



The Ziegler School
of Rabbinic Studies

Walking with History

Edited By
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and Rabbi Patricia Fenton

דרכיה דרכי נעם

In Memory of Harold Held and Louise Held,
of blessed memory

The Held Foundation

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Published in partnership with the
United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism,
the Rabbinical Assembly,
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and the Women's League for Conservative Judaism.



UNIT 10: CONCLUSION

RABBI PATRICIA FENTON

The metaphor “walking with” is well-suited to the theme of history, since history is all about our journey from the past to the future. On this journey we may know what has gone before us but we never know with certainty what lies on the road ahead. History is simultaneously about our link to the past and our difference from the past. It is about continuity and change. What happened in the past is neither irrelevant nor the whole story. If we don’t know where we come from, we don’t understand the present and how it came about. And while the present rises out of the past, it is never a copy of the past. As the Reconstructionist aphorism says: “the past has a vote but not a veto” on the present.

Studying any subject in a historical way means that we believe that chronology is important. But, as Rabbi Artson pointed out in his Introduction, putting events in order is only one of many ways to learn about our history and to frame our thinking about how it affects us today. As he says: “History must be rewritten by each new generation, from every human perspective. Each telling integrates objective information and subjective evaluations and it is impossible to escape this very human process. *Dor dor ve-dorshav*, each generation has its interpreters. Every vibrant community has the privilege and obligation to retell the Jewish story from its own perspective”. As the study of history in general and of Jewish history in particular, has expanded to include social history, the story becomes more “raucous”, more complex and more real.

No religious movement in Judaism has been as historically oriented as the Conservative Movement. As we saw, its founders conceived of the movement as “positive historical Judaism”. This implies both sides of the historical polarity: change is not only possible but inevitable and desirable, and we don’t want to change so much that we break our ties with the past.

Our “Walking with” survey of Jewish history brings just a taste of the vast and complex story of the Jews. We have included interpreters of different generations and interests, and their essays provide a rich introduction to our topic. Some of you will have noticed that the Holocaust is not explicitly addressed in these essays. This provides a good opportunity to think about what that means to you as an individual and to us as a people. It may be that the Holocaust is really missing from these accounts, and then we should consider what that might mean for the Jewish present and the Jewish future. It may be that, consciously or unconsciously, the Holocaust is always in the background of our thoughts as we learn about who and what went before, an inescapable if unspoken of “elephant in the room” of Jewish history.

The journeys of our individual lives parallel the history of our people. We come from biological and cultural roots and we live our lives in contexts. Our ancestry, our upbringing and our childhoods affect us as we move forward in time. Yet even as we change through time, we remain the same “I” throughout our lives. In the journeys of our lives and in the journeys of our people, we sometimes focus on where we come from, sometimes on where we are going and sometimes on the journey itself. As each individual remains the same “I” throughout life, so too do the Jewish people remain the Jewish people through the long, and as Rabbi Artson says, raucous course of our history.

As you continue to walk your life journeys, we hope they are enriched by your appreciation of Jewish history, and that you continue to draw knowledge and inspiration from our “Walking with” series.



UNIT 10: CONCLUSION – TEXT 1

YEHUDA KURTZER, *SHUVA: THE FUTURE OF THE JEWISH PAST*¹

In the homiletic Midrash Tanhuma (Pekudei 3), the rabbis imagine that all Jewish souls, past and present, stood at the receiving of the Torah and the conferral of its obligations at Sinai, and assented aloud to its commitments with the memorable phrase from Exodus that “all that God spoke, we shall do”! It is difficult to overstate how radical this idea truly is, that future converts to the Jewish people do not enter the covenant at the moment they emerge from the *mikvah* but rather that they reclaim a retroactive participation at Sinai: they merely now, for the first time, remember that core experience and assume its attendant obligations. Converts are not outsiders, lower on a hierarchy; ethnicity and background have little value in this system. Once you enter and accept the system, you can flip a switch and assume a suppressed memory.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Kurtzer calls the idea that all Jewish souls stood at Sinai “the most profound expression of the theology of memory, with the deepest ramifications for how memory factors into Jewish peoplehood” (p.31). What does his idea of a “theology of memory” mean to you? In your opinion, how do history and memory differ?
- In Unit 6, Synagogue and Sidur, Rabbi Leider calls the Torah Service “the centerpiece of the Jewish liturgical experience”. How does this assertion fit in with the midrash from Tanhuma in our text?
- Midrash Tanhuma makes a profound statement about converts to Judaism. A popular term today for converts is “Jews by choice”. How do you understand the term “Jew by choice” in light of this midrash? Does the theology of memory expressed by the midrash truly allow for individual free choice?
- Kurtzer states with regard to converts: “Once you enter and accept the system, you can flip a switch and assume a suppressed memory”. What does this mean to you as a Jew today? Do you feel that your soul stood at Sinai? What does Kurtzer’s statement say about history versus memory? For the midrash, what is the relative importance of history and memory?

¹ Yehuda Kurtzer, *Shuva: The Future of the Jewish Past*. Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2012, p.31.



CONCLUSION – TEXT 2

RABBI SCOTT PERLO, JUDAISM IN THE NEW WORLD (UNIT 9)

Today's spiritual communities and independent minyanim can be seen as the contemporary inheritors of the havurah tradition. What this means is that no cease-fire has been called in the battle over the nature of non-Orthodox American Judaism. There is active tension as to whether Jewish holy spaces should focus on communal Jewish identity or political activism and Jewish spirituality. The future will be decided by an aggregation of individual choices, and will not be imposed from without. One thing is clear, however: every community, whether synagogue or otherwise, must converse openly, thoughtfully, and consciously, as to the nature of the choice. The story of American Judaism is that the choice of who we are, and who we are to be, is forever in our hands.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **This is the conclusion of Rabbi Perlo's essay on Judaism in the New World in Unit 9. How do you react to Rabbi Perlo's assertion that "The story of American Judaism is that the choice of who we are, and who we are to be, is forever in our hands"? When you think about Judaism in other countries does your reaction change? If yes, how?**
- **Given what you know about Jewish history, how do you react to Rabbi Perlo's statement that "The future will be decided by an aggregation of individual choices, and will not be imposed from without"?**



CONCLUSION – TEXT 3

DR. STEVEN LOWENSTEIN, THE ENLIGHTENMENT (UNIT 7)

Between the two extremes [Orthodox Judaism and Reform Judaism], Zacharias Frankel (1801-1875) founded what he called “positive historical Judaism”. Frankel believed that change was necessary but feared that too much change would break continuity with the Jewish past. Unlike most Orthodox and Reform leaders of his day who saw Judaism as primarily a religious ideology, Frankel left more of a place for peoplehood. He placed authority with the Jewish people rather than with “the spirit of the times”. Although Frankel did not start a separate movement in Germany, his thought was later continued by the founder of Conservative Judaism in America, Solomon Schechter (1847-1915).

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Dr. Lowenstein says that Zacharias Frankel “believed that change was necessary but feared that too much change would break continuity with the Jewish past”. What do you think Frankel was afraid of?**
- **Where do you think we stand today with regard to “continuity with the Jewish past”? Does it matter? Why? For you, in your community today, what would constitute a break with the Jewish past?**
- **What do you think enables Jews to maintain a connection with our past? Is it our knowledge of history? Our collective memories?**
- **Compare Frankel’s concerns with Rabbi Perlo’s concluding paragraph, in text 2 above. Encourage people of different backgrounds and generations to share their opinions.**



CONCLUSION – TEXT 4

משנה פסחים, י:ה
בכל דור ודור, חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצריים.

MISHNAH PESAKHIM 10:5

In every generation, a person is obligated to see himself as if he went out of Egypt.

A FIRE IS KINDLED WITHIN ME, A LAMENTATION FOR THE 9TH OF AV¹

A fire (of joy) is kindled within me, as I think (of the time)

When I departed from Egypt.

But I will raise (my own) lamentations as I recall (the time)

When I departed from Jerusalem.

Then Moses sang, a song unforgettable,

When I departed from Egypt.

But Jeremiah mourned and wailed with bitter lamentation,

When I departed from Jerusalem...

The Torah, the Testimony and the Order of the Temple Service were taught to me,

When I departed from Egypt.

May (I obtain) gladness and joy, and let sorrow and sighing flee away,

When I return to Jerusalem.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Our first text, found in the Passover Haggadah, is from the Mishnah, which was compiled around the year 200 C.E. The second, an excerpt from a lengthy anonymous lament for the fast day of Tisha B'Av, was known in the Middle Ages. What can these texts teach us about the transmission of Jewish history from generation to generation?**
- **What do these texts teach us about collective memory? Yerushalmi says of the lament that “It is the antiphony of the hammering refrain that first catches our attention. The ‘memory’ of being exiled from Jerusalem is established and heightened by a repeatedly inverted comparison with the exodus from Egypt, the archetypal local of Jewish historical reference”.² Discuss. If you were to add verses to this lament that express your view of Jewish history, especially in the 20th and 21st centuries, what would they be?**
- **Do you think that reciting texts like these helps us to maintain the continuity with the Jewish past that Zacharias Frankel wished for? How so?**
- **How do you feel about the fact that we continue to recite these texts? In what ways do you find their message(s) meaningful?**

¹ *Tisha B'Av Compendium*. Translated and annotated by Rev. Abraham Rosenfeld. New York: The Judaica Press, 1983 (1965), p.144-5.

² Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996, p.43.



CONCLUSION – TEXT 5

ALAN B. LUCAS, HOLY DAYS AND HOLIDAYS¹

By common consensus, Tisha Be'Av is the saddest day of the Jewish year. According to tradition, it was on this very day that the First Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. and that the Second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 C.E. Subsequently, many other tragedies have befallen the Jewish people on this date, including the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492...Some wonder how to relate the events of the Shoah [Holocaust] to the observance of Tisha Be'Av. The rituals of Tisha Be'Av seem, after all, to presuppose that the sins of Israel brought on the destruction of Jerusalem and that the Babylonians or the Romans were merely instruments of divine punishment. Can anyone speak of the Shoah in such terms? Those who find it inconceivable to describe the Holocaust as reflective of God's will to punish Israel make a special effort to avoid any mention of the Shoah in their observance of Tisha Be'Av...Others find a kind of solace in connecting the events of the Shoah to the long pageant of Jewish suffering and martyrdom...

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **We relive our history every year through our liturgical calendar. As Isaac Klein says in his *Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*: “The festivals are the sacred days that express the unique teachings of Judaism, fostering them and transmitting them to the generations to come. Each festival has its distinct philosophy, its own historical referent, and its special observances”.² How does your observance of Jewish festivals compare to your observance of the national festivals of your country? In your opinion, how do the festivals teach and transmit Jewish history?**
- **In your opinion, should events of the Holocaust be commemorated on Tisha Be'Av, in addition to Yom Ha-Shoah?**
- **Now that the State of Israel exists with a rebuilt Jerusalem, how do you feel about continuing to mourn the destruction of Jerusalem on Tisha Be'Av? What is the significance and meaning of this annual mourning in our day?**
- **How you feel about the Egyptians who oppressed our biblical ancestors and the Babylonians and Romans who destroyed the Temples? How do you feel about those who oppressed and murdered Jews in the Holocaust? Try to identify the similarities and differences in your feelings, and how they relate to your understanding of the history of each of these time periods. No doubt, there are a variety of feelings and opinions in your group. Can you see any patterns in responses depending on generation, experience or other factors?**
- **When, if ever, do you think that a generation of Jews will feel about the murderers of the Holocaust in the same ways that Jews today feel about the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians and Romans?**

¹ Alan B. Lucas, “Holy Days and Holidays”, in *The Observant Life: The Wisdom of Conservative Judaism for Contemporary Jews*, edited by Martin Samuel Cohen and Michael Katz. New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 2011, p.231-234.

² Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*. New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1979, p.97.





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