

Yuval Harari and Religion

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I have always enjoyed reading books that challenge my preconceptions. Whether it was Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, Hitchens, Pinker, or all the other atheists who rubbished religion, I read them with interest, to see if they could challenge my faith or get me to reassess my arguments. They rarely did, because the straw man of religion that they set up to destroy just wasn't my religious position at all. Mine was not based on myths or fear of being struck down by heaven or going to hell. It was neither exceptionalist nor exclusive. It was not a fundamentalist or genocidal. All things that they accused religion of. If it was true that awful crimes had been committed in the name of religion, so had they been in the names of Marxism, atheism, and any other ism. Even in the name of football! All humans were and are imperfect to one degree or another.

My religion was not a perfect answers to all of life's problems or in a belief that a Divine Superman would come down from heaven to save me from my indiscretions or those of others. It was based on experience, feeling, study, and a framework for living that maintained a connection with my history and community and got me to think about my behavior and try my best to improve it. I certainly accepted that humans could be good people without religion; it was just that I thought they would be missing out on a important spiritual dimension that adds something more to the complexity and tapestry of life. One can live without music, too.

Yuval Harari is the latest champion of this secularist cause. I enjoyed reading his book *Sapiens*. Its broad sweep of human evolution was fascinating. He offered a range of possibilities on many issues before coming down on the side of one or the other. And he stimulated me to read more, so that I soon discovered that many experts greater than him completely disagreed on a range of fundamentals.

I was disappointed with his next book *Homo Deus*. Not for the analysis or description of how machines, artificial intelligence, would radically change us and our world. But rather with his confident assertion that there was neither need nor room for spirituality, or what different people mean by God. When someone can confidently assert that something that makes no sense to them cannot make sense to anyone else, this seems like hubris and illogical. I agree I cannot prove to a skeptic that God exists. But I don't understand how anyone can assert with utter confidence that God does not. All one can say is that it makes no sense to them.

In his latest book, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, Harari returns to discuss the challenges of the future and once again misrepresents religion when it suits him. For example, he confidently asserts that "mainstream Judaism...maintains that the entire cosmos exists just so that...rabbis can study their holy scriptures, and that if Jews cease this practice, the universe will come to an end" (p.186). Really? Some might. I don't. Not literally, and

I regard myself as mainstream. Many ideas expressed in Midrashic thought are metaphorical or allegorical, not literal. "This," he says, "is a central article of faith of Orthodox Jews." Strange that Maimonides or any other of the great rabbis who formulated Principles of Jewish Faith never thought to mention it.

Do "[s]ecular Jews...too believe that the Jewish people are the central heroes of history and the ultimate wellspring of human morality, spirituality, and learning"? Really? And if there are indeed some Jews who think they are automatically better or more spiritual, most of those I mix with certainly do not. And Harari seems to think that all Orthodox Jews read the Bible literally, with no nuance or commentary.

He says, "Prior to 1800 the Jewish impact on science was limited." Is he not aware that all universities then were religious institutions and that, with rare exceptions, Jews were banned from them and from the non-Jewish intellectual world? As if a Jew in Eastern Europe had much of a chance of participating with the world's intellectuals, until perhaps Mendelssohn or exceptional cases in parts of Italy in the benign pockets of the Islamic world.

Yet, to my great surprise, without realizing it perhaps, he actually manages to find something positive to say about Orthodox Judaism. In talking about AI and the threat it poses to jobs, he discusses forms of universal basic support. It is not a bad idea in theory. It might answer the purely financial challenge of mass unemployment. But not the psychological one that many could end up without purpose, vegetate or turn to violence. This is his surprising opinion:

"Perhaps the most successful experiment so far in how to live a contented life in a post-work world has been conducted in Israel. [He is obvious ignorant of American and European Orthodoxy.] ...about 50 percent of ultra-Orthodox Jewish men never work. They dedicate their lives to studying holy scriptures... They and their families don't starve ...they don't lack the basic necessities of life.

"...Although they are poor and unemployed, in survey after survey these ultra-Orthodox Jewish men report higher levels of life satisfaction than any other section of Israeli society. This is due to the strength of community bonds as well as a deep meaning they find in studying scripture and performing rituals. A small room full of Jewish men discussing the Talmud might well generate more joy, engagement, and insight than a huge textile sweatshop...

"Secular Israelis often complain bitterly that the ultra-Orthodox don't contribute enough to society...Sooner or later, the state will not be able to support so many unemployed people...Yet it might be just the reverse. As robots and AI push humans out of the job market, the ultra-Orthodox Jews may come to be seen as the model for the future rather than a fossil from the past....in the lives of all people, the quest for meaning and community might eclipse the

quest for a job." (pages 42-43)

Well, there you have it. Orthodox Judaism could offer something after all. Even if it is by no means the whole answer. Many Orthodox Jews are simply not intellectually or temperamentally suited to lives of study. And as for the benefits of closed communities, or indeed subservience to community norms and limitations, they work well for some, but by no means for everyone. He might also have added the fact that very Orthodox people who do not use technology on Sabbaths and festivals might be even more relevant nowadays for mental health, as we and our children seem incapable of surviving one hour without our iPhones and iPads, let alone twenty-five.

By all means attack religions. Particularly religious power structures. They corrupt too and need to be challenged. What Harari attacks is his own biased, misleading caricature of religions. That only weakens his case rather than undermining the faith of those who can think for themselves.