelation of the Torah (Shavuot) to the wandering in the wilderness (Sukkot)—punctuated by the Babylonian/Persian exile (Purim), the Maccabean Revolt (Chanukah), and the destruction of the Second Temple (Tisha B'Av). The daily liturgy reinforces the liberation with references to the Exodus. Even the Kiddush on Shabbat represents

itself as a remembrance of the Exodus (*zeker litzit'at Mitzrayim*).

These are more than casual references. As we say explicitly at the Pesach Seder, we are obliged to view ourselves as if we ourselves were slaves and participated in the wondrous liberation. We are supposed to reenact our sacred history by way of experiencing its power in our own present lives.

Fifteen years ago, Professor Y.H. Yerushalmi made a point of distinguishing between the experiential power of the reenacted memory of pre-modern Jews and the distancing study of history in which modern Jews engage.¹

His point was direct and compelling: Jews today mistake the commandment to remember as a directive to study our own history. But before the modern era, Jews did not engage in historical study. The historian's objective is to describe his or her subject in historical context, so that

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the subject is understood as a product of a particular period, not our own. The student of history is thus distanced from the past.

Traditional Jewish memory, by contrast, related to the sacred past in a-historical terms. Jews lived timelessly, suspended between the destruction of the Second Temple and the expected messianic redemption, and they interpreted contemporary events as either the fulfillments of prophecy or signs of the coming endtime. Contemporary events in themselves had no meaning for them; their significance was understood with reference to the sacred past or the awaited future.

Yerushalmi's troubling point was that with the advent of history in our era, and with the wholehearted embrace of history by today's Jews, our study of the Jewish past alienates us from the very heritage we are trying to embrace. The more we learn about the historical contexts underlying biblical or rabbinic texts, the less likely we are to experience their sacred, transformative power.

The Mythic Power of History

It is true that our historical consciousness can serve as an obstacle to our experience of the sacred power of traditional texts and rituals (although there is much more to be said about the ways in which that power remains). But contemporary historians now possess a new power to shape our sense of reality by the way in which they organize and explain the past—not entirely unlike the way in which sacred myths functioned in the past.

History is inevitably interpretation. Historians do not present us with uninterpreted factual data. They select data that they uncover in their research, choosing what they consider significant based on the assumptions that they bring to their work, and shaping the data into coherent narratives that reflect those assumptions.²

When I study medieval Jewish history with rabbinical students, our first challenge after reading the work of an historian is to extract his or her assumptions and determine how they affect the conclusions that are presented. Does he assume that all rabbinic leaders lived pious lives that reflected the most noble of rabbinic teachings? Then he is liable to justify the actions of those leaders. Does she assume that all Jews who were forcibly converted to Christianity maintained heroically their loyalty to Judaism? Then she is likely to believe the Inquisition's accusations about Judaizing conversos. And those who read and accept their historical accounts inevitably have their views of reality shaped by these unspoken assumptions.

The Zionist Reading of Jewish History

Nowhere do we face this challenge more acutely than in the overwhelming influence that Zionist theory has had upon the interpretation of Jewish history.

Beginning with its earliest proponents (Pinsker³ and Herzl⁴), Zionists have argued for the necessity of the establishment of a Jewish state on the grounds that Jewish powerlessness

after the destruction of the Second Temple left us vulnerable to the cruel, anti-Semitic whims of non-Jewish rulers. Not only is a Jewish state, in which we can determine our own fate, needed to protect us from persecution. It is needed to effect a renewal and healing of the Jewish soul, which has been impoverished and disfigured by 2000 years of powerlessness in the Diaspora. There thus emerged the Labor Zionism that celebrated the return to manual labor on our own soil.

As the result of this viewpoint, in the first decades of the state, secular Israeli Jews virtually eliminated from the curriculum the study of post-destruction Diaspora Jewish history and culture. Their models and heroes were biblical prophets and kings and heroic *halutzim* (Zionist pioneers), not talmudic sages, and certainly not the generations of medieval Jews—powerless, persecuted, and unenlightened—whose traumas Zionism sought to transcend in its pursuit of the normalization of the Jewish people.

The Kaplanian Reading

If Zionists are those who make aliyah, then North American Jews aren't Zionists. But if we define a Zionist as someone who affirms the centrality of the State of Israel, then Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (one of the earliest North American advocates of Zionism) and his followers qualify.

Kaplan affirmed the legitimacy of Jewish communities outside of Israel, but in the classic Reconstructionist diagram, Israel is at the center, and we

are on the circumference. Following Aḥad Ha'Am, Kaplan believed that the flowering of Jewish civilization in Eretz Yisrael would serve as a radiating source for Jewish communities elsewhere, where Jewish civilization is necessarily secondary to the primary culture in which we live.

The Lachrymose View of Jewish History

How does this scheme affect our perception of ourselves? This question comes up weekly in a seminar on medieval Jewish history. Affected subliminally by Zionist theory, we are subject to a constant inclination to assume that medieval Jews endured lives of misery, humiliated by anti-Jewish legislation, ever fearful of the next attack or expulsion, buffeted from trauma to trauma as they proceeded inevitably to the Spanish Inquisition and the Nazi Holocaust.

The great historian of Judaism, Professor Salo Wittmayer Baron, sought to correct this attitude, which he labeled “the lachrymose view of Jewish history.” Most medieval Jews in most places in most years were not the targets of pogroms. Most lived lives that, protected by charters and privileges, were far more secure and prosperous than the overwhelming percentage of non-Jews around them. And contrary to our expectations, even those communities that were savaged by attack often demonstrated a resiliency that led them to flower demographically and culturally immediately afterwards. Jews awaited the messianic redemption that would finally free them from uncertainty, but

they rarely aspired to self-governing power in the pre-messianic world.⁵

Jewish Accommodation in the Diaspora

More to the point, applying the Zionist assumption to the study of pre-modern Jews inevitably skews our understanding of their experience. They were not outraged by regulations that treated them differently from non-Jews because they had no aspiration to equality or integration into the larger society. In fact, they welcomed (at least their rabbinic leaders welcomed) restrictive legislation because they *wanted* to be separate; the integrity of Jewish communal culture depended on separation.⁶

Even the most rationalistic among them awaited God's imminent redemption, but while they waited, they flourished: writing legal commentaries and healing amulets; composing liturgical poetry and songs about love, wine, and natural beauty; decorating synagogue walls and arches and researching physics and astronomy; traveling the world as international traders and tending vineyards; communing mystically with the Holy One and making medical advances; creating exquisite handicraft and investigating philosophical questions. Their leaders became the trusted advisors of rulers, and ordinary Jews befriended non-Jewish neighbors.⁷ They carried with pride the disabilities that came with Jewish status, and they flourished.

Should we dismiss 1700 years of Jewish experience as a futile attempt

to fend off the inevitable auto-da-fé or gas chamber? Of course not. Most of what we value most about our heritage was generated by Jews who did not live in Israel—certainly not when Jews were self-governing there. Only fifty years after the Holocaust, however, it is extraordinarily difficult not to chart every anti-Semitic persecution as a point on the road to genocide. Israelis can do so more easily, given the Zionist reading of Jewish history. But those of us who have chosen not to live in Israel, and who are devoted to a vital, evolving Jewish community, cannot afford to buy into that myth. It is a myth that foretells our own destruction.⁸ It is the Zionist myth of *shelilat hagolah* (the negation of the Diaspora).

Future Uncertainty

North American Jewish communities have no assurance that our current safe and even privileged status will continue indefinitely. Jews have flourished for centuries in other lands, only to have things turn sour and brutal. But difficult as it is to utter, neither is the success of the Zionist experiment guaranteed forever. Only those who believe that the supernatural hand of God guides the course of history have the luxury of knowing that everything will turn out well in the end.

Which is not to say that we should ignore the consequences of our people's powerlessness through the centuries. Much of our heritage was created by people who were traumatized by their vulnerability to attack and who lived in the narrow alleys of Jewish quarters that were overshadowed by

towering mosques and cathedrals. We should not be surprised or ashamed when we encounter violent attitudes towards non-Jews, or triumphalistic affirmations of Jewish chosenness that debase other religions, or halakhic double standards for how one treats a Jew and a non-Jew. They emerged out of a very specific historical context, different than our own.

It was extraordinarily fortuitous that the Zionist movement emerged in time to create the State of Israel to serve as a refuge for Jews when so many Jewish communities came under attack and survival strategies that had succeeded for centuries failed. For all of its manifest problems, Israeli Jewish society retains its promise for a renewal of the Jewish spirit.

Israel is not, however, in the words of the Israeli prayer, *reshit tzemihat ge'ulatenu* (the beginning of flowering of our redemption). Even as we give it our love, loyalty, and support, we should recognize it as a flawed, vulnerable, human enterprise, as have been all the other Jewish communities throughout our long and varied history. Time will tell whether Jewish power succeeds—strategically and morally—more than powerlessness.

The Power of Historical Myth

The way in which North American Jews narrate the story of the Jewish collective past has consequences. If we assume the Zionist perspective that the essential, unifying feature of all Diaspora experience is that, sooner or later, Jews come under attack, we may find ourselves reacting inappropriately and self-destructively to our own cir-

cumstances—by failing to invest adequately in our own future, for example, or by overreacting to isolated incidents of perceived anti-Semitism. If Jews in ninth-century Muslim Spain had lived out that myth, we might not now count in our heritage the poetry of Ibn Gabirol or the philosophy of Maimonides—people who lived centuries later. If twelfth-century Jews in the Rhineland had assumed that perspective after the massacres of the First Crusade (and they certainly would have been justified), the rich tosfastic study of the Talmud might never have developed.

Similarly, we would do well to be cautious about viewing all of our past as leading inevitably to the Holocaust. In the first decades after the liberation of the death camps, that perspective helped us to cope. Focusing on heroic conversos and martyrs affirmed the Jewish ability to defy all attempts to wipe us out. But North American Jews clearly need another *raison d'être* than anti-Semitism. We need as many models as possible of Jewish life through the centuries in which Jews flourished and celebrated their lives. Those models exist.

We need not and should not use the Zionist vision as the measure with which we judge the rest of Jewish experience—past, present, and future. The messianic promise of the Zionist dream is no closer to realization today than it was fifty years ago. Until it is realized, we would do well to narrate the Jewish experience as a chain of diverse communal experiments, adapted to wildly varying circumstances, in which the Jewish people

found expression and meaning for as long as we could do so.

1. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982).

2. For an excellent treatment of this topic, see Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). For a review of the issues as they apply to Jewish historians, see Michel Nutkiewicz, "Jewish Historians and the Historical Sublime," *Reconstructionist* 50/6 (1985): 26-30, 34.

3. Leo Pinsker, *Auto-Emancipation*, 1881.

4. Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State*, 1896.

5. One notable exception was the fascination of Hasdai Ibn Shaprut (tenth century Cordoba) with the Jewish Kingdom of Khazaria. See his letter to the king of the Khazars in *Masterpieces of Hebrew Literature*, ed. Curt

Leviant (New York: KTAV, 1969), 159-169; or in *Eyewitnesses to Jewish History*, ed. Ariel Eisenberg et. al. (New York: UAHC, 1973), 68-74.

6. See Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980).

7. For startling evidence of everyday relationships between Jews and non-Jews, see Leila Gal Berner, *A Mediterranean Jewish Community: Barcelona's Jews in the Thirteenth Century* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1998).

8. See Y.H. Yerushalmi's poignant response to Rosemary Radford Reuther's breast-beating confession that Christianity is inherently and irredeemably anti-Semitic. The Jewish historian seeks to affirm the ways that the Church, pre-Holocaust, protected Jews. To accept Reuther's thesis is to face a bleak future. *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?* ed. Eva Fleischner (New York: KTAV, 1977), 79-92, 97-107.