

Review Essay: Jewish History in a Hostile World

Alan Levine, *Scattered Among the Peoples: The Jewish Diaspora in Ten Portraits* (Toronto, Canada, McClelland & Stewart, 2002); pp. 410 + 16 pages of b/w plates; ISBN: 978-0771052750.

Introduction

Every decade or two it becomes necessary for an author to draw together the latest writings on Jewish history, integrate this new material with standard views of the past two centuries, and provide a well-written, clearly argued introduction for undergraduate university students and the educated general public. Unlike an academic or scholarly study, the grand synthesis – there is usually only one or two at a time – does not have to cite historical documents, discuss historiographical problems or justify a particular new ideological position. There are therefore usually no footnotes, although there may be a guide to further reading added at the end. All material in these kinds of popular syntheses is presented in translation and quotations are deftly integrated into a single smooth narrative voice.

A Grand But Flawed Survey

Alan Levine's book begins warm and homely, with the background of his childhood in Winnipeg's small but lively Jewish community, where I lived myself in the late 1960s, and while his synthesis probably will not have the drawing or staying power of Simon Schama's magisterial two-volume *The Story of the Jews* (2013-2014), it will be a soft, non-threatening way into modern Jewish history for ordinary Jews and non-Jews alike. Placing his annotations and references at the rear of his book, Levine allows non-scholarly readers to sail through the text, yet reassures the more professional historian of the validity of the citations and paraphrases. For those readers familiar with the people, events and ideas he discusses, Levine seems to offer a cautious and unexceptional survey of history. But there are two ways in which his book is exceptional, without being incautious.

First, his special gambit is to concentrate each of his ten chapters on a particular individual or family, with the new chapter linked by relationships between the characters and the events in history that connect them. While he seems to avoid venturing into the field of scholarly debates or delicately walking through the minefield of controversial alternative views on how Jews moved from their medieval rabbinical traditions into the ordeals of modernity, by silencing those debates he seems to take his stand on the side of a basically American and Canadian liberal tradition.

Second, he shows a generally progressive development of modern Judaism through a sequence of pen-portraits of key figures from the time of the Expulsion from Iberia in 1492 through the formation of new Sephardic and Crypto-Jewish and Marrano communities in the Netherlands, England and other nations of western Europe, and thus eventually on to the New World. By not only grounding this journey into democratic views, liberal theology and cosmopolitan culture in the Sephardic experience, with the Ashkenazi and *Yiddishkeit* further east as a secondary formation, Levine puts greater weight on the side of Maimonidean rationalism than Nachmanidean irrationality and mysticism, that is, the thought worlds of Kabbalah and East European Hasidism, even though he skirted the whole philosophical and institutional crisis that preceded the breakdown of Spanish and Portuguese Jewry and its culminating disaster in the 1490s.

When dealing with Ashkenazi Yiddish-speaking Jewry, Winnipeg-based Levine again tried to focus on a few individuals or, at least, families, to give his narrative focus. He does not make the obvious comparisons between the Sephardim and the Ashkenazim, perhaps because he is a child of East European immigrants, like most American and Canadian Jews today. Perhaps, too, because the rise of modern Israel has obscured many of the earlier differences, not least with the very term Sephardi coming to designate immigrants from North Africa, the Balkan, and the Arab Middle East; with the Spanish and Iberian culture that once was paramount obscured. The openness to surrounding civilizations, the poetic and philological achievements, and the proud assertion of continuity with ancient Israel have often been lost in the overwhelming voices of Ashkenazi Orthodoxy and Liberalism, assimilation and secularism. Instead of Maimonidean rationalism and

study of the Law as an instrument of participation in scientific and philosophical modernity, many immigrants from the Mediterranean world have fallen under the sway of Nachmanidean spiritualism, mysticism and obscurantism, even to the point of adopting the customs, dress, language and attitudes of ultra-Orthodoxy and Hasidism, both alien to Sephardic traditions. Yet despite this, Levine gives a fair picture of how Jews fared within the Pale of Settlement and in their migration to the New World to escape pogroms and social stagnation.

His chapter on the Dreyfus Affair is one of the best I have seen – and I have myself written three lengthy studies of Alfred and Lucie Dreyfus – both in the sense of a comprehensive overview of the context and circumstances of the case for and against Dreyfus, and in the sense of updating so-called standard views through integration of research into private archives during the last ten to fifteen years, at least up to 2002. Levine avoids many of the egregious errors usually made by historians in assessing the role of the Dreyfus family, although he still overlooks the activities of Lucie Hadamard's family and other relatives, as well as of Lucie herself in her lengthy correspondence with Alfred during his five years imprisonment on Devil's Island. Levine still skims over Alfred's dozens of notebooks kept while in solitary confinement on the island, *cahiers* filled with commentaries on books and ideas, poetry and speculative essays, as well as mathematical and engineering problems, linguistic exercises, and thousands of 'doodles' drawn on almost every page, sometimes filling whole pages, the significance of which is only slowly being recognized. He also tends to take at face value Alfred's seeming dismissal of Judaism as a pertinent factor, not only in the false charges brought against him, but in the formation of his personality and intellect.

In the chapter called the *Goldene Medinah*, the Golden Land of America, Levine's focus rests squarely on the development of the Lower East Side in New York City, the original source of so much that is now typically Jewish in the modern view of Jewish values and attitudes. While the author does not completely neglect the growth of communities and institutions outside of New York, nor the key formative role in education played by several Sephardic rabbis from Livorno in Italy who crossed the Atlantic, his version of Jewish America conforms to the pictures and characters in the so-called writers

of the Jewish Renaissance of the 1950s and 1960s (i.e. Malamud, Roth, Potock, *et al.*) as well as the cinematic and television clichés now familiar to everyone, including Gentiles.

Even more moving and powerful is the chapter concerning Vilnius, the Jerusalem of the North. Its account of the formation and then the liquidation of the city's ghetto by the Nazis and their local assistants is a synthesis of published sources, although it is based mainly on English and a few translated studies, rather than German, Polish, Lithuanian, Yiddish and Hebrew works or original archival research and personal interviews. It is in the clarity of his style and the focus of Levine's narrative that his presentation gains value.

The other powerful and important chapter is the penultimate, 'Zionists and Soviets'. While an excellent scholarly study of the treatment of Jews in the Soviet Union during the twentieth century and especially of the struggle for the right of *Refusniks* to migrate to Israel, it seems a somewhat odd choice of a topic in this book as presently conceived. It is excellent in some ways that the previous chapter on Lithuanian Jewry missed out on, such as the use of primary sources, published interviews, and personal research. To a certain degree, it tries to balance out the earlier examination on the development of various forms of accommodation to and secret strategies for surviving or even opposing the pressures towards conversion in Iberia during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Levine stressing at times the Marrano-like existence Jews in the USSR had to adapt to masquerade their true identities, their attempts to practice Judaism and maintain Jewish culture in secret, facing a state apparatus run by Stalin as absurd and absolutist as the Inquisition. However, on its own the chapter does not achieve the needs of the whole of *Scattered Among the Peoples*. The experiences of Jews under that persecutory regime cannot represent all of modern Jewish history – or the history of Judaism as a culture as well as a religion – in the modern age. It would take similar chapters on the dialectic of Jewish-American society and on the ordeal of the founding and creation of a specific Israeli nationhood in the post-

World War Two period to fill out the picture, something barely attempted in the short final chapter on ‘The Diaspora in 2000’.

Published in 2002, Levine’s concluding chapter sets out to serve as an overview and prognosis of Jews and Judaism in the twenty-first century, but thirteen years on seems unbelievably optimistic, or should we not rather say naïve. Things changed drastically in 2001 and Levine does not take those changes into account. A few months before the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the Durban UN Conference on Racism made it abundantly clear that the tide of anti-Semitism (whether or not in the guise of anti-Zionism) had not only turned against the Jews (and Israel), but had become a sustained tsunami; a tidal wave of hate, bigotry and intellectual obscenity not experienced since 1945 that goes on and on and on. The triple-attacks of 9/11 tipped the world off its axis: the United States itself had been subjected to major infiltration and could no longer think of itself as immune, above and beyond the kind of constant threats to its very existence that Israel has endured from its very beginnings as a modern state.

But whereas the Jewish state has fought many wars, geared itself up to confront both the external enemies and those who have breached its geographical boundaries, and decided to continue as a democratic, urban and technological homeland for its people, as well as a protector of Jews throughout the Diaspora, the United States, like Europe, has fumbled, dithered and retreated into ambiguity and confusion. This sudden weakness on the part of its former allies since the late 1940s, means that Israel – and Jews, and Judaism too – has to reassess its own inner and historical resources to survive. Not an easy task to undertake and accompanied by its own confusions and debates, nevertheless Israel – the land, the state, the people and the sacred Law it lives by – is in the process of renewing itself, just as it always has done in times of crisis. Levine, unfortunately, does not address this aspect of his story. His narrative tends to be a version of lachrymose history, of a people who only marginally escape from the horrors of their past, and who remain mostly in a state of prehistoric

anticipation of either the next disaster or a messianic apocalypse. He has no appreciation for the force of the Jewish imagination or intellect.

From his perspective, where American and European support for Israel has dwindled away into a mere sham, when the culture clash between civilization and barbarism is denied even as it is promoted in every news broadcast, and however much the West seeks to hide itself within the delusions of political correctness and appeasement the fate of the Jews depends on the strength and vitality of Israel, the two key chapters in Levine's book should be examined again. The one that deals with how the Holocaust developed into the most enormous crime ever committed against a people and their culture and the other how the Jews in the Soviet Union hung on to their culture despite the power of the communist regime and managed to evoke one of the last so far united efforts by their co-religionists around the world, they do more than expose at worst weakness and passivity or at best dogged determination to survive.

But there is another way to look at what happened. Out of apparent defeat and death – Levine speaks of the great destruction of the European heartland of Yiddish civilization and of an experience in America of assimilation and loss of faith in Jewish identity – comes new intellectual and artistic vitality and the creation of a modern, thriving democracy in the ancient land of Israel. Levine tends to neglect the cultural and religious history of Judaism, focusing on individuals and their families as they coped with hostile and aggressive political and social institutions; he has almost nothing to say about artists, philosophers, writers, musicians and scientists who created a good part of what we today call modernity. In another sense, without analysing the moral, ethical or spiritual dimensions of the sheer fact of survival against all the odds that history could throw at them, the Children of Israel have created a new version of their most ancient and essential myths; the struggle for freedom, the foundation of a nation based on Law, and the persistence of their own memory as a civilization.

A Personal Note

I recall attending a lecture in the late 1990s at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem by a Canadian scholar who came to speak of gloom and doom, about falling synagogue attendance, loss of population through marriage out of the kosher clan, and decadence in loyalty to the old practices of rabbinical tradition. His evidence came in the form of comparing membership in Orthodox and Conservative houses of worship: the demographic was slipping dangerously. When questioned, this expert could not imagine or accept that people expressed their Jewishness in other ways than old-fashioned Ashkenazi habits of living.

I pointed out that when I lived in Winnipeg – his prime example – almost every Jew I knew was part of a different kind of community: some sent their children to the *Volkshul* where socialist Zionism was promoted, others to provincial schools where the study of French and English culture was a concomitant to the *Yiddishkeit* they learned at home; these families joined social groups centred on support for Israel, promoting *aliya* and reading Hebrew novels, attending Israeli plays and dance-performances, and even studying and arguing about Kabbalah. And this whole unaffiliated community that the visiting lecturer did not have eyes to see was roused during the 1967 war, collecting great sums of money, sending sons and fathers to join the IDF or work on kibbutzim, and totally expressing their support for their Homeland. Nor would this Canadian scholar accept as valid figures that showed how, in general, intermarriage led, not to an absolute diminution of Jewish numbers or a percentile turning away from Jewish culture, but rather to an expansion. For even if the spouse did not formally convert, he or she encouraged their children to learn about Jewish history, to visit Israel, and to become creative in ways that embraced Jewish values.

So I ask myself, after reading Levine's *Scattered Among the People*, is there a precedent for this kind of renewal and recreation of Judaism? It lies in the way Maimonides tried to unravel the perplexity of his students through the study of what was then modern science and philosophy. It can be found in the French and German Haskalah, an Enlightenment that asked of young men and women to go out into the modern, secular world as Jews – and become painters, musicians, critics, scholars, sculptors, playwrights, and to develop the new arts of cinema and television, to open new electronic and digital means of

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communication, to advance medicine beyond the positivistic realms of the nineteenth century – to explore, to innovate, to improve the world. It can be found among the Sephardim who still maintain their openness to other cultures, whether Christian, Muslim or secularized modernity; and among the Jewish men and women throughout the ages whom wrote the books the rabbis did not approve of, the artists and craftsmen who designed and decorated the synagogues and other public buildings that ancient enemies destroy again and again; and all those who have retained the memory of dances, songs and patterns of thought and recreated them again and again to provide them matrix of Jewish thought and social life.

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