

Zvi Grumet

Rabbi Grumet is the Associate Principal of the Torah Academy of Bergen County and the Associate Editor of Ten Da'at

## BOOK REVIEWS - JEWISH HISTORY

### **Understanding Jewish History:**

*Texts and Commentaries*, by Steven Bayme,  
(Ktav, Hoboken, New Jersey, 1997)

### **Modern Jewish History for Everyone:**

by David Bianco (*History for Everyone*,  
Los Angeles, California, 1997)

For years, Jewish History teachers have bemoaned the lack of choices of textbooks for their classes. Torn between Grayzel's voluminous *History of the Jews* and Artscroll's partisan presentation of Jewish History, many teachers resorted to "cut and paste" techniques to build a collection of materials they considered usable. Two recently published books significantly broaden the horizon in this underserved field of study.

Steven Bayme's *Understanding Jewish History: Texts and Commentaries* was not written as a high school textbook, rather, as a guide to adults and college students attending lectures on Jewish History. The language is generally suitable to upper high school grades (although it could use a glossary for some of the more obtuse words and foreign phrases that dot the volume), and the book is far more readable than some of the other texts currently in use. Each chapter concludes with an appropriate reading of primary source material and is accompanied by a broad bibliography for further research. The value of the book as a classroom text would be greatly enhanced if accompanied by a teacher's guide, as

well as by review questions at the end of each chapter. While not as comprehensive or fact-filled as other history texts, it is certainly more comprehensible. With access to a broad range of scholarship — biblical, rabbinic, historical, sociological and archaeological — Bayme presents a broad sweep of Jewish History "from the biblical covenant to contemporary relations between Israel and world Jewry."

This book represents a significant departure from the classical history text. Bayme is not as interested in names and dates as he is in interpreting events with a particular focus on the relevance of that interpretation to contemporary Jewish life. Virtually every chapter has a discussion of the events that will ring familiar notes in the ears of the reader, and the connection to contemporary society is often made. This feature sets the book apart, and is both the volume's greatest strength as well as its most significant weakness.

Clearly, understanding why one needs to learn Jewish History is one of the most significant hurdles faced in the classroom. By the time the reader has completed the first two or three chapters finding relevance is no longer a challenge, as the book abounds with relevance. Using this text, any competent teacher can build entire lessons in contemporary Judaism with the students researching the ancient origins of modern issues. For example, within the first fifty pages parallels are drawn between Avraham living in a pagan world and modern minorities surviving in democratic majorities, moral dilemmas posed by the displacement of the ancient Canaanites by Yehoshua and the displacement of Palestinians by the modern State of Israel, the destruction of the Bet Hamikdash and the Shoah, and the return to Zion in the days of Ezra and modern day Zionism.

As the reader progresses through the volume, the sense that "the contemporary Jewish condition comprises an outgrowth of the sum of its experience" emerges from the text, and it is abundantly clear that a significant goal of the book is to gain insight into contemporary Jewry based on an understanding of its history. Clearly twenty-five percent of the book focuses on the last two hundred years, and there seems to be a preoccupation with modernity. The modern condition, as defined by Bayme, relates to Jewish life in an era in which rabbinic and communal authority has collapsed and Jewish identity and practice are volitional in nature. In this context, the struggle between the Zedukim and

Perushim serves as an ancient precursor of modernity, as does the Karaite schism. Fascinatingly, Bayme sees in the Marranos early models of Jewish attempts to grapple with modernity, followed by Sabbetianism and Hasidut as further developments in the process eventually erupting with what he terms the "Old Orthodoxy" of the *Hatam Sofer*, the neo-Orthodoxy of Hirsch and the emergence of the German Reform.

With such a strong emphasis on analyzing history the volume skimps on facts and details, often assuming that the reader is already familiar with some of the core material. This helps make the book very readable, but sometimes leaves the reader wishing that the "missing pieces" would be filled in. As such, no teacher can rely on this being the students' sole textbook, and the book demands that the teacher do a significant amount of preparation beyond the text.

The thematic presentation of the book offers a number of other advantages and disadvantages. While the chapters basically follow a chronological order, there are times when thematic order prevails. This enhances thematic clarity and helps develop ideas, but can lead to chronological confusion. For example, the chapter titled "Destruction and Renewal" (of the second Bet Hamikdash) extends well into the second century CE, but precedes the chapter on the origins of Christianity.

Any presentation that is thematic in nature will necessarily be selective in which themes are developed, and the choice of themes will help determine one's view of the usability of the book in a particular setting. The first third of the book is devoted to understanding the unique contributions of Judaism to humanity and the things that set Judaism apart from the rest of the world - monotheism vs. paganism, rationalist vs. mystical and magical understandings of the world, a contrast of the world view of *Sefer Kohelet* to Greek philosophy, to name a few. Later chapters focus heavily on internal Jewish factionalism and sectarianism. Significantly, there are two chapters on messianism, two on sectarianism, five on Christianity and two on Islam - yet not a single chapter devoted to the Talmudic era.

Aside from the obvious themes, there are a number of threads that seem to run throughout the book, themes that may be appropriate for the book's primary audience — college students and adults attending a lecture series on Jewish History— but less so for the Orthodox day

school student. One almost senses that the book is meant as a training manual for the lay leadership of the American Jewish community. The book is heavy with models of Israeli-Diaspora cooperation (Chapter 4), how an ethnic minority is to behave while living within a majority culture (pp. 5, 51), tolerance and acceptance of diversity (pp. 18, 57, 142, 171), diplomacy and cooperation with the authorities (as opposed to rebellion, pp. 35, 54, 80, 92-96), universalism (p.26, Chap. 24, 25), affirmation of the Diaspora (pp. 41, 141-148, 177, 235), Christian-Jewish cooperation and tolerance (pp. 168-169, 226-228, 389), concern about intermarriage (pp. 42-43, 276), medieval precursors to UJA-Federation (p. 224) and even a defense of Roosevelt's actions vis a vis the Shoah (pp.389-390).

This is not to say that the author is insensitive to Orthodox or traditional sensitivities. While the book takes some liberties in interpreting the flexibility of halakha (pp. 64, 225-226) and questions the traditional authorship and historicity of the *megillot* (pp. 38, 42, 52, 361), there is no hostility to Rabbinic tradition or Orthodoxy. The book praises the leadership of the Perushim, quotes freely from rabbinic tradition, and presents contemporary Orthodoxy as a vibrant model to be emulated by other streams within Judaism. While some traditionalists may feel uncomfortable with certain aspects of the book, the presentation of contemporary conflicts within Judaism is honest, balanced and fair, highlighting the positions of each with their apparent strengths and weaknesses.

As noted earlier, the emphasis on themes is both the book's strength and weakness. At times it seems that this is not a book of Jewish History as much as it is a book on Jewish Philosophy with historical references. The chapters dealing with Covenant, Creation, Redemption (1), Origins of Christianity (9), The Church and the Jews (10), Jewry and Islam (11) and Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Islam (13) are almost exclusively philosophic in nature, as well as half of the chapters dealing with The Marrano Phenomenon (18), Hasidism (21), The Decline of the Medieval Kehilla (22), Reform Judaism (24), Neo-Orthodoxy (25) and Conservative Judaism and Reconstructionism (30). In pursuing repeating themes (what the author calls continuity), those elements which do not fit into the framework are omitted. There is almost no discussion of the Talmud, little attention to medieval figures, and while there is an

entire chapter on the decline of the medieval kehilla, almost no discussion of the kehilla itself.

As the author himself notes in the introduction, in a book of this nature and scope, omissions are expected and excusable if the book is to remain manageable in size. As its title suggests, it is an interpretation of Jewish History rather than a comprehensive presentation of facts. Often, the analysis is insightful and creative and often shines. For example, the chapters on modern anti-Semitism and the Shoah present a perceptive depth touching the core of the issues. The clarity of the philosophic discussions outlined above is especially good, as are the elucidations on the origins of Zionism and the Haskalah.

Any book that presents a particular interpretation of history has significant value. For those who agree with the analysis, that volume is their guide. For those who disagree with the analysis, the book serves as a vehicle for valuable discussion. While this book may not be the final analysis of Jewish History, it is a worthwhile vehicle for starting the discussion. Even more than the specific conclusions he reaches, the approach to Jewish History is refreshing. As such, Dr. Bayme has made a worthwhile contribution to the educational community.



Quite different is David Bianco's *Modern Jewish History for Everyone*. Essentially modeled in the style of traditional textbooks, this text uses a variety of didactic tools and aids to make it more functional, both for the student and the teacher. The novelty here is that a standard textbook approach is applied to Jewish History.

To be sure, this was written as a classroom-oriented textbook, and its content level is suitable for high school classes, although probably not for advanced level eleventh or twelfth grades. It is unquestionably user friendly, and this is clearly its strength. Starting with the late eighteenth century Europe, continuing through the Shoah and Zionism, and culminating with an overview of contemporary American Jewry, Bianco presents basic factual material that effectively introduces the student to each era. Each of the seven sections is subdivided into smaller, easy to read units. The subsections are between four and six pages long, and neither the writing style nor the vocabulary are complex. Each subsection is framed by questions in the beginning to guide

the reader and review questions at the end to enhance comprehension, some of which challenge the student to apply historical knowledge to contemporary issues. At the conclusion of each chapter there is also a review of terms (and names) to identify, as well as a suggested research project. Throughout each section are interesting sidebars — "Controversies in History," "Contemporary Jewish Issues," "Connections with World History," "In Their Own Words," and "Jewish Historical Profiles" — which, aside from their intrinsic value, make the page more graphically appealing and break up the reading. The text is accompanied by appropriate maps, charts, time lines, graphs and illustrations, again enhancing the book's readability.

While presentation was clearly a concern of the author and publisher, accounting for the many graphical enhancements to the page, there are some production quality issues which should be addressed in future editions. The text is occasionally fuzzy, and pictures are not clear. On a number of pages the margin was too close to the binding, so that words got swallowed in the binding.

Bianco scrupulously avoids being judgmental or taking sides on issues, letting the readers decide for themselves what conclusions to draw. In the process, however, many of the ideological arguments that have fueled the internal dynamic of the Jewish community seem pale and without passion, and are not likely to stir the passions of the reader. The book breaks no new ground in the areas of historical scholarship or interpretation and does not seem interested in challenging accepted notions. It is strong on breadth but its evenhanded approach denies it any element of analysis or interpretation of the events, and while the organization of the volume and layout of the page are designed to ease reading, the dryness of the text demands those accompaniments. Missing from the book is any sort of bibliography, so that students who wish to explore past the text or engage in any of the suggested projects need outside help to even begin the process.

In a sense Bianco's and Bayme's books are excellent companion volumes, at least for the modern era, as each one is strong precisely in the areas of weakness of the other. Insofar as Bayme skimps on background facts, Bianco fills those in; and while Bianco is missing an analysis of those facts, Bayme does that skillfully. Bianco's readings are short and manageable, whereas Bayme's require more time and thought.

Bianco is interested in presenting answers to “who,” “what,” “where” and “when,” while Bayme explores the issue “why.” Bayme contributes a bibliography and Bianco adds didactic tools. The combination of the two volumes provides the teacher with a reservoir of resources that could begin to change the way we teach and think about Jewish History.

Now if someone wanted to combine the strengths of both in a single work . . .