

## ***Striving for Truth: Struggling with the Historical Critical Method***

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Holiness and history – like oil and water – would seem to be an immiscible pair. Of course, both the quest for holiness and the pursuit of history are conducted in the name of truth. But there the resemblance ends. Things equal to the same thing are not always equal to each other. Holiness is transcendental; history is cognizable. Holiness is subjective and incommunicable; history is objective and intelligible. Holiness speaks to the soul; history addresses the mind. Our topic, however, entails more than a juxtaposition of unlike elements; it embodies a profound conflict. History placed at the service of faith (or any other ideology) can have volatile, if not dangerous consequences. When theologies or ideologies make history their servant, the ensuing distortions and falsifications make dissenters and non-believers their victims. No people should be more sensitive to this peril than the Jews, who have been victimized by historians of hate, from Bible bashers to Holocaust deniers.

One may, of course, argue that the dichotomy between history and holiness does not apply to Judaism; that our religious tradition affirms the value of history by constantly invoking historical events within the context of religious belief and performance. It demands that we relate to the great defining moments of our national history, from *yetsi'at mitsrayim* [exodus from Egypt] to the *burban beit ha-miqdash* [destruction of the Temple], through the performance of various rituals and obligations. But here we must differentiate between memory and history. When we celebrate the Passover *seder* or engage in *aveilut* on *Tish'a be-Av*, we recall the past, even re-enact it, but we certainly are not required to engage in an historical/critical analysis of causal factors, economic circumstances, political conditions, or cultural environments that contributed to these events. And although God introduces himself at Sinai as the Author of the Exodus, it is not at all clear if He means that He is the God of history or the God who sometimes pre-empted history.

Many years ago, while still in *yeshivah*, I remember the *rebbe* interrupting the *shi'ur* to request some mathematical formula that was relevant to our discussion. When no one came forward, he somewhat sarcastically chided the class, “What happened to your commitment to *Torah* and *madda*?” Didn’t we know that we could see the greatness of the Creator through mathematical and scientific principles? As a history major, I took umbrage at his theological preference for the sciences and asked: “But isn’t it equally true that we can see Divine Providence through the study of history?” With a knowing gleam in his eye he answered: “Well, if you study history in order to see the *hashgabah* [Divine Providence] in every event, then that is O.K. too.” To which the class wit countered (albeit in a stage whisper): “*Rebbe*, it’s hard to believe that when Louis XIV was choosing a mistress the *hashgabah* had anything to do with it!” There was a profound truth embodied in that bit of sarcasm.

The endowing of all history with Divine purpose leads to the exclusion of any analytical method. The result is an a-historical, if not anti-historical approach that obscures truths rather than uncovering them. Worse, eschewing the historical/critical method results in sins of commission: hagiolatry, distortion, and triumphalism. Permit me to explain these categories:

Hagiolatry is the taking the medieval-style “lives of the saints” to an extreme bordering on idolatry. I think that we are all familiar with the cottage industry of “*gedolim* biographies” that fill the shelves of Jewish bookstores. These stereotypical treatments of great scholars, according to one description,

begin with the saintliness of the *gadol*'s parents. Then follows a *de rigueur* description of the *gadol* as a child prodigy and *tzaddik* who, as everyone

could tell, was destined to become a Torah great. He continues his development into precocious adolescence, ultimately marries an equally saintly woman and finally emerges as the towering Torah giant. It is not difficult to understand a certain woman who, after reading a few of these stylized stories, remarked in all seriousness, “How interesting to note that all *gedolim* lived identical lives.”

Lest this quotation be stigmatized as unfair “*haredi*-bashing,” let me note that this description is taken from a review in the *Jewish Observer*, published by *Agudat Yisrael*.<sup>1</sup> Such biographies do little to add to our understanding of history or of the human dimension of their subjects. In fact, one of my students, a mother of five who had returned to college, complained that these books set such high standards that they actually frustrated and discouraged some of her children who saw these men as inimitable role models.

The second sin — distortion for the sake of ideological correctness — is usually committed via historic selectivity, though it is sometimes the product of outright prevarication. The recent debate over Efraim Zuroff’s book<sup>2</sup> on the *Va`ad ha-Hatsalah* has produced many such examples. In defending the *Va`ad* and the orthodox community from perceived criticism, one writer describes the various post-war activities of *Agudat Yisrael* to aid the DP’s without once mentioning the darker side of those efforts, including the lack of cooperation and vehement debates among *Agudat*, *Mizrabi*, and the *Va`ad* about policy issues, threats of resignation, and misrepresentation of facts in organizational advertising

of the time.<sup>3</sup> The famous controversy over the volume entitled *My Uncle the Netziv* is another prime example of this historic disingenuousness that results from the pairing of religious agenda with historical writing.<sup>4</sup>

Last in this sinful series is triumphalism. Triumphalist versions of history, such as those produced to bolster nationalist causes or political movements, are the bane of serious scholars and — unfortunately — the bread and butter of so-called religious historians. Some of you are familiar with purported histories whose sole purpose is to demonstrate that only Orthodoxy guaranteed Jewish survival, as if creativity and vitality were the exclusive possession of the *frum*. In a recent essay, one such author complains that while the secular historian Heinrich Graetz may have known what color shirt *Rasbi* wore, he and his ilk ignored “what *Rasbi* really stood for and his immortal contribution to Jewish survival and destiny.”<sup>5</sup> Such pulpit polemics don’t serve history well. Nor do one-sided evaluations of great movements in Judaism, such as Hasidism, that ignore social and religious consequences that may not have had such a salutary effect on Jewish life. A triumphalist “We told you so” is not an acceptable thesis, and uncritical accounts for the sake of religious inspiration cannot pass for history.

I should add, perhaps, that it is not only the religious right that suffers from such lapses in historical credibility. I still remember my professor of American Jewish History, the late Hyman B. Grinstein, criticizing Moshe Davis for his over-zealousness in claiming all English-speaking rabbis of the 19th century as precursors of Conservative Judaism in his published history of that

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Aharon Feldman, “*Gedolim* Books And The Biography of Reb Yaakov Kaminetzky,” *The Jewish Observer*, 27, 8 (November, 1994): 32-33.

<sup>2</sup> *The Response of Orthodox Jewry in the United States to the Holocaust: The Activities of the Va`ad ha-Hatzolah Rescue Committee* (New York: Yeshiva University, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Nisson Wolpin, “Facing *Churban* Europe: The Anguish, The Grief... and the Sense of Mission,” *The Jewish Observer*, 33, 6 (June, 2000): 6-16. Some of the primary sources documenting these issues have been published in Jonathan Helfand, ed., *Archives of the Holocaust: Yeshiva University* (New York and London, 1991), a collection of documents from the *Va`ad Hatsalah* archives.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob J. Schacter, “Haskalah, Secular Studies, and the Close of the Yeshiva of Volozhin, in 1892” *The Torah u-Madda Journal*, 2 (1990): 76-133. For an encyclopedic review of such distortions and misrepresentations see his recent essay “Facing the Truths of History,” *The Torah u-Madda Journal*, 8 (1998-1999): 200-276.

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Berel Wein, “Why History?” *The Jerusalem Post*, 2000.

movement.

Why do those who strive for truth as a religious exercise turn their back on the historical enterprise? Why are they wary if not hostile when it comes to this combination of “history and holiness”? I believe they have several compelling arguments. First, they ask, what can history add to the quality of our observance? Would reciting the latent socio-economic factors influencing the enslavement of the Jews in Egypt really enhance our *seder* experience? Would our mourning for the *hurban* be more meaningful if we read a history of Roman military tactics in conjunction with *Eikebab*?

Second, the dissection and analysis of historic events deprive them of their aura of mystery and sanctity. The fear of the desacralizing effect of historical analysis is not limited to religious thinkers. Many have argued against the prominent place given to Holocaust studies because they feel it trivializes and even demeans the victims and their martyrdom. In his recent autobiography, Raul Hilberg tells how his history of the Holocaust was first rejected and later attacked for its frankness and some of its embarrassing truths. Referring to Theodor Adorno’s condemnation of those who would write poetry after Auschwitz as barbaric, Hilberg asks rhetorically, “Are footnotes less barbaric?” Ultimately, he observes, academic research will reduce this greatest of Jewish catastrophes into “catastrophology.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, for many, any critical study of our national past leaves the story of the Jewish struggle for survival spiritually disemboweled.

Third, since the nineteenth century, guilt by association has tainted the study of Jewish history. Religious Jews, and especially rabbinic authorities, have associated the study of Jewish history with *Wissenschaft des judenthums*, the Science of Judaism, an approach adopted by many who sought to use history to bolster the calls for reli-

gious change and reform. The ideologues of the Reform movement used the “objective-scientific approach” to challenge rabbinic law and to promote innovation in synagogue and ritual practice. Indeed, one could say that the Reform movement was the first to abuse history for the sake of ideological initiatives. Little wonder that the late Dr. Samuel Belkin, President of Yeshiva University, once praised himself for never having allowed *hokhmat yisra’el* [*Wissenschaft*] within the walls of his *yeshivah*.

Fourth, in the scale of intellectual priorities, engaging in the study of history is viewed as an unnecessary waste of time better spent on Torah studies, a *bittul torah*.

Finally, the unflinching search for truth in history is seen by some as being diametrically opposed to traditional religious values. The late Rabbi Shimon Schwab presented the most effective exposition of this view:

There is a vast difference between history and storytelling. History must be truthful; otherwise it does not deserve its name. A book of history must report the bad with the good, the ugly with the beautiful, ... the guilt and the virtue. ...It cannot spare the righteous if he fails, and it cannot skip the virtues of the villain.<sup>7</sup>

And this, of course is the problem. Only a prophet, speaking in God’s name, says Rabbi Schwab, has the right to record the embarrassing truths of history. Citing the example of pre-Holocaust Germany, he points out that a factual history would have to report uncomplimentary things about the community and its leaders. This would violate the prohibition against *lashon ha-ra* and, furthermore, would serve no ethical purpose. Instead of the naked truth, he proposes that we teach our children “the good memories,” tell of the good people, their faith, honesty, charity, and reverence for

<sup>6</sup> Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory* (Chicago, 1996), p. 138.

<sup>7</sup> Simon Schwab, *Selected Writings* (Lakewood, N.J., 1988), p. 233. I am grateful to Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter for drawing my attention to this essay several years ago.

<sup>8</sup> Schwab, p. 234.

Torah – not their inadequacies and contradictions:

Every generation has to put a veil over the human failings of its elders...that means that we have to do without a real history book.... We do not need realism; we need *inspiration* from our forefathers in order to pass it on to posterity.<sup>8</sup>

Have we then reached the point of no return? Is the methodological/theological divide between history and holiness unbridgeable? Must the historian and the Orthodox Jew part ways? I think not. Clearly there are serious issues, some of which we have raised here and others that we have not, and not all of them can be easily resolved. But for lack of an easy answer one need not necessarily give up the entire enterprise.

I would suggest, with all due respect to the memory of Rav Schwab, that the promotion of historical truth within the religious context has educational, moral, and spiritual value, and that repression of such truth poses a far greater danger than its revelation. In his famous essay *J'accuse*, Emile Zola issued a warning that echoes true today even more than when he wrote it over a century ago:

When truth is buried in the earth, it accumulates there, and assumes so mighty an explosive power that, on the day it bursts forth, it hurls everything into the air. We shall see if they [the suppressers of truth] have not just made preparations for the most resounding of disasters yet to come.

We live in an age where the cover-up no longer works and truth cannot be suppressed. Some years ago in Israel, one *bedats* [rabbinical court for supervising *kashrut*] threatened to remove its supervision from some yogurt treat when the company began decorating the containers with pictures of dinosaurs. The campaign to remove the offensive design received wide coverage in the media and, by the time the decorative dinosaurs were removed, the attendant publicity ensured that everyone – including those the *bedats* wished to shelter

from such dangerous ideas – had learned about these prehistoric creatures. The lesson is clear: history and science will not disappear for our religious convenience or comfort, and we cannot hide or protect our children from a truth that cries out from even our yogurt containers. Educationally, then, it would be a grave error to let others, less committed than ourselves, expose our children to the problematic or controversial issues of Jewish history.

It is also a great mistake to create such cults of personality around our leaders and heroes as to make them unreal and unreachable. The Torah injected a note of realism into the narrative because it wanted to encourage our moral development and not portray models of sanctity whose very perfection would discourage emulation. The pursuit of truth in Jewish history offers the opportunity not only to learn from the failings of the past, but also to be encouraged by them to try again when we fall short of the high standards we aspire to.

Finally, there is a great spiritual value in the pursuit of truth, wherever it is to be found. Truth, the rabbis tell us, is the seal of God. The first word that follows our recitation of the *shema* in the morning and in the evening is *emet*, true. And if truth is such a basic religious value we should seek its inspiration in all realms of knowledge.

The book “*Hut ha-Meshulash*,” a classic biography of the *Hatam Sofer* written by his grandson, offers a refreshing example of such pursuit of historical truth. The author tells us that his revered grandfather gave a historical explanation for the absence of any discussion of *Hanukkah* in the Mishnah. Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi, editor of the Mishnah, was a descendant of King David, and the Hasmonean dynasty had usurped the Davidic throne. Therefore, when he wrote the Mishnah with divine inspiration, this story was left out of the text. Interestingly, this interpretation did not sit well with some 20th century zealots, one of whom engaged in some historic revisionism of his own, claiming that this could not have been the intention of the *Hatam Sofer*, since it ascribed less than lofty motives to R. Judah ha-Nasi.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Binyamin Shlomo Hamberger, ed., *Zikhronot u-mesorot al ha-Hatam Sofer*, (Bnai Brak, 1996), p. 13.

With similar honesty, the author records that the *Hatam Sofer* gave a *baskamah* [approbation] for a German translation of the Talmud and later rescinded it. The venerable rabbi of Munkatsh, a century after the fact, condemned this account as a lie and part of a modernist plot to sully the reputation of the *gedolim*. It goes without saying that the story is verifiably true and, as such, it reflects the integrity of the *Hatam Sofer*. Sadly, it is the attack of the Munkatsher Rav on the truth that brings the rabbinate into disrepute.<sup>10</sup>

Running away from history is not only a legacy of the religious right. The writer Haim Hazaz in a short story entitled “*Ha-Derashah*” tells of a reticent kibbutznik who one day rises at a meeting to hesitatingly announce: “I am opposed to Jewish history.” As he warms to his topic he angrily declares:

I would simply forbid teaching our children Jewish history. Why the devil teach them about our ancestors’ shame? I would just say to them: Boys, from the day we were exiled from our land we have been a people without a history. Class dismissed. Go out and play football.<sup>11</sup>

Jewish history should be neither an issue of shame nor one of nostalgia but a matter of truth, the whole truth, about our national past – triumphs, tragedies and all.

There are two caveats that must be made. First, as

important as historical truth might be, it must not be made to impinge on religious truth or practice. Professor Daniel Sperber, at the conclusion of an essay demonstrating that the *minhag* to abstain from meat and wine during the “nine days” is based on an erroneous understanding of a text, adds a note saying that this analysis should not form the basis for rejecting the custom. Referring to an opinion of the Meiri, he says that the intrinsic value of the performance is the decisive factor, regardless of the historical fact that it is rooted in a mistaken understanding of a text.<sup>12</sup> History should enhance our understanding, and not be used as an arbiter of religious practice.

Second, history should be used as a tool, not a weapon, in our pursuit of truth. There is all too often a temptation to wield an event, a personality, or an anecdote as a bludgeon with which to bash our ideological adversaries. We trumpet the evidence that this rabbi said that or that this rebbetzin studied that, as if our singular historical discovery will suffice to resolve complicated matters of faith and practice. Or we gloat at the discovery of embarrassing truths, past and present, that really do little more than show the frailty of the human condition and say nothing of the righteousness of one position or another.

If truth is pursued in a truthful manner – religiously and historically – then I believe that historical integrity can make a significant contribution to our spirituality and our holiness.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor, Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (New York, 1989), p. 97.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael*, 1 (Jerusalem, 1990), p. 146, n. 25.

