

How Jewish Is Jewish History?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Once we asked, “Who is a Jew?” Now the big question is, “What is Jewish History?” Both questions are largely academic and typical of a particular mindset that desires to know exactly how to characterize human affairs and where other human beings fit it. It is a product of Western philosophical culture, modern nationalism, and indeed scientific categorization.

I don't for the life of me understand why it has taken me so long to read Moshe Rosman's excellent [How Jewish is Jewish History? \(Littman Library of Jewish Civilization\)](#). I must have been sleepwalking, for it is a most important and essential book for anyone interested in Jewish affairs. It is an overview of how academic theories of modernism are changing and have changed perceptions. It is a vital analysis of how many different approaches to Jewish history there are.

Even the ancillary issue of when does “modern Jewish history” begin is the subject of constant debate and modification. Was it the French Revolution? The American Revolution? Napoleon? The Haskalah, the Enlightenment? Mercantilism? The exile from Iberia? The rise of nationalism? The collapse of autonomous Jewish life in Poland? The first mass migration to Israel under Yehuda Hachasid? Does it really make any serious difference?

It all confirms what we inside have always known. You can define neither Jews nor Judaism in a way that will satisfy all its various elements. What is the difference between a “people” and a “nation”? Is Judaism an “ethnic culture” a “religious culture” or neither? Jean-Paul Sartre thought it was anyone who others think is Jewish. Homi Bhabha thinks it is any group that suffers as a result of imperialist domination.

Modern theory is right to try to avoid “The Simple Solution”, “The Grand Scheme”, or the “Neat Title”, whether it is “The End of History” or “The Clash of Civilizations”. They might sell books, but they get just as much wrong as right. We do know that modernism has freed us to think more as individuals than as members of established ideologies. The internet in all its varieties has, for better and worse, enabled more of us to “pursue our own ideas and goals”. Political, religious, and social groups try to control and dominate, but the genius of mankind is its ability to resist automatonism and to allow us to be ourselves as we define it. We might call it existentialism or phenomenology, but the fact is that just as much as some humans need to lose themselves in the comforting but suffocating embrace of societies, communities, and ghettos, many others resist these constrictions. There are plusses and minuses in both, and it would be wrong to say only one is right and all the others wrong. But that sadly is precisely what fundamentalism does.

Rosman's book highlights the achievements, advances, and the limitations of academia. Old models are challenged and superseded, and the new models in

turn will face revisionism. It is a world in which great minds toil and produce theories, defend them with aggression and determination, devote passion and animosity to demolishing competition, and invariably end up being as doctrinaire, unreasonable, and closed-minded as the worst anti-academic fanatics. Those of you who saw that brilliant Israeli film [Footnote](#) know exactly how it works on the academic shop floor. It is hard to find a more competitive and cutthroat atmosphere outside of a Marxist coven. It makes rabbinic conflict look positively benign, and it explains why so much antagonism towards Israel comes from universities.

Rosman raises all the fascinating issues. Can Jewish history only be about Jews? What about their relationship, for better and worse, with their host societies? Is an English Jew more English or more Jewish than a French Jew? Is an American Jew more comfortable with other Americans or with other Jews? Is a Charedi Jew more at home with a Salafist Muslim or a secular Jew? Is a liberal Jewish female more at home with other feminists?

Israelis, Russians, Ethiopians, Jews from Arab lands, and Jews from Christian lands are probably influenced just as much by their cultures of adoption as they are by Judaism. You can tell an American Chasid from an Israeli one. If Jews are defined as having a common culture, is it one of religion or of card playing? How can all their different histories, cultures, and attitudes be reconciled if Jewish history is concerned with culture? But one might study their institutions and systems under a rubric of Jewish structures. And what about Kabbalah? Is it mainstream Judaism or fringe? If it is a category of Jewish culture? (In which case Madonna could be more Jewish than a rabbinical Talmudist!) But that is the beauty of postmodernism. It opens up new worlds, new ideas that I find liberating. A Jew is indeed anyone who declares or feels to be one. The only problem is when you want other Jews to agree with you!

Postmodernism recognizes the variations and validates them. But in so doing it creates such an indeterminate category as to be gutless, passionless, and all but meaningless. I don't belong entirely to any of the categories that postmodernism offers as defining Jews, although in part to some. But in one area, the religious, I live a clearly Jewishly-defined way of life, more animated by the Jewish tradition than any other. I do indeed walk in Athens and Jerusalem, but there's no doubt in my mind which and what matters most, even if my version has little in common with 90% of other Jews. In other words, I am who I am. And Moshe Rosman helps me feel very good about it.