



The Ziegler School
of Rabbinic Studies

Walking with History

Edited By
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דרכיה דרכי נעם

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

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UNIT 1: LIVING JEWISH HISTORY: AN INTRODUCTION

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WHAT IS JEWISH HISTORY?

Jews have been around for a very long time. We have dwelt in countless different locations, organized our communities in distinctive ways. Each Jewish community has included different books in what they considered to be the canon of authoritative texts (think of Karaites, Chabad, and American Conservative Jews - the authors these groups consider authoritative are quite distinct to each community), idealized and utilized very different economic realities. While Jews constitute a numerically small people in contrast to many larger populations, there still have been millions of us across the millennia. And our footprint on human history and thought looms large, far out of proportion to our numbers or power.

If the study of history is the effort to make coherent sense of the human past, then there have to be ways to determine which facts are significant and which are not. On one level, that assessment is straightforward - what Judah Maccabee liked for breakfast is not significant. How he battled for Jewish autonomy is. Whether Golda Meir preferred riding in convertibles doesn't matter; her leadership skills do. But the question of historical significance becomes quickly more complicated when you make explicit often hidden assumptions of what and who matter. For example, until recently, the tale of Jewish history was told with only rare reference to any women. Yet one could make a pretty compelling argument today that a story of the Jewish people that ignores half of those people is flawed from the start. For some Jews, our economic activities are less significant than our religious ideas. Each of those views has strong adherents, and facts alone cannot resolve such a debate.

What that means is that history is not, cannot be, the objective listing of what happened. Hidden within the compilation of any such list are the values, assumptions, personality and priorities of the person compiling the list. Often the governing principles that shape what event makes it on the list are not explicit even for the historian composing the account. At the same time, the values, priorities, and assumptions of each historian do have to comport with a constraining set of data: the sequence of the events, reliable testimony, and previous versions already in circulation. All of these constrain and shape the possible ways a historian may revisit an historical event. But because every telling is partially a decision of significance, partially a use of surmises to fill gaps of data, there is an intersubjective element to the telling that cannot be avoided. In such a process, the best each historian can do is cite their sources and attempt to reveal their presumptions.

Every history, then, is a combination of some of the facts (the ones the historian decides are significant), some of the testimony, and the tools and approach favored by that particular historian and the time the history is published. This means that 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.

THE WARP & WOOF OF JEWISH LIFE

Jews have been around for a long time as Jews. Of course, that statement masks an important reality - all people have been around a long time as human beings, and Jews are but one cluster within the human family. That means that our story emerges from within the context of a more expansive story - we emerge as a distinct group from other groupings of humanity, and our story is continuously shaped and reshaped by our interactions, responses, conflicts and conversations with other groups and individuals in every age. Being Jewish is never in isolation - it is always a dynamic development of where we've already been and the cultures from which we emerged. Jewish roots are planted not only in the House of God, but in the soil of the peoples from whom we spring.



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Jewish becoming is responsive in another way as well. Not merely a response to our past and our roots, Jews in every age continue to understand the expression of our heritage in the light of broader contemporary cultural expression. That means that a Jewish voice from a particular era will reflect the cultural norms and expressions of that age - sometimes by rejecting them explicitly, often by modifying them to better cohere within a Jewish context. Not infrequently, implicit cultural assumptions find expression in the core ideas, values, or structures of Jewish life in that age. Think of the influence of 1st century Platonic thought on Philo, 9th century Islamic Kalam (speculative theology) and political structure on the thought and authority of Rav Saadia Gaon, 12th century Aristotelian thought and Sufi mysticism on Maimonides and his descendants, early modern political theory and the social structure of Polish Jewry in the 17th century, and the ideological impact of the Pragmatists on 20th century Jewish thought, education, and organization. Currently there is a surge of conversation around the ideas and insights of Process/Relational Thought and a sustained project to articulate and advance Judaism in Process terms. Jewish growth is pruned, nourished, shaped and challenged by the peoples and cultures with whom we dwell and interact.

What this inheritance/interaction entails is that Jews are best understood in dynamic relationship with humanity as a whole. Jewish identity is not some closed system with clearly delineated borders that remain static across time. Instead, what Jews perceive our selves and our Judaism to be retains constancy across time but also displays great variety, openness and diversity across time. Like a biological organism, Jewish identity and Judaism are living, coherent, shifting, and resilient in maintaining order amidst chaos, continuous identity amidst shifting components.

At the same time that Jewish self-identity and Judaism offer a permeable membrane to the world, absorbing ideas, information, beliefs and social norms from other peoples and cultures, it also remains true that Jewish self-understanding and the nature of Judaism are the outgrowth of the written and spiritual/intellectual heritage of successive generations of Jews. From the very earliest stages of our self-perception as a people, we nestled our central story in the narratives of the Torah and shaped our lives in responsive fidelity to its norms. The stories and laws of Torah became the creative filter for Jewish expression and authenticity. As we danced life through Torah, our web of growing commentary assumed the glow of holiness itself, and Torah reverberated through all subsequent Jewish literature - religious and secular, poetry and philosophy, law and liturgy. Too much can be made of the ways Jewishness is dynamically related to the rest of humanity; Jewish distinctiveness also plays a major role in the continuing bloom of Jewish life, identity, and expression. That interactive engagement with Torah, at its core, shapes and stimulates the diversity of Jewish life in its many communities and manifestations. Reverberations of the Voice from Sinai stimulate, constrain, and sustain us to this day.

That dynamic binary - engaged permeability with the larger world and creative unpacking of Torah across the ages - forms the warp and woof on the Jewish loom of life. Neither pole in isolation can correctly characterize or sustain Jewish life. Neither is completely separable from the other. Rather, both shape and nurture each other in a symbiotic biofeedback loop.

PUK HAZI (GO AND SEE WHAT THE PEOPLE ARE DOING) FROM THE TOP DOWN & THE BOTTOM UP

Another dynamic binary that pulsates across Jewish history is a competing focus on whether the tale of the Jews is best told from the top down (the tale of kings, priests, and prophets, then of rabbinic sages, intellectual giants and political and economic titans) or from the bottom up (the everyday people and the realities of how Jewishness was lived day to day). For a generation of post World War Two scholars, this tension took the form of



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a somewhat strident debate - intellectual and political historians argued for a top down approach, while social and cultural historians insisted on a bottom up approach.

Making room for dipolarity - the way a phenomenon can have multiple attributes that are not contradictory if pertaining to distinct levels or aspects (I can be a father, son, rabbi, and citizen without those attributes constituting contradictions) - allows us to concede that each of these two approaches to history organizes the massive amount of data (the facts, dates, people, events) in distinctive but complementary ways. We do want to know who the leaders of the Jewish people were in diverse communities across time. We do want to understand the ideological insights that transformed the religion and the literary blockbusters that shaped the discourse and self understanding of an entire people. Famines, wars, policies, institutions - these decisively impacted the ways that Jews lived and we need to attend to these top down catalysts and constraints.

At the same time learning how the now nameless men, women and children actually lived their lives in ways that the literary and political record of the dominant elite might mask opens a window for us to understand silenced and marginalized lives. Particularly the insights and experiences of the poor, women, Jews of diverse sexual identities and orientation, ethnic minorities, illiterate individuals, and far flung smaller communities now open themselves to contemporary historical tools and reveal a Jewish past that is far more expansive, varied, and intriguing than the official records might have indicated. We are the beneficiaries of this bigger, more raucous telling. In the undomesticated humanity of Jewish reality, we can more easily discern the roots of our own individual distillations of what it means to be a Jew.

. . . IS IN THE DETAILS

Where do these reflections leave us?



Jewish history is a telling and retelling which connects the narrator (historian), the listeners (community) and the events in a living triangle. That interlocking nexus continues to develop and shift with the deepening learning of the Historian, the shifting identity and values of the Community, and new contemporary concerns which shift what lessons need to emerge from this act of doing history. What links Historian and Event is the rigor of Education - research, analysis, data sifted through scholarship. Between Event and Community is the Experience recalled by those who lived through it and as it is recalled in living memory. And between Community and Historian is the link of Inspiration, that artful teaching that emerges from shared identity and the mobilization of historical narrative to address contemporary concerns of what it means to be Jewish, authentic, to learn from the past as construed by the present.

What stands out in this dynamic is the priority of the historical events over and above conceptual abstraction. History is built out of the connections forged between actual events. Those events (actions, documents, and people) are the real data from which history is forged. The thinking about those events, the filter of our priorities or values changes over time and is secondary. Later generations are free to accept those secondary abstractions as they find them useful for their own historical understanding and self-identity, and are free to reject and utilize their own filters as their needs and values shift.

In thinking about the Jewish past, then, we are invited to the ongoing task of seeing ourselves as implicated in events long initiated, in people long deceased, in places far away. We are the continuing working out of what



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it means to be Jewish, which means not some timeless abstraction but rather timely connection - to those who have gone before, to the assessment of their choices and challenges, and to learning from their lives, their insights, their struggles and triumphs.

We are, the ancient rabbis teach us, not prophets ourselves yet we are the children of prophets. And of monarchs, sages, poets, parents, soldiers, shepherds, merchants, paupers, housewives - a small and extraordinary group of human beings whose lives and journeys made our own possible, in whose embrace we stand, and by whose courage and hope we continue to walk in the world. In telling their stories, we explore our own. In re-framing their journey, we clarify our journeys. As we affirm their lives, they live in us; and we, in them.

AM YISRAEL HAI — The Jewish People lives!



UNIT 1: LIVING JEWISH HISTORY: AN INTRODUCTION – TEXT 1

וְהִיא שְׁעֵמֶדָה לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ וְלָנוּ, שֶׁלֹּא אֶחָד בְּלֶבֶד עָמַד עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ, אֲלָא שְׁבַכָּל דּוֹר
וְדוֹר עוֹמְדִים עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ, וְהַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְצִילֵנוּ מִיָּדָם.

FROM THE PASSOVER HAGGADAH

And this is what has sustained our ancestors and us. For not only one [enemy] has risen up against us to destroy us, but in every generation they rise up against us to destroy us and The Blessed Holy One saves us from their hand.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- The Haggadah is one of the best known and best loved texts in Judaism. Think about the Haggadah and about Passover seders you have attended. How would you summarize the Haggadah's view of Jewish history?
- What is the purpose of Passover and the reading of the Haggadah? Does it build collective memory, or recount Jewish history? What is the difference between history and collective memory? Which do you think is more important?
- Do you think that this text is a fair summary of the Jewish experience? Why or why not? How would you think and feel about Jewish history if you had only the Haggadah on which to base your ideas?
- What is the image of God in this text? If this text were all that you knew about God, how would you say God relates to history? Is this an image of God who works through history?



LIVING JEWISH HISTORY: AN INTRODUCTION – TEXT 2

PAULA HYMAN, GENDER AND ASSIMILATION IN MODERN JEWISH HISTORY¹

The experiences of Jewish women and the contradiction between those experiences and the representation of women in expressions of Jewish public opinion mandate a rethinking of the nature and significance of assimilation in the first generations of emancipation and into the contemporary period. I have chosen to focus on issues of gender because they not only highlight the regularly overlooked experiences of women, but also pose new questions about male behavior.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Someone once said that adding a gender perspective to history is more than just “add women and stir”. How does this passage illustrate that idea?**
- **What does Hyman mean when she talks about the contradiction between the experiences of women and the representations of women in Jewish public opinion? Can you think of some examples?**
- **What do you think Hyman means when she refers to the “regularly overlooked experiences of women”?**
- **Hyman talks about the contradiction between experience and representation. What does this mean? How does it relate to history and collective memory?**
- **Did/do Jewish women and Jewish men experience assimilation differently? How so?**

¹ Paula Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of Women*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995, p.12.



LIVING JEWISH HISTORY: AN INTRODUCTION – TEXT 3

YOSEF HAYIM YERUSHALMI, *ZAKHOR: JEWISH HISTORY AND JEWISH MEMORY*¹

Memory and modern historiography stand, by their very nature, in radically different relations to the past. The latter represents, not an attempt at a restoration of memory, but a truly new kind of recollection. In its quest for understanding it brings to the fore texts, events and processes, that never really became part of Jewish group memory.....It continually recreates an ever more detailed past whose shapes and textures memory does not recognize. But that is not all. The historian does not simply come in to replenish the gaps of memory. He constantly challenges even those memories that have survived intact.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **What does it mean to say that a people has a collective memory? How does this come about? How does Jewish collective memory relate to the idea of tradition?**
- **How do historians challenge “even those memories that have survived intact”? Do you think that this challenge of a people’s beliefs about its past is constructive?**
- **What are the purposes of a collective memory? Is collective memory about the past or is it about the present and future?**
- **Look back at Text 1. In what ways does Jewish collective memory of the Exodus from Egypt differ from the history of the Exodus from Egypt?**

¹ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996, p.94.



LIVING JEWISH HISTORY: AN INTRODUCTION – TEXT 4

THE PITTSBURGH PLATFORM OF REFORM JUDAISM, 1885¹

First – We recognize in every religion an attempt to grasp the Infinite, and in every mode, source, or book or revelation held sacred in any religious system, the consciousness of the indwelling of God in man. We hold that Judaism presents the highest conception of the God idea as taught in our holy Scriptures and developed and spiritualized by the Jewish teachers, in accordance with the moral and philosophical progress of their respective ages. We maintain that Judaism preserved and defended, midst continual struggles and trials and under enforced isolation, this God idea as the central religious truth for the human race.

Second – We recognize in the Bible the record of the consecration of the Jewish people to its mission as priest of the one God, and value it as the most potent instrument of religious and moral instruction. We hold that the modern discoveries of scientific researches in the domains of nature and history are not antagonistic to the doctrines of Judaism, the Bible reflecting the primitive ideas of its own age, and at times clothing its conception of Divine Providence and justice, dealing with man in miraculous narratives.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **How does this passage conceive of history? How do earlier times relate to later times in this way of thinking?**
- **What do you think about the Platform's statement that "modern discoveries in the domains of nature and history are not antagonistic to the doctrines of Judaism"? How does this relate to the Platform's idea of history and to yours?**
- **Talk about the doctrine of progress exemplified by this Platform. Is it relevant to our day? More than 100 years after the passing of this Platform, do you think we are more or less optimistic about progress? Does progress mean the same thing to us?**

¹Michael Berenbaum, "Pittsburgh Platform". *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. 2nd ed. Vol. 16. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007, p.190-191.



LIVING JEWISH HISTORY: AN INTRODUCTION – TEXT 5

CHANCELLOR ISMAR SCHORSCH, JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY OF AMERICA COMMENCEMENT KEYNOTE ADDRESS, 2006¹

With the advent of emancipation, the founders of Conservative Judaism embraced history as their new meta-halakhic worldview. In Zacharias Frankel's classic formulation of positive-historical Judaism, the term positive stood for halakhah while the term historical was its meta-halakhic underpinning. The study of history was to gird afresh Jewish adherence with a radically expanded national narrative that sought to highlight the motifs of exile and resistance, literary virtuosity and cultural contributions, insularity and integration, contextualization and development. Each new discovery added meaningfulness to a religious heritage revered for its evident antiquity. Heinrich Graetz's *History of the Jews*, Solomon Schechter's *Studies in Judaism* and Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews*, all still in print, are but the most sparkling specimens of history as meta-halakhah.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- **In this address, Rabbi Dr. Schorsch presents a view of Conservative Judaism which he seems to mourn as a lost vision. According to this address, why did the founders of the Conservative Movement find history to be such an inspiring framework for Jewish continuity?**
- **“Meta-halakhah” means a realm beyond halakhah (Jewish law) which gives halakhah its meaning. How does history function in this way?**
- **What are your reasons for Jewish identification and observance? How do history and collective memory figure into them? To what extent do you find the antiquity, continuity and development of Judaism over the ages to be meaningful reasons for identification? For observance?**

¹The full text of this address is available on the website of Professor John Hobbins, University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh: <http://ancienthebrewpoetry.typepad.com/files/schorsch-commencement-address.pdf> (accessed 6-15-12).





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