

Adam Kirsch

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

There are few contemporary Jewish writers in the USA I am interested in meeting. They invariably use what Jewish religion they have to rebel against it or to ridicule it. I have no common language with completely secular Jewish writers – although of course I respect their freedom to choose and to be who they want.

ON the other hand I have always admired those who can sit comfortably in two cultural worlds (Jewish and non-Jewish, Jerusalem and Athens) and combine religious commitment with an appreciation of secular culture and scientific research. In Israel, one can find a wealth of such people. In the USA, not so much. To my mind, Adam Kirsch an outstanding exception and about the only American Jewish writer I would love to meet.

I first came across a book of his poems quite by accident. Then I saw his series on *Daf Yomi* in Tablet Magazine. (*Daf Yomi* is the daily page of Talmud that now, albeit controversially, almost defines popular Jewish study in the internet era with hundreds of different daily classes in Talmud for every level in almost every major language). Someone who could be so committed to regularly studying Talmud and come up with such interesting and balanced comments had to be someone worth reading. I read more and was just bowled over by his range. He has recently published a collection of essays entitled "*Who wants to be a Jewish Writer*" which begins with a preface quoting (and criticizing) the great Victorian, Mathew Arnold, on the importance of poetry.

According to his bio, he was born in Los Angeles in 1976. He is the son of a lawyer, author, and biblical scholar. He started writing poetry around the age of 14. After attending Harvard, he began a career as assistant literary editor of the New Republic. He has published two books of poems, "*The Thousand Wells*" and "*Invasions*" (which won The New Criterion Poetry Prize in 2002). Over the course of his career, he has written reviews and articles on a wide range of poets and novelists as well as on all kinds of a cultural issues. He is as comfortable analyzing the language of the Book of Psalms, comparing the original Hebrew to different translations, as he is with Seamus Heaney, Liberalism and Stefan Zweig.

In his essays, "*Who wants to be a Jewish Writer*" and "*Is there such a thing as Jewish Literature*", he tackles old issues that remain pertinent today. Why

Saul Bellow said "I am often described as a Jewish writer, in much the same way, one might be called a Samoan astronomer or an Eskimo cellist or a Zulu Gainsborough expert. There is some oddity about it. I am a Jew and I have written some books. I have tried to fit my soul into the Jewish-writer category, but it doesn't feel comfortably accommodated there."

Kirsch's explanation is that Jews who were accepted as American novelists in the previous generations were born to parents who had no profound connection with Jewish texts or religious life. Or if they did once, rejected it all to try to integrate into the wider society. Their offspring were bequeathed no value or sense of Jewish cultural linguistic tradition. Judaism meant nothing to them in any significant way and that was why they rejected it, made fun of it or dismissed it.

In many respects things have progressively deteriorated since then. Nowadays, the vast majority of American Jewry has neither the knowledge nor the experience of a Jewish past with its agonies and memories. So many of them are either alienated or disconnected from Jewish scholarship and Jewish experience even when they accept their Jewish lineage

Kirsch is as proudly knowledgeable and educated in Jewish culture as the great Western canon. He rejects the modernist abandonment of spiritual, religious values. Science did indeed once challenge religion and, in Mathew Arnold's day, threaten to make it redundant. But the failures of science and modernity to answer the deepest yearnings of the human soul have contributed to a remarkable persistence in religion – if not a comeback.

I am reminded of the great debate in 1950's English cultural circles between Frank Leavis, the Cambridge English professor, and C.P. Snow, the scientist and novelist. In *"The Two Cultures"*, Snow argued that "the intellectual life of the whole of western society was split into" two cultures – the sciences and the humanities. They were not combined – which was a major hindrance to solving the world's problems. In *"The Common Pursuit"*, Leavis vigorously attacked Snow's suggestion that practitioners of the scientific and humanistic disciplines should have some significant understanding of each other. It was a bitter battle and, in the Cambridge English department of my day, if you were not on Leavis's side you were an outcast. I could not understand why there needed to be a fight so fierce. Why not both? Interestingly, the detached Jewish American literary lion (sic), Lionel Trilling, sided with Snow.

Most American Jewish novelists have been stuck in the alienating insecurity of being outsiders in two worlds and thinking, therefore, that they should

choose which side of the identity demarcation line they should fall. What I admire in Adam Kirsch is that he proudly feels comfortable wanting the best of both worlds. As indeed do I! That is why I have so admired the Soloveitchik and Lichtenstein dynasties – they could write as Talmudic scholars as well as literary PhD's.

That was my late father's wish for my education. As he put it, "like the pendulum of a grandfather clock, that swings from one extreme to the other so that the clock in the middle tells exactly the right time!"