

JEWISH HISTORY

AN ESSAY IN THE PHILOSOPHY
OF HISTORY

BY

S. M. DUBNOW

PREFACE TO THE GERMAN
TRANSLATION

The author of the present essay, S. M. Dubnow, occupies a well-nigh dominating position in Russian-Jewish literature as an historian and an acute critic. His investigations into the history of the Polish-Russian Jews, especially his achievements in the history of Chassidism, have been of fundamental importance in these departments. What raises Mr. Dubnow far above the status of the professional historian, and awakens the reader's lively interest in him, is not so much the matter of his books, as the manner of presentation. It is rare to meet with an historian in whom scientific objectivity and thoroughness are so harmoniously combined with an ardent temperament and plastic ability. Mr. Dubnow's scientific activity, first and last, is a striking refutation of the widespread opinion that identifies attractiveness of form in the work of a scholar with

superficiality of content. Even his strictly scientific investigations, besides offering the scholar a wealth of new suggestions, form instructive and entertaining reading matter for the educated layman. In his critical essays, Mr. Dubnow shows himself to be possessed of keen psychologic insight. By virtue of this quality of delicate perception, he aims to assign to every historical fact its proper place in the line of development, and so establish the bond between it and the general history of mankind. This psychologic ability contributes vastly to the interest aroused by Mr. Dubnow's historical works outside of the limited circle of scholars. There is a passage in one of his books[1] in which, in his incisive manner, he expresses his views on the limits and tasks of historical writing. As the passage bears upon the methods employed in the present essay, and, at the same time, is a characteristic specimen of our author's style, I take the liberty of quoting:

"The popularization of history is by no means to be pursued to the detriment of its severely scientific treatment. What is to be guarded against is the notion that tedium is inseparable from the scientific method. I have always been of the opinion that the dullness commonly looked upon as the prerogative of scholarly inquiries, is not an inherent attribute. In most cases it is conditioned, not by the nature of the subject under investigation, but by the temper of the

investigator. Often, indeed, the tediousness of a learned disquisition is intentional: it is considered one of the polite conventions of the academic guild, and by many is identified with scientific thoroughness and profound learning.... If, in general, deadening, hide-bound caste methods, not seldom the cover for poverty of thought and lack of cleverness, are reprehensible, they are doubly reprehensible in history. The history of a people is not a mere mental discipline, like botany or mathematics, but a living science, a *_magistra vitae_*, leading straight to national self-knowledge, and acting to a certain degree upon the national character. History is a science *_by_* the people, *_for_* the people, and, therefore, its place is the open forum, not the scholar's musty closet. We relate the events of the past to the people, not merely to a handful of archaeologists and numismatians. We work for national self-knowledge, not for our own intellectual diversion."

[1] In the introduction to his *_Historische Mitteilungen, Vorarbeiten zu einer Geschichte der polnisch-russischen Juden_*.

These are the principles that have guided Mr. Dubnow in all his works, and he has been true to them in the present essay, which exhibits in a remarkably striking way the author's art of making "all things seem fresh and new, important and attractive." New and important his essay undoubtedly is. The author attempts, for the first time,

a psychologic
characterization of Jewish history. He endeavors to
demonstrate the
inner connection between events, and develop the ideas
that underlie
them, or, to use his own expression, lay bare the soul
of Jewish
history, which clothes itself with external events as
with a bodily
envelope. Jewish history has never before been
considered from this
philosophic point of view, certainly not in German
literature. The
present work, therefore, cannot fail to prove
stimulating. As for the
poet's other requirement, attractiveness, it is fully
met by the work
here translated. The qualities of Mr. Dubnow's style, as
described
above, are present to a marked degree. The enthusiasm
flaming up in
every line, coupled with his plastic, figurative style,
and his
scintillating conceits, which lend vivacity to his
presentation, is
bound to charm the reader. Yet, in spite of the racy
style, even the
layman will have no difficulty in discovering that it is
not a clever
journalist, an artificer of well-turned phrases, who is
speaking to
him, but a scholar by profession, whose foremost concern
is with
historical truth, and whose every statement rests upon
accurate,
scientific knowledge; not a bookworm with pale, academic
blood
trickling through his veins, but a man who, with
unsoured mien, with
fresh, buoyant delight, offers the world the results
laboriously
reached in his study, after all evidences of toil and
moil have been
carefully removed; who derives inspiration from the
noble and the

sublime in whatever guise it may appear, and who knows how to communicate his inspiration to others.

The translator lays this book of an accomplished and spirited historian before the German public. He does so in the hope that it will shed new light upon Jewish history even for professional scholars. He is confident that in many to whom our unexampled past of four thousand years' duration is now terra incognita, it will arouse enthusiastic interest, and even to those who, like the translator himself, differ from the author in religious views, it will furnish edifying and suggestive reading. J. F.

PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION

The English translation of Mr. Dubnow's Essay is based upon the authorized German translation, which was made from the original Russian. It is published under the joint auspices of the Jewish Publication Society of America and the Jewish Historical Society of England. H. S.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE TO THE GERMAN TRANSLATION

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

I

THE RANGE OF JEWISH HISTORY

- Historical and Unhistorical Peoples
- Three Groups of Nations
- The "Most Historical" People
- Extent of Jewish History

II

THE CONTENT OF JEWISH HISTORY

- Two Periods of Jewish History
- The Period of Independence
- The Election of the Jewish People
- Priests and Prophets
- The Babylonian Exile and the Scribes
- The Dispersion
- Jewish History and Universal History
- Jewish History Characterized

III

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JEWISH HISTORY

- The National Aspect of Jewish History
- The Historical Consciousness
- The National Idea and National Feeling
- The Universal Aspect of Jewish History
- An Historical Experiment
- A Moral Discipline
- Humanitarian Significance of Jewish History
- Schleiden and George Eliot

IV

THE HISTORICAL SYNTHESIS

- Three Primary Periods
- Four Composite Periods

V

THE PRIMARY OR BIBLICAL PERIOD

- Cosmic Origin of the Jewish Religion
- Tribal Organization
- Egyptian Influence and Experiences

Moses
Mosaism a Religious and Moral as well as a Social and
Political
System
National Deities
The Prophets and the two Kingdoms
Judaism a Universal Religion

VI

THE SECONDARY OR SPIRITUAL-POLITICAL PERIOD

Growth of National Feeling
Ezra and Nehemiah
The Scribes
Hellenism
The Maccabees
Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes
Alexandrian Jews
Christianity

VII

THE TERTIARY TALMUDIC OR NATIONAL-RELIGIOUS PERIOD

The Isolation of Jewry and Judaism
The Mishna
The Talmud
Intellectual Activity in Palestine and Babylonia
The Agada and the Midrash
Unification of Judaism

VIII

THE GAONIC PERIOD, OR THE HEGEMONY OF THE ORIENTAL JEWS (500-980)

The Academies
Islam
Karaism
Beginning of Persecutions in Europe
Arabic Civilization in Europe

IX

THE RABBINIC-PHILOSOPHICAL PERIOD, OR THE HEGEMONY OF THE SPANISH

JEWS (980-1492)

- The Spanish Jews
- The Arabic-Jewish Renaissance
- The Crusades and the Jews
- Degradation of the Jews in Christian Europe
- The Provence
- The Lateran Council
- The Kabbala
- Expulsion from Spain

X

THE RABBINIC-MYSTICAL PERIOD, OR THE HEGEMONY OF THE GERMAN-POLISH

JEWS (1492-1789)

- The Humanists and the Reformation
- Palestine an Asylum for Jews
- Messianic Belief and Hopes
- Holland a Jewish Centre
- Poland and the Jews
- The Rabbinical Authorities of Poland
- Isolation of the Polish Jews
- Mysticism and the Practical Kabbala
- Chassidism
- Persecutions and Morbid Piety

XI

THE MODERN PERIOD OF ENLIGHTENMENT (THE NINETEENTH CENTURY)

- The French Revolution
- The Jewish Middle Ages
- Spiritual and Civil Emancipation
- The Successors of Mendelssohn
- Zunz and the Science of Judaism
- The Modern Movements outside of Germany
- The Jew in Russia
- His Regeneration
- Anti-Semitism and Judophobia

XII

THE TEACHINGS OF JEWISH HISTORY

- Jewry a Spiritual Community
- Jewry Indestructible

The Creative Principle of Jewry
The Task of the Future
The Jew and the Nations
The Ultimate Ideal

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

What is Jewish History? In the first place, what does it offer as to quantity and as to quality? What are its range and content, and what distinguishes it in these two respects from the history of other nations? Furthermore, what is the essential meaning, what the spirit, of Jewish History? Or, to put the question in another way, to what general results are we led by the aggregate of its facts, considered, not as a whole, but genetically, as a succession of evolutionary stages in the consciousness and education of the Jewish people?

If we could find precise answers to these several questions, they would constitute a characterization of Jewish History as accurate as is attainable. To present such a characterization succinctly is the purpose of the following essay.

JEWISH HISTORY

AN ESSAY IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

I

THE RANGE OF JEWISH HISTORY

Le peuple juif n'est pas seulement considérable par son antiquité, mais il est encore singulier en sa durée, qui a toujours continué depuis son origine jusqu'à maintenant ...

S'étendant depuis les premiers temps jusqu'aux derniers, l'histoire des juifs enferme dans sa durée celle de toutes nos histoires.--PASCAL, *Pensées*, II, 7.

To make clear the range of Jewish history, it is necessary to set down a few general, elementary definitions by way of introduction.

It has long been recognized that a fundamental difference exists between historical and unhistorical peoples, a difference growing out of the fact of the natural inequality between the various elements composing the human race. Unhistorical is the attribute applied to peoples that have not yet broken away, or have not departed very far, from the state of primitive savagery, as, for instance, the barbarous races of Asia and Africa who were the prehistoric ancestors of the Europeans, or the obscure, untutored tribes of the present, like the Tartars and the Kirghiz. Unhistorical peoples, then, are ethnic groups of all sorts that are bereft of a distinctive, spiritual individuality, and have failed to display normal, independent capacity for culture. The term historical, on the other hand, is

applied to the
nations that have had a conscious, purposeful history of
appreciable
duration; that have progressed, stage by stage, in their
growth and in
the improvement of their mode and their views of life;
that have
demonstrated mental productivity of some sort, and have
elaborated
principles of civilization and social life more or less
rational;
nations, in short, representing not only zoologic, but
also spiritual
types.[2]

[2] "The primitive peoples that change with their
environment,
constantly adapting themselves to their habitat and
to
external nature, have no history.... Only those
nations and
states belong to history which display self-
conscious action;
which evince an inner spiritual life by diversified
manifestations; and combine into an organic whole
what they
receive from without, and what they themselves
originate."

(Introduction to Weber's Allgemeine
Weltgeschichte, i,
pp. 16-18.)

Chronologically considered, these latter nations, of a
higher type,
are usually divided into three groups: 1, the most
ancient civilized
peoples of the Orient, such as the Chinese, the Hindoos,
the
Egyptians, the Chaldeans; 2, the ancient or classic
peoples of the
Occident, the Greeks and the Romans; and 3, the modern
peoples, the
civilized nations of Europe and America of the present
day. The most
ancient peoples of the Orient, standing "at the

threshold of history,"
were the first heralds of a religious consciousness and
of moral
principles. In hoary antiquity, when most of the
representatives of
the human kind were nothing more than a peculiar variety
of the class
mammalia, the peoples called the most ancient brought
forth recognized
forms of social life and a variety of theories of living
of fairly
far-reaching effect. All these culture-bearers of the
Orient soon
disappeared from the surface of history. Some (the
Chaldeans,
Phoenicians, and Egyptians) were washed away by the
flood of time, and
their remnants were absorbed by younger and more
vigorous peoples.
Others (the Hindoos and Persians) relapsed into a semi-
barbarous
state; and a third class (the Chinese) were arrested in
their growth,
and remained fixed in immobility. The best that the
antique Orient had
to bequeath in the way of spiritual possessions fell to
the share of
the classic nations of the West, the Greeks and the
Romans. They
greatly increased the heritage by their own spiritual
achievements,
and so produced a much more complex and diversified
civilization,
which has served as the substratum for the further
development of the
better part of mankind. Even the classic nations had to
step aside as
soon as their historical mission was fulfilled. They
left the field
free for the younger nations, with greater capability of
living, which
at that time had barely worked their way up to the
beginnings of a
civilization. One after the other, during the first two
centuries of

the Christian era, the members of this European family of nations appeared in the arena of history. They form the kernel of the civilized part of mankind at the present day.

Now, if we examine this accepted classification with a view to finding the place belonging to the Jewish people in the chronological series, we meet with embarrassing difficulties, and finally arrive at the conclusion that its history cannot be accommodated within the compass of the classification. Into which of the three historical groups mentioned could the Jewish people be put? Are we to call it one of the most ancient, one of the ancient, or one of the modern nations? It is evident that it may lay claim to the first description, as well as to the second and the last. In company with the most ancient nations of the Orient, the Jewish people stood at the "threshold of history." It was the contemporary of the earliest civilized nations, the Egyptians and the Chaldeans. In those remote days it created and spread a religious world-idea underlying an exalted social and moral system surpassing everything produced in this sphere by its Oriental contemporaries. Again, with the classical Greeks and Romans, it forms the celebrated historical triad universally recognized as the source of all great systems of civilization. Finally, in fellowship with the nations of to-day, it leads an historical life, striding onward in the path of progress without stay or interruption. Deprived of political independence, it nevertheless continues to fill a place

in the world
of thought as a distinctly marked spiritual
individuality, as one of
the most active and intelligent forces. How, then, are
we to
denominate this omnipresent people, which, from the
first moment of
its historical existence up to our days, a period of
thirty-five
hundred years, has been developing continuously. In view
of this
Methuselah among the nations, whose life is co-extensive
with the
whole of history, how are we to dispose of the
inevitable barriers
between "the most ancient" and "the ancient," between
"the ancient"
and "the modern" nations--the fateful barriers which
form the
milestones on the path of the historical peoples, and
which the Jewish
people has more than once overstepped?

A definition of the Jewish people must needs correspond
to the
aggregate of the concepts expressed by the three group-
names, most
ancient, ancient, and modern. The only description
applicable to it is
"the historical nation of all times," a description
bringing into
relief the contrast between it and all other nations of
modern and
ancient times, whose historical existence either came to
an end in
days long past, or began at a date comparatively recent.
And granted
that there are "historical" and "unhistorical" peoples,
then it is
beyond dispute that the Jewish people deserves to be
called "the most
historical" (_historicissimus_). If the history of the
world be
conceived as a circle, then Jewish history occupies the
position of

the diameter, the line passing through its centre, and the history of every other nation is represented by a chord marking off a smaller segment of the circle. The history of the Jewish people is like an axis crossing the history of mankind from one of its poles to the other. As an unbroken thread it runs through the ancient civilization of Egypt and Mesopotamia, down to the present-day culture of France and Germany. Its divisions are measured by thousands of years.

Jewish history, then, in its range, or, better, in its duration, presents an unique phenomenon. It consists of the longest series of events ever recorded in the annals of a single people. To sum up its peculiarity briefly, it embraces a period of thirty-five hundred years, and in all this vast extent it suffers no interruption. At every point it is alive, full of sterling content. Presently we shall see that in respect to content, too, it is distinguished by exceptional characteristics.

II

THE CONTENT OF JEWISH HISTORY

From the point of view of content, or qualitative structure, Jewish history, it is well known, falls into two parts. The dividing point between the two parts is the moment in which the Jewish state

collapsed irretrievably under the blows of the Roman Empire (70 C. E.). The first half deals with the vicissitudes of a nation, which, though frequently at the mercy of stronger nations, still maintained possession of its territory and government, and was ruled by its own laws. In the second half, we encounter the history of a people without a government, more than that, without a land, a people stripped of all the tangible accompaniments of nationality, and nevertheless successful in preserving its spiritual unity, its originality, complete and undiminished.

At first glance, Jewish history during the period of independence seems to be but slightly different from the history of other nations. Though not without individual coloring, there are yet the same wars and intestine disturbances, the same political revolutions and dynastic quarrels, the same conflicts between the classes of the people, the same warring between economical interests. This is only a surface view of Jewish history. If we pierce to its depths, and scrutinize the processes that take place in its penetralia, we perceive that even in the early period there were latent within it great powers of intellect, universal principles, which, visibly or invisibly, determined the course of events. We have before us not a simple political or racial entity, but, to an eminent degree, "a spiritual people." The national development is based upon an all-pervasive religious tradition, which lives in the

soul of the
people as the Sinaitic Revelation, the Law of Moses.
With this holy
tradition, embracing a luminous theory of life and an
explicit code of
morality and social converse, was associated the idea of
the election
of the Jewish people, of its peculiar spiritual mission.
"And ye shall
be unto me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" is
the figurative
expression of this ideal calling. It conveys the thought
that the
Israelitish people as a whole, without distinction of
rank and
regardless of the social prominence of individuals, has
been called to
guide the other nations toward sublime moral and
religious principles,
and to officiate for them, the laity as it were, in the
capacity of
priests. This exalted ideal would never have been
reached, if the
development of the Jewish people had lain along
hackneyed lines; if,
like the Egyptians and the Chaldeans, it had had an
inflexible caste
of priests, who consider the guardianship of the
spiritual treasures
of the nation the exclusive privilege of their estate,
and strive to
keep the mass of the people in crass ignorance. For a
time, something
approaching this condition prevailed among the Jews. The
priests
descended from Aaron, with the Temple servants (the
Levites), formed a
priestly class, and played the part of authoritative
bearers of the
religious tradition. But early, in the very infancy of
the nation,
there arose by the side of this official, aristocratic
hierarchy, a
far mightier priesthood, a democratic fraternity,
seeking to enlighten

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

