

The Faith of Fallen Jews

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Thanks to Brandeis University Press, I have been thoroughly enjoying a volume of essays by the historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi who died far too early, in 2009. The title of this compilation, [*The Faith of Fallen Jews: Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi and the Writing of Jewish History*](#)[✕], comes from the major interest of his academic life. Yerushalmi was fascinated by what life was really like for the Marranos, the conversos, the Secret Jews, some of whom were forcibly converted when they were given the choice of death or abandoning their faith. But since 1391 in several waves, thousands of Jews had converted willingly in the tragically deluded notion that they would be accepted by Christians if only they “saw the light”. Indeed this was the official position of the Church. But in practice it did not work out.

The success of such converts in rising through the ranks of Christian society was seen as a threat. So “old Christians” fought back by differentiating between racially pure Christians and the originally Jewish parvenus. They introduced the racist concept of “pure blood”, *limpiezia de sangre*, to purge Jewish blood, even converted blood from that of the racially pure of the faith. Even if the concept in theory applied to Muslims/Moriscos and others, in practice it was applied almost exclusively to those of Jewish descent. Yerushalmi argues that we are mistaken in thinking that racist anti-Semitism was the innovation of the nineteenth century. The nineteenth century might have taken the idea of racial contamination of the Jews out of the religious into the realms of the national, but it was a religious disease before it became secular.

He similarly debunks the mythos of the “Convivencia”, the fashionable idea that once Jew, Christian, and Muslim all got along famously and equally in the Golden Age of Spain. There was hardly a Golden Age but merely brief respites in an otherwise painful state of accommodation and convenience in which Jews were used when it suited their masters. Even then the interaction was essentially with a small layer of aristocratic and learned Christians and Muslims, which never reached down to the masses. Indeed one might say that that characterizes much of present day interfaith activity. Not that I discount it for that. I merely point out its limitations. Both in Christianity and Islam, tolerance meant simply the condescending acceptance of an “other”, but never genuine equality. When later such equality was enforced by law, it was resented in the salons and homes of the established classes.

Yerushalmi points out an important feature of Jewish political life throughout the years of exile. It is that Jews established vertical relationships with the few power players capable of extending them protection. Kings protected them when it suited them. Different religious leaders shielded them on occasion. But political relationships were essentially with the ruling classes and rarely horizontal with the majority, the lower and merchant classes. The result was that whenever there was a

political crisis, plagues, commercial competition or the agitation of fanatical preachers, the Christian mob, the Muslim street, turned on the Jews with violence and cruelty. Even if there were always individual relationships and those who helped Jews and tried to protect them, the vast majority of every class, did not.

The interesting question is whether it would or could have made a difference had such a policy been altered. Perhaps the profound religious sense that Jews were the enemy of the True Faith, regardless of which one (including Marxism), was too strong and deeply rooted to have been influenced.

Yerushalmi emphasizes time and again how important it is, in making crucial judgments, to have a historical perspective. He quotes the magisterial Baer as saying that the Jews of Iberia had no historical self-understanding. That was why they were so unprepared for the catastrophe that befell them, both those who converted and those who remained steadfast. "Despite his vast and intimate experience in the political world of his day, even Isaac Abarbanel, the last great leader of Spanish Jewry, did not perceive the impending disaster with sufficient clarity to prepare his brethren."

In an essay based on a talk to the Leo Baeck Institute, he argues that German Jews suffered the same fate. Even if they did have a tradition of Wissenschaft and a secular perspective, they failed to appreciate the lessons of history. The same can be said of the failure of the Eastern European anti-Zionist leadership to see which way the winds were blowing in the 1930s. Somehow we often got blinded by the periods of peace in our host societies and assumed they would always remain safe, that we would survive regardless.

The same is true in Israel today. There is a reluctance to examine the lessons of history and to forge horizontal political alliances instead of vertical ones.

If this is true of Israeli secular society, it is even more so of Charedi society. The leaders, devoid of any academic historical training or understanding of history outside of the Talmud, are clearly unaware how their refusal to accommodate other viewpoints or reach out to create alliances on, say, the question of serving in some form of community service, if not the army, or refusing to allow significant numbers to study other subjects so as to enable them to get jobs and earn a living, is a symptom of the refusal to see things through different, including historical, perspectives. Theirs is just one angle; admittedly it is a legitimate one, but few things in life are black-and-white.

Some argue that this single mindedness is the result of Israeli political culture, all or nothing, the more noise you make the more cash you get. But if so that's all the more why the work of men like Yerushalmi is so important and must not be allowed to disappear off our radar.