

George Eliot & Judaism

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

George Eliot (whose real name was Mary Ann Evans) has always been one of my favorite English novelists. She combined command of the language with a gift for a great story and an acute observation of the inequalities, and social hypocrisies of her age. Last week was the 200th anniversary of George Eliot's birth. To celebrate it there is a new novel *In Love with George Eliot* by Kathy O'Shaughnessy.

Eliot is remarkable not just as the outstanding female novelist, but uniquely as the most important non-Jewish literary voice in support of Judaism and Jewish identity in the nineteenth century and beyond.

Benjamin Disraeli had written novels *Coningsby* and *Tancred*, with major Jewish characters and their ambiguity about their Jewish origins, earlier. But both novels are mediocre works of literature. The Jewish element is quite incidental. And reflects Disraeli's ambiguity about his Jewish origins.

In contrast, George Eliot wrote *Daniel Deronda*. Not one of her best novels admittedly, but still a major work of Nineteenth-century literature. In it, through the character of Mordecai, she argues persuasively for the contribution that Judaism has made to the world. And for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Israel, long before Theodore Herzl wrote his *Altneuland* or the Balfour Declaration and the Holocaust.

As Mary Evans, she was born in 1819. The third child of Robert Evans and Christiana Evans. After a little formal education with a tutor called Maria Ellis until she was sixteen, she returned home to act as housekeeper in 1836 when her mother died. But she continued to correspond with her tutor. Although she was brought up in a very traditional Christian home, she began to question her religious faith, her father threatened to throw her out of the house, but his threat was not carried out. Instead, she respectfully attended church and continued to keep house for him until his death in 1849, when she was 30.

She was influenced by John Stuart Mill's secular, rational and utilitarian world view. And specifically his critique of society's treatment of women. She moved to London where she met George Lewes a philosopher and critic in 1851. He helped further her career and although Lewes was already married,

they lived together. Even so, Evans began to refer to Lewes as her husband and to sign her name as Mary Ann Evans Lewes. After Lewes' death in 1878, she legally changed her name to Mary Ann Evans Lewes. But she had also adopted the nom-de-plume of George Eliot.

In 1880 she married John Cross and again changed her name, to Mary Ann Cross. While the couple was honeymooning in Venice, Cross, in a state of depression, jumped from the hotel balcony into the Grand Canal. He survived, and they returned to England. But Eliot fell ill and died on 22 December 1880 at the age of 61.

Her first novel *Adam Bede* was, published in 1859 to acclaim. It was followed by *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner*, *Romola*, *Felix Holt*, *the Radical* and *Middlemarch* (which is regarded as her masterpiece). Her last novel was *Daniel Deronda*, published in 1876

It concerns the relationship Deronda had with two women with whom he crosses paths. One, an English rose called Gwendolin. The other a Jewish girl called Mirah. F.R. Leavis the English critic thought their stories should have been split into two separate novels.

The plot, in brief, is that Daniel Deronda was raised by a wealthy gentleman, Sir Hugo Mallinger. Deronda thought that he was Sir Hugo's illegitimate son. One day, boating on the Thames, Deronda rescued a young desperate Jewish girl, Mirah Lapidoth, from attempting to drown herself. She had come to London in search of her mother and brother after running away from her unsavory and exploitive father. Deronda undertook to help her look for her mother (who it turned out had died) and brother. Through them, he is introduced to London's Jewish community and Judaism.

Searching for Mirah's family, Deronda met Mordecai. Despite his ill health, he was passionately committed to the Jewish people was working and preaching for them to be restored to their Promised Land. Through their conversations, he succeeded in influencing Deronda and pressed him to become an advocate for the Jewish people. Deronda was attracted to Mirah and his desire to embrace Mordecai's vision became stronger. But he was still confused about his own identity.

Deronda was finally reunited with his mother and learned that she was a Jewish opera singer with whom Sir Hugo was once in love. She had married and had a child, but because she resented the rigid religious upbringing of her childhood she wanted to hide her identity from Deronda. On her husband's

death, she asked Sir Hugo to raise her son as an English gentleman, never to know that he was Jewish.

Daniel, having now discovered his Jewish identity, felt comfortable with his love for Mirah, and committed himself to carrying out Mordecai's vision for the Jewish people. They discovered that Mordecai was Mirah's brother. Daniel married Mirah, and the newlyweds prepared to set off for "the East" with Mordecai. But then Mordecai dies in their arms, and that is where the novel ends.

Eliot shows real familiarity with Judaism and Jewish identity beyond that of any earlier non-Jewish novelist. She had met a Talmudic scholar called Emanuel Deutsch who was working at the British Museum and he started to teach her Hebrew and a great deal more about Jewish life. Ironically he set out to visit the Holy Land but died on the way there.

When *Daniel Deronda* was published, the Chief Rabbi of England wrote to thank her for her accurate and sympathetic portrait of Deronda and Judaism. A stark contrast to Dickens's portrait of Fagin in *Oliver Twist*. However, many non-Jews resented her positive description of a Jew. Henry James, for example, wrote a piece called *Conversation* published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in which he satirized Eliot's *Deronda* and initiated a discussion in which all the negative stereotypes of Jews were presented as being a truer portrait.

Things have not changed much. *Daniel Deronda* would never be read nowadays in an American or European University 's English department. for fear of giving offense. Chaucer wrote that "Love Conquers All." Nowadays in our intellectual world, it is "Hatred that conquers all." Or as our Rabbis put it " Both love and hatred distort the mind."

After I had written this piece, I received an email from the remarkable Prof Mark Mirsky of CUNY whom I am honored to call a friend. He wrote

One of my students with whom I still have a deep and warm friendship was Michelle Wallace, who would write a mesmerizing first book *Black Power and the Myth of the Superwoman*. One day, she asked me if I had read *Daniel Deronda*. I shook my head, a bit surprised that she would find George Eliot that interesting.

"No," I answered. She looked at me in disbelief. "Why do you ask?" I added.

“George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* is asking in terms of Jewish identity, all the questions that we American Blacks today, have to ask ourselves if we are going to create a new sense of our identity.”

Some years later, Michelle, who would become a professor in our English Department at City College, and one of the stalwart defenders of rational discourse on our campus, told me that she had a Jewish great or great-great-grandfather, which made me feel what Herman Melville called “the shock of recognition. But really the understanding that we both belonged to the same tribe, came when she sent me to *Daniel Deronda* to be educated.

It just shows that there so much goodwill and amity in our world we really ought to focus on what we share rather than what divides us!