

Michael Gove & History

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

It is a popular misconception that there is no precise word in the Bible for "history". But the Bible uses the words "Divrei Hayamim", which we translate as the two books of Chronicles. That sounds very much to me like what I understand history to be. We have the word for story, "Tolda", the unfolding of generations, from father to son and mother to daughter. Even if I agree it usually is the narrative of male chauvinists (his story) still there are plenty of contrasting narratives within the whole. If history means objectivity, then of course the Jewish story is a story with an agenda; God's involvement in the history of a people. In the ancient world one did not record one's defeats and failures. Remarkably, the Bible did. And we have a tradition of reinterpretation and adaptation, even if it always struggles against conservative interests. I hope this blog often shows how we have changed perspectives, adopted and adapted external ideas, and continued to struggle to adjust our Jewish narrative to changing reality while remaining loyal to our past.

"This is the story of Mankind," says Genesis (5:1) and the Talmud (Sanhedrin 38b) adds that our forefathers were taught "Dor Dor Ve Dorshav", "Each generation (has its unique features), its wise men and its leaders." "Jeptah in his generation was like Samuel in his" (Rosh Hashanah 25b). Human affairs are always fluid. Our tradition requires us to study and know how our story has unfolded, its triumphs and its failures. We recount them all, we preserve them all, and we teach them all. What we add is the extra concept of "Zachor", remember. We are commanded to remember our past. Memory in itself is not enough unless it is translated into action. That's what has helped us survive and what makes our attitude to history special.

I was fortunate to have two unconventional but highly inspirational history teachers. So I know that a great teacher is worth so much more than a curriculum. Nevertheless, I have witnessed over the years a significant change in the way history is or is not taught in schools nowadays. Out has gone chronology, looking at great spans of history, and in has come more detailed analyses of sources. This is a tragedy. Not because details are unimportant or that specificity is insignificant. But if one has little understanding of one's cultural past, it is very difficult to understand one's present.

I was fortunate to be educated in England at a time when we were expected to understand the unfolding of English life over a thousand years. I was doubly fortunate to have learnt about Jewish history and the occasions when the two narratives conflicted. I could see what the Crusades did for the Normans and how disastrous they were for the Jews. How Jews were expelled from England, and then how vigorously the bishops and aldermen fought against Cromwell's desire to allow the Jews to reenter. In 1753, Parliament passed the Jew Bill to allow Jews civil rights. George III signed it, and then Lord Newcastle repealed it the next year because of the popular outcry. All of this colored

my view of Britain. So when I came to study the Empire it was with a mixture of pride and disdain.

It is so sad that in much of Britain today not only does the curriculum not include the past, glorious and infamous, but now no longer requires students to know anything about the two World Wars. And in the USA many a college education no longer requires certain basic information. I have always made a bird's eye view of Jewish history an essential feature of any Jewish curriculum I have ever taught.

As each country becomes more multicultural and includes large numbers of citizens from other cultures, I believe it is even more important to teach everyone the history of the host society as well as others. This does not mean ignoring its disasters or excluding other narratives. Certainly one must avoid contempt or intolerance. It should be critical. But one needs a basis, a point of reference, a foundation from which to compare and contrast. If "fear of God is the beginning of wisdom", then factual information is the beginning of historical knowledge.

In most colleges in the US, the educational system has been seriously degraded by kowtowing to cultural relativism. Let alone the dumbing down of standards and curricula. There is nothing wrong with teaching all the various different histories, religions, and cultures around the world. But one needs to start somewhere, and that somewhere is the national narrative, its home.

Britain currently is fortunate to have in Michael Gove, an education secretary who has at last put his foot down and insisted that the school curriculum combines both chronology and a national narrative. In doing so, he has of course stirred up a hornet's nest. Britain is usually so painfully politically correct. The debate is between those like me, who support chronology and standards, and those who argue that English history is "his story" or just about "posh white blokes". It may well be. Nevertheless, some "posh white folk" abolished slavery before anyone else did. They supported the idea of a Jewish homeland when no one else did. British history has the good as well as the bad and the ugly.

The mood of appeasement that plagued Britain after the First World War should have taught it certain lessons about relinquishing pride, heritage, and moral backbone. Sadly, the current mood of refusing to recognize and then deal with the imported septic tank of ideology that opposes the culture of the country and seeks to overthrow it, is no different than the challenge that revolutionary Marxism once presented to free societies, which seduced much of the elite of its era.

If one studies chronological history one will recognize those recurring patterns. Otherwise like an ostrich it pretends it is only a few crazies who go round murdering in the name of a cause, it is not serious. Hitler can be negotiated with.

There was and is anti-Semitism, racism, chauvinism, and arrogance in every society. But there is also often a lot of good. It is an error not to study and learn from the past, be it in the UK or the USA. Once upon a time the USA

was a beacon of liberality and equality. Over the years it has waxed and waned, delighted and disappointed. I fear it is fallen now to the disease of relativity and no standard at all. Statism rivals Wall Street for self-interest and power. Values give way to interests. Poor H*y*m*a*n K*a*p*l*a*n must be turning in his grave.