Faith and Critical Jewish History: A Complex Relationship

■ by **Robert Chazan**

Over the past two centuries, a new kind of historical study has emerged in the Jewish world. As described elegantly by Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi in his book *Zakhor*, this new historical study has critically reexamined and reassessed aspects of the Jewish past, in the process often confronting and contradicting many of the traditions sacred to Jewish memory. Like so much else in Jewish life over the ages, this new development has not been self-generated from within the Jewish world; it is the result of the broad tendency in the modern West to investigate anew historical realities and—in the process—to subvert traditional thinking. The more firmly Jews have engaged and absorbed modern Western thinking, the more intense the Jewish commitment to critical historical study has become. Today, there are major centers of Jewish historical scholarship all across North America, in the State of Israel, and in many European countries. The products of this scholarship are diffused far and wide throughout all these settings and regularly involve reassessment of traditional Jewish convictions about the past.

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The current commitment to historical scholarship and the challenge this scholarship poses to traditional thinking are in part simply a byproduct of the nature of contemporary academic study. The contemporary academy is committed to the creation of new knowledge in all areas—the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities as well. Scholars, including historians in general and historians of the Jews in particular, are encouraged—in fact required—to produce innovative findings. This requirement commits historians to advancing new perspectives on the past and thus leads ineluctably to creating challenges to the venerable and accepted.

For Jewish historians, challenging the venerable and accepted has often been undertaken with the explicit goal of undermining negative "truths" broadly held by non-Jews about Jews. For example, researchers into the Jewish past have labored intensely and successfully to dismantle the destructive stereotype that Jews have historically been involved economically only in the problematic field of finance, making economic contributions in no other area. The Genizah research of S. D. Goitein has put that stereotype to rest, as he uncovered incontrovertible evidence of the widest possible range of Jewish economic activity among Jews in the medieval Islamic world. Jews have generally been most appreciative of this undermining of traditional anti-Jewish historical "truths."

Likewise, the traditional Western sense of the Jews as a people without a history of aesthetic sensibility or achievement has been subverted by nineteenth-century reclamation of the poetry of medieval Iberian Jews and twentieth-century archeological uncovering of the Jewish art of late antiquity. Again, these subversions of prior negative stereotypes held by non-Jews have been welcomed by Jews.

Modern historical research has not limited itself, however, to reexamining and reassessing traditional non-Jewish thinking. Traditional Jewish thinking as well has been subjected to critical scholarly investigation, often with the overt intention of subverting accepted "truths." Much of nineteenth-century Jewish historical research was related to the efforts to reform Jewish social and religious life. It is no accident that many of the key researchers in this early period of Jewish critical history were important figures in nascent Reform Judaism. Their research and their religious activism went hand-in-hand. Their research was directed at undoing the traditional views that undergirded the authority of the rabbis, and it played a major role in justifying efforts to change the structure of Jewish reli-

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gious life in nineteenth-century Europe. In similar fashion, it is no accident that the Zionist movement, from its earliest phases, produced a rich body of historical research, intended in no small measure to buttress the ideological foundations of the movement and to contradict prior views of the Jewish past.

Innovative perceptions of the Jewish past have come to the fore for all periods of that past. Because of the special salience of the ancient periods—first early antiquity and the Bible and then late antiquity and the rise of rabbinic Judaism, the impact of innovative history writing on those two periods has been most problematic to many Jews. Since reconstruction of biblical history is a world unto itself and is beset by serious problems of data and methodology, I shall provide a few simpler examples from late antiquity. The traditional sense of the Maccabean uprising against Seleucid domination has projected a wicked Greek king named Antiochus, who attempted to force his own faith on his Jewish subjects. As knowledge of the Seleucid Empire and its policies has expanded, this view has come into serious question. There is simply no evidence whatsoever for such a Seleucid policy in any sector of the far-flung empire or at any time. Modern historians have had to propose alternative explanations, generally looking within the Jewish community itself for explanations of the Antiochene persecution. In the process, the Hanukkah story has been radically altered, to the dismay of many Jews.

Another mainstay of traditional Jewish thinking has projected the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 as the point at which the multiplicity of religious perspectives in first-century Palestinian Jewry, documented in both rabbinic sources and Josephus, gave way to the absolute dominance of the rabbis and the formulation and victory of rabbinic Judaism. As the data on Jewish life in post-70 Palestine and throughout the Roman Empire have proliferated, this simplistic picture has been altered. Rabbinic Judaism took centuries to crystallize, and the same is true for the power of the rabbis. The traditional picture of destruction and the emergence of a new and unified Judaism occurring simultaneously has been abandoned in the scholarly world.

These examples reflect the impact of newly accumulated data on the Jewish past. In addition to these data-driven perspectives, nineteenth- and twentieth-century students of Jewish history have also challenged the values embedded in traditional historical thinking. For example, traditional Jewish thinking has acknowledged (and often exaggerated) the historic suffering of the Jewish people. This suffering has been depicted at length, has been portrayed as noble and heroic, and has been projected as the foundation for future divinely initiated Jewish bliss. Many twentieth-century Jewish historians have rejected the ubiquity of Jewish suffering and its ennoblement. The young Salo Baron in 1928 attacked his great predecessor Heinrich Graetz, who had presented post-70 Jewish history as a succession of traumas; Baron called for the abandonment of what he dubbed the lachrymose view of the Jewish past. Zionist historians have maintained the sense of ubiquitous Jewish suffering, but have denigrated this suffering and insisted on altering Jewish circumstances in order to remove its causes. Indeed, Zionist historians have attacked as well the second pillar of the Graetz view of the Jewish past, the valorization of Jewish intellectual activity and creativity. Many Zionist historians urged more attention to the physical well-being and prowess of Jews, seeing in what they perceived to be excessive intellectualization the root of many Jewish problems.

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Our question then is the place of this critical historical scholarship in the Jewish classroom. Many in American Jewish education—administrators, teachers, and parents—perceive critical historical scholarship as corrosive, a danger to Jewish identity and thus a disservice to the young students enrolled in Jewish schools. They feel that challenging traditional thinking serves ultimately to shake the faith of young students and thus weaken their Jewish identity. This is a case that makes *prima facie* sense. Exposing young students to the shortcomings of their tradition would seem indeed to shake their faith in that tradition, by exposing its weaknesses. The issue, however, is far more complex and deserves more nuanced and thoughtful consideration.

In the first place, the young Jewish students whose faith in traditional Judaism might be shaken by exposure to critical historical thinking by no means live in a vacuum. They live in a world of the History Channel and the Internet; almost all of them will proceed on to college. This means that, eventually and in one way or another, these young students will be exposed to critical historical thinking about the Jewish past and the challenges such critical thinking poses. Is it better to have this encounter take place within the confines of Jewish education itself or subsequently in less supportive environments? Is not the corrosive effect of subsequent engagement with critical historical thinking likely to be far more damaging than it would have been in the Jewish educational ambience? Indeed, what message is being sent by this avoidance itself? Does the avoidance not project to young Jews a message of Jewish anxiety and fearfulness, an unwillingness or an inability on the part of their elders to address the modern world and its issues?

Put more positively, engagement with critical historical thinking is a value in and of itself. It sends the message that Jewish tradition is ever-renewing, open to a constant process of reflection and

alteration. It communicates to young students that their tradition puts a premium on mature reflection and valorizes intellectual engagement and rethinking. Ultimately, introduction of critical history to the Jewish school curriculum carries with it the danger of diminution of Jewish identity—but so does the decision to avoid critical history. Decisions concerning critical history in the Jewish school curriculum do not involve simply a choice between strengthening Jewish faith and diminishing Jewish faith. These decisions involve a close look at student bodies and careful assessment of the potential impact of introducing critical history and the potential impact of avoiding critical history.

Moreover, for some young students, the altered picture of the Jewish past—while pointing to shortcomings in the traditions of Jewish memory—brings to light neglected aspects of the Jewish past that are in fact quite salutary. The most obvious example is the recovery of the history of Jewish women over the ages. Traditional Jewish thinking has slighted the role of women over the course of Jewish history, contemporary apologetics notwithstanding. Contemporary critical history, with its commitment to reconstructing the story of Jewish women and restoring it to a central place on the broad canvas of the Jewish past, is hardly likely to alienate young women students and to diminish their faith in Judaism. To the contrary, this form of critical history has the potential for augmenting the faith of many younger Jews—females and males alike. Once again, the issue of critical history and its potential impact on Jewish faith is complex and requires serious consideration of specific school circumstances.

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There is surely a relationship between faith and critical Jewish history teaching, with major implications for fostering or diminishing the Jewish identity of students. That relationship, however, is by no means simple and straightforward. In some schools, there may be justification for avoiding critical historical scholarship; in other schools, such avoidance would in fact constitute a profound disservice to students and their Jewish identity. In all schools, teaching Jewish history from a traditional perspective or from a critical perspective or in a manner that engages both perspectives must be examined carefully and thoughtfully, weighing the pros and cons of all approaches. ■