

Teaching Jewish History: A Major Impediment

■ by **ROBERT CHAZAN**

Eminent scholar of medieval Judaism Chazan suggests a reason why many students find history uninteresting. His solution is to give them the tools to understand the complexity of choices people confronted.

Teaching Jewish history at the high school level is fraught with difficulties. For many high school students, the past feels utterly irrelevant, offering no genuine insight into the new, ostensibly more complex, and seemingly intractable issues of the twenty-first century. This sense of a remote and irrelevant past regularly cripples the efforts of dedicated teachers to connect with the imaginative and conceptual faculties of their students. To a significant degree, this core problem in the teaching of Jewish history can be traced to a less obvious but equally daunting impediment.

In the eyes of many high school students, the Jewish past is composed of smart and stupid Jews. Let us note a few examples of this student sense, beginning with the Jewish rebellion against Rome that commenced in the year 66. Was it not perfectly clear that the Roman authorities had at their disposal the most powerful army in the world? Should it not have been obvious to those fomenting rebellion against Rome that their cause was hopeless? Thus, the Jews of pre-66 Palestine for many high school students fall into the categories of smart Jews who opposed the rebellion and stupid Jews who supported it. The problems of Jewish life in pre-66 Palestine and their obvious solution seem to offer little guidance for the complexities of 2014, so why bother studying them?

Let us examine yet another instance of the same dilemma, this one from the Middle Ages. In 1391, the Jewish communities of Spain suffered devastating violence all across the Spanish peninsula. Thousands of Jews lost their lives; many other thousands

converted in order to save their lives; entire Jewish communities—some of them very ancient—disappeared. A century later, in 1492, the Jews of Spain were expelled from their homes, seemingly in sudden and unexpected fashion. However, was not the die cast in 1391? Was it not clear after those massacres that there was no future for Jews in Spain? Why did Jews persevere and remain in Spain? Once again, this behavior seems to offer evidence of obtuseness in Jewish circles.

Finally, moving closer to the present, Jewish high school students have great difficulty understanding why Jews should have

opted to remain in Germany through the 1930s. Was the eventual destruction of European Jewry not obvious from the moment the Nazis came to power? The decision to remain in Germany can only reflect Jewish unwillingness to face up to

realities that were beyond reasonable doubt. Studying Jews who exhibit such resistance to truth seems pointless to many high school students—and indeed to many of their elders as well.

At this point, I suspect that many readers will have their backs up, objecting that historical outcomes are never clear-cut, that those living through a crisis—for example the road to rebellion in first-century Palestine, the events leading to the expulsion of 1492, or the evolving assault on German Jewry—have no way of knowing the ultimate outcome of the difficulties they are experiencing. This is surely the case, but it highlights the nature of the pedagogical problem: How is it possible to introduce students to the complexities of crises the outcomes of which are fully known in retrospect?

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How can this significant pedagogical challenge be overcome? I would urge that, in order to make Jewish history rewarding, high school students must be transformed into active participants in the reconstruction of the Jewish past. Assigning students to study and present the thinking of the opposing Jewish parties in first-century Palestine or fifteenth-century Spain or twentieth-century Germany often meets initially with shrugging shoulders and doubts that a serious case can be mounted for all the diverse factions and their conflicting positions.

However, these doubts tend to dissipate fairly quickly. As students become committed to understanding and representing forcefully the first-century War Party or the Jews committed to reconstruction of Jewish life in fifteenth-century Spain or those convinced of a future for Jews in Germany, they seek out fuller comprehension of the thinking that animated these groupings, despite the well-known outcomes of the crises. Investment on the part of such students results in the drive to fuller comprehending of context and issues and thus leads to augmentation of interest in these difficult points in the past. These crises have the potential of transforming seemingly obvious realities and choices into genuine human dilemmas, worthy of serious consideration.

How can students arrive at such fuller understanding? The key lies in two sets of available literature. The first literature clarifies contexts. Teachers aspiring to turn their history classes into genuine engagement with the dilemmas of the past must seek out secondary literature that portrays the period under study in all its complexity. Secondary readings that present difficult periods of the past in their full complexity are invaluable in the effort to transform dilemmas of the Jewish past into real and vibrant crises, replete with reasonable alternatives.

Beyond the secondary literature that establishes realistic context, students must also be led to available primary source materials that can clarify in a compelling way the range of alternatives available to Jews living through the crisis period. In some instances, such multiple perspectives are readily available. Letters from German Jews convinced that their fellow Germans would come to their senses and repudiate the Nazis abound. These were hardly “stupid” Jews, unwilling to face up to obvious truths; they were concerned and intelligent Jews using

the best available evidence at their disposal. That they were eventually proven wrong is tragic, but not a sign of obtuseness. In other instances, the sources are quite limited and require historical imagination. Thus, for example, Josephus—who was at the point of his writing convinced of the hopelessness of rebellion against Rome—must be used imaginatively to offer students hints for reconstructing the counter-arguments of the Jewish War Party.

This kind of historical reconstruction is not easily achieved. It requires skillful, knowledgeable, well prepared teachers capable of guiding students in historical investigation. These teachers need guidance in choosing crises worthy of study, in locating the requisite secondary literature, and in identifying primary sources that are accessible to high school students. Organizations like RAVSAK must take the lead in identifying major crises in the Jewish past, in providing the kind of secondary literature that would enable high school students to grasp the complex context within which these crises unfolded, and in presenting primary sources that transform Jews of the past into feeling and thinking human beings.



Enabling such creative reconstruction of the Jewish past is arduous, but certainly worthwhile. Such historical reconstruction transforms the Jews of the past from often incomprehensible ciphers into fuller human characters facing life's uncertainties; it makes the study of the Jewish past incomparably more engaging and meaningful. In the process, students also come to realize that the fluid reality through which they and their Jewish contemporaries are living will one day also resolve itself into clear results. Hopefully, this will engender a greater interest in the present dilemmas of Jewish life and a measure of humility and uncertainty as to the positions currently espoused in diverse quarters with undue confidence. Ultimately, a measure of humility and uncertainty is a fine outcome for historical study. ■