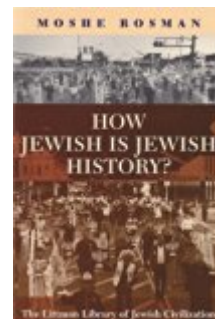


Murray Jay Rosman. *How Jewish Is Jewish History?*. Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007. xii + 220 pp. \$39.50, cloth, ISBN 978-1-904113-34-8.



Reviewed by Steven Bowman

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"I object to Jewish history," stuttered Yudke, the shy hero of Hayyim Hazzaz's searing critique of the Diaspora in his short story "The Sermon," written nearly four lunar cycles ago (ca. 1936). Moshe Rosman, under siege by internal critics of his craft, spent a decade reading postmodernism. His brief, incisive, and welcome conversation with contemporary Jewish historiography will be of inordinate use to the perplexed of our time. In the nearly seventy years between Hazzaz and Rosman a revolution has taken place that has shifted the Jewish axis from a modern world to an uneasy postmodern one, and replaced giants with their student heirs.

Postmodernism is the latest stage in the crisis of doubt that has plagued intellectuals since the pre-WWI challenges to the Bible, to German identity, and to Aristotle's physics. Each generation has added its own facet to this prism of doubt, and postmodernism, with its multifaceted attack on whatever remained staid and sacred, is best seen in light of the political, social, and scientific developments of the past two centuries. Here we

should recall the useful observation of Wade Baskin, who translated Ferdinand de Saussure's, *Course in General Linguistics*: "The dominant philosophical system of each age makes its imprint on each step in the evolution of linguistic science." [1] Here we may substitute historiography for linguistics.

How postmodernism plays among Jewish intellectuals is evident from the rise of feminism and feminist studies, in particular the attacks on a patriarchal Bible paralleling the philosophical rereading of Plato and Aristotle. (Actually the former dates back to Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the late nineteenth century). That library is still being written by both male and female Jewish scholars with numerous iconoclastic, albeit some beneficial, contributions, as Rosman notes in his final chapter on Jacob Katz's contribution to women's history, the hitherto unrevealed strand of DNA in Jewish history.

Rosman, a professor of Polish Jewish history at Bar Ilan, encountered postmodernism while on

sabbatical in the United States and quickly began considering its ramifications for Jewish history. A decade later he confronted at a conference in Berkeley the extent to which postmodernism had affected his discipline. A potentially terminal condition gave him the incentive to read and write more broadly on this challenge. This volume, in which Rosman addresses the challenges facing the writers of Jewish history in the postmodernist climate, is a result of that effort and consists in the main of several previously published articles (chaps. 2-7), a new extensive introduction, a new chapter, and a conclusion that provide an intellectually stimulating survey of the contemporary challenges to writing and teaching Jewish history.

Recognizing that language and translation control any discourse and that encoded language is a uniquely human way of relating to our reality—that is, "constructionism"—the author shows that any discourse must be deconstructed to be intellectually useful in the changing phases of reality. So, according to Rosman, constructionists, or "modest critics," "looked to evaluate power and interests," while postmodernist critics "try to detect power and interests." Here Rosman summarizes Michel Foucault, Hayden White, and the more extreme Ilan Pappé, for whom "the ideological or moral sense of the teller") supersedes the availability of source material which in any case is "unimportant" (p. 7). Rather, "a new moral consciousness" outscores accuracy. (Such an attitude may help us understand somewhat, in addition to anti-Semitism, the contemporary denial of the Holocaust.) Fortunately, Rosman nearly saves us from this desultory attack with an apt and welcome quote from Menahem Brinker, reminding us that fiction is not related to the facts whereas history is!

With respect to Jewish history, which has been challenged as a discipline by other historians and postmodernists alike, Rosman notes that the proliferation of individual monographs leads to the traditional metanarratives (eschewed by

postmodernists in general) being replaced by a new "multicultural" narrative that emphasizes the influence of the local culture on the Jewish community. "Such a view is postmodern enough in its multiperspectivism, but its 'meta-ness' contradicts the spirit of postmodernism" (p. 18).

The chapters following this lengthy introduction deal with the theoretical challenges of postmodernism for Jewish history (1-4) and to the ways that new methods and perspectives may be adapted to postmodern Jewish historiography (5-7). Rosman begins with a somewhat sardonic observation that Jewish historians usually indicated their attitudes in the conclusion while postmodernism has made it almost mandatory to confess one's approach in the introduction, to which the author bends a knee in his preface. He identifies five key questions in Jewish history: 1) What are the Jews? 2) Do all Jews share a common history? 3) Was *Galut* good or bad for the Jews? 4) How do Jews fit into history? Or do they function on a unique rhythm, z.B., David Gans? 5) Which metahistory to choose (if any)? Rosman argues that, given the plethora of metahistories proposed by nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians, postmodernism opts for the multicultural, namely that Jewish society is "a 'hybrid' component of the 'hegemonic' society and culture ... within which Jewish identity, culture, and society are 'constructed'—differently in each time and place" (p. 53). In other words, there can be no master narrative. Rosman's response is, as the late Benny Kraut once observed, "Remembering the event is integral to the experience of it. Jewish history has formed the Jews. Only if they believe in it will they continue to exist" (p. 55).

It seems to me that Jewish historiography, rather than Jewish history or historiosophy—a somewhat lost concept—is based on three seminal premodern texts: the Bible, which portrays a divine interaction with Jews; Josephus (first century), who weaves Rome and Jerusalem with a goodly smattering of diasporism; and *Sepher*

Yosippon (tenth century), which presents a nationalist viewpoint that has prevailed among the religious and secularists *mutatis mutandis* to the present day. If we add to this Baskin's observation cited above, then we have the parameters for the challenge that postmodernism posits for Jewish history. How much of the Jewish past is seminal for a Jewish future? Should we really be interested in a Jewish present since biblical Hebrew has no tenses, only two modalities: a completed action and an uncompleted action? It was the Greeks, as we have learned, who introduced the centrality of the imminent now, the ancestor of existentialism and its spin-offs culminating in postmodernism.

Rosman has posed many questions in his conversation with postmodernism and its followers. He has read widely and deeply, and this reading will benefit the receptive and critical reader and enlighten the student. His chapter on the Polish-Jewish experience is illustrative of trends among seventeenth-nineteenth-century east European Jews and their cultural—in the broadest sense of the term—development. His later critique of the folklorists via a one-sided exchange with Eli Yassif is a delightful interlude in his journey through the fragmenting scholarship on Jewish history. Homi Bhabha and the post-colonialists enter the scene (the former with his "colonial hybridity" as an evolving culture which Rosman historicizes by the term "palimpsest"), but they can only complement rather than determine Jewish historiography; similarly, the literary critics have something to teach us as we plod our way through the swamp of *toldoth*. But how does "hybridity" work, Rosman asks, when applied to the phenomenon of Portuguese Crypto-Jews? Apparently Jews are not Indians (save perhaps for Mel Brooks and the more seriously investigated communities of the subcontinent). It is clear that the terms "Jew," "Jewish," and "Judaism" are reinterpreted in each generation within the parameters of each community against the background of its environment.

But beyond the vicissitudes of hybridity, a greater challenge to Jewish history is the denial by the prolific school of Jacob Neusner that there is even a Jewish history. The question of Neusner's school is whether the Torah of Sinai is more important than the word of Gott from Auschwitz. As they argue, we should only be studying the "history of Judaism." Indeed, Neusner has opted out of the *Jewish history* argument as did other heresiarchal victims (Paul, Mani, Martin Luther) of what David Flusser once called "*unrechte Verbindungen*."

On another plane Rosman suggests a close relationship between contemporary multiculturalism and the nineteenth-century mission of Jewish civilization. Both seem to be apologetic and thus recall Josephus's seminal work noted earlier. Again we recall Baskin's observation and patiently await the next generation's intellectual critique of postmodernism, which is cluttering our libraries. But why critique too harshly an interesting ongoing dialogue?

Rosman (chap. 5) gives a nuanced treatment of "tradition." To summarize briefly, it is an ongoing conversation with the past adjusted to the exigencies of the present. He shows to what extent a knowledge if not training in rabbinic sources is necessary to study and interpret Jewish history since in certain places and times Jews were religious—despite the postmodernist, secularist challenge—and based themselves on a contemporary adaptation of their inherited texts. The Greeks did it with Homer, Plato, and Aristotle. Why should not Jews do it with Torah and Talmud? But what is tradition? Only Jewish sources? Here Rosman, having analyzed some halakhic customs in Poland and their antecedents in the Rhineland, proffers a broader observation—although distinctive, Jews were an integral part of the Polish polysystem, just as they were and are in any society! So Jews adopted and adapted both from outside influences and from the wealth of tradition. He then critiques the lack of study of Jewish attitudes to-

ward non-Jews in Poland, as if the agenda were set in stone that only non-Jewish attitudes toward Jews were necessary to study, analyze, and teach.

Finally, cultural history, a product of post-modernism perhaps, has introduced Jewish women as subjects into Jewish history; more importantly, it has recovered the voices of Jewish women as writers of Jewish history. While Jewish society has been naturally gendered, nonetheless we are now learning how complex was the female role. Another seminal area is the ubiquity of Kabbalah among early modern Jewry in Poland-Lithuania and the Ottoman Empire. How do we enter Gershom Scholem's pioneering and revolutionary contributions into the scheme of Jewish history? While the world of the scholars has been fairly well plowed, we still have to illuminate the impact of popular Kabbalah among the male and female masses.

Having engaged many of the "isms" that constitute postmodernism, Rosman ends with a typical rabbinic closing. To paraphrase: history is a story in progress. The current Hiwi al-Balkhis are challenging the inherited metahistory with new intellectual constructs. We await a new Sa'adia who will answer them and the new Karaites who eschew the dominant consensus scholarship by incorporating this panoply of monologues into a discourse for the next generation of Jews who will grapple anew with their identity and their past. "To reiterate," as Rosman concludes, "postmodern Jewish historiography is possible. It probably must give up on the classic metahistories, although it will not be able to avoid replacing them.... How Jewish is Jewish history? As Jewish as the Jews have been, and as Jewish as historians have the courage to present it" (p. 186).

Note

[1]. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), xvi.

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