



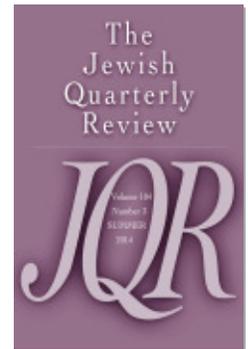
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Yosef H. Yerushalmi's *Zakhor*— Some Observations

MOSHE IDEL

I: "THE FAITH OF THE FALLEN JEWS"

THE FOLLOWING REMARKS represent some amateurish reflections concerning some of the observations and assumptions found in Yosef H. Yerushalmi's *Zakhor*. They concern only quite a small part of this rich and thoughtful book, especially the initial pages and its final part. In this framework only two topics in the book will be addressed: the assumption that history is the faith of the fallen Jews, and then the stark distinction that Yerushalmi claims exists between premodern traditional Judaism and modern Jews' inclination toward history. Consequently, these forms of Judaism may hardly communicate. An attempt will be made to exemplify the complexity of the relationship between the two forms of Judaism.

The faith in history by the "fallen," an expression that reflects Yerushalmi's ironic understanding of modern interest in history,¹ itself has a small history. According to a certain testimony, Gershom Scholem once remarked that in his classes at the Hebrew University he taught not reason but history.² His shift from the earlier reliance on the paramount Enlightenment value—reason—to historical modernism is, to follow Reinhold Niebuhr's diagnosis, "not so much confidence in reason as *faith in history*. The conception of a redemptive history informs most diverse forms of modern culture."³ In lieu of the image of the divine redeemer, it is now history, in its Hegelian form, that offers the redemptive experience. Faith in history, or in historical research, dislocated, at least to a certain extent, traditional faith in a personal deity and worked with the

1. *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, (New York, 1989), 86, 98.

2. *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, ed. W. J. Dannhauser (New York, 1976), 46.

3. See *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York, 1949), 6, emphasis added. See p. 203.

assumption that meaning or, according to another formulations, identities are hidden in or dramatically shaped by events that constitute the history of a nation or a person. For a skeptical observer, however, the two forms of faith are based on strong though rarely explicated hypotheses, which can hardly be proven. From this point of view, they are equal.

How and why did this new “faith” emerge in Judaism? The new status attained by Jewish history in the general economy of modern Judaism represents a major jump; it succeeded in establishing itself as a main, if not dominant, dimension of identity for many modern Jews. This is part of a profound process of self-definition emerging in rapidly changing circumstances, in which the recent history of the Jews has been dramatically accelerated.⁴ The more dramatic changes are well known: the Holocaust, the shift from the largest concentration of Jews in Europe to Asia and North America, the establishment of the state of Israel and the massive emigration that liquidated whole communities (some of which existed for millennia), and the emergence of the American center of Judaism—in a word, new forms of struggle for personal, national, and cultural survival. These struggles were coupled with complex attempts at redefinition, Zionist, and more recent trends, mainly American, to search for an identity that does not depend on earlier views of the Diaspora or on a territorial solution of the exilic condition. Such dramatic turns are unknown even in the long and tortuous Jewish history prior and represent unparalleled accelerations of events. They were major ruptures that occasioned a search for antecedents, and thus the protagonists of these events turned to history for examples. This turn is, psychologically speaking, a natural one. People try, especially in cases of dramatic changes and crises, to situate themselves in a wider framework in order to understand their personal or communal vicissitudes, some of which are quite unexpected. According to such a view, history as an academic profession is not essential, and the resort to examples from the past reflects crises or turning points, related to occasional moments of self-understanding, though imposed mainly by external forces.

Less dramatic, though still very important from the point of view of the ascent of history, and of what I call “the historical Jew,” is another development, characteristic of only a small part of Jewish communities, mainly in Central and Western Europe: a gradual opening of some Jews and Christians toward more religiously neutral forms of society, as part

4. For the concept of acceleration of history, see the introduction to Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de memoire* (Paris, 1984), 1:xvii.

of a more comprehensive process of secularization. Deep changes that took place in Western Judaism, in centers where history emerges as a main form of self-understanding for the Christian majority, induce soon afterwards a similar development in Jews. Comparatively speaking, this propensity for history does not occur in other Jewish communities: Northern African, East European, or Asian Jewish communities, where historical events were not conceived of as identity-forming. Therefore, it is not only a matter of adherence to the rabbinic worldview that marginalized the importance of history for shaping identity, as Yerushalmi correctly demonstrated in *Zakhor*. The negative attitude toward history among Jews also owed to the majority non-Jewish and nonhistorical cultures. One may argue that in those more traditional settings, the cohesiveness of Jewish community was much greater and more resonant to a rabbinic way of life, while in Central and Western Europe the process of disintegration of the Jewish communities impelled the search for new forms of cohesiveness, or personal identities, now based on shared history in the past rather than on shared rituals in the present. However, this process is also discernible in Christian communities which looked for forms of identity other than the religious—most notably, the nation, which, it was claimed, had a common history. Among traditionalist Jews in Central Europe, the critique of this historicizing trend is especially evident in the case of Samson Raphael Hirsh in Germany.

However, the first modern Jewish historians were not only in search of a new identity but also of some form of transcendental meaning embedded in history. As Yerushalmi formulated the contribution of the Jews to history: “If Herodotus was the father of history, the fathers of meaning in history were the Jews” (p. 8). So there is a certain dissonance between the more Greek descriptive vision of history and a more directed or even biased exposition of history, which points to a certain kind of sacred history. While Greek history is understood in much more immanent terms, the biblical type of history includes an incomparably more transcendental dimension, which creates, or discovers, meaning in events by attributing to them an expression of the divine will and an ultimate premeditated design. However, while Jews in biblical times were concerned with “meaning” in historical events, this interest ceased, according to Yerushalmi, in the next major form of Judaism, the rabbinic (p. 18), and was not a major form of expression in Jewish literature until the sixteenth century. Though scholars have offered different explanations as to why historical writings become so prevalent in a rather short period of time in the sixteenth century—whether it was the impact of the Renaissance

historiography⁵ or of the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula (pp. 57–75)—the very rise of this trend of Jewish writing was, to the best of my knowledge, never disputed in scholarship. However, evident as this new interest in Jewish history was, it never became a central feature of Jewish thought in the Renaissance. Dominated by other types of speculative interest like philosophy and mysticism, and obedient to the rabbinic *regimen vitae*, premodern forms of Judaism remained indifferent to the few chronicles or critical works of history produced in the sixteenth century.

This does not mean that a historical approach to Judaism, embodied in what I call the historical Jew, is less Jewish or less authentic than other forms of Judaism. The “historical Jew” constitutes part of the process of assimilation to his environment, just as the intellectual Jew reflects the impact of Muslim and Christian engagement with philosophy and theology in the Middle Ages. Graetz and Yerushalmi are, in my opinion, no less Jewish than any other exponents of Judaism, including Abraham ibn Ezra or Maimonides. Yerushalmi’s elegiac assumption, emphasizing the rupture involved in the historical tendency seems to me to be true, though exaggerated. Maimonides, a major exponent of Judaism, provoked a lot of bitter criticism in his lifetime, and yet he became—though a revolutionary of the first order—part and parcel of many forms of Judaism. Given my working assumption that tradition is a multifaceted concept, and that, in fact, we should speak of a constellation of traditions that is accumulative, flexible, and developing, “historical Judaism” is certainly part of it. This function is a result not of an abstract Jewish tradition but of the place that the bearers of historical Judaism occupy in the general structure of the Jewish nation, as we will see in the second part of this essay.

The description of events related to Jews above constitutes an example

5. For a general assessment of the reasons for the emergence of Jewish historical writings in the sixteenth century, see Reuven Bonfil, “The Historian’s Perception of the Jews in the Italian Renaissance,” *Revue des études juives* 143 (1984): 59–82; idem, “Some Reflections on the Place of Azariah de Rossi’s *Meor Enayim* in the Cultural Milieu of Italian Renaissance Jewry,” in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. B. D. Cooperman (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), 23–48; also by Bonfil, “How Golden Was the Age of the Renaissance in Jewish Historiography,” in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, ed. D. Ruderman, (New York, 1992), 219–50. For a more general survey of Jewish historiography during the Renaissance period, see Reuven Michael, *Jewish Historiography from the Renaissance to Modern Times* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1993), 17–71. See also Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley, Calif., 1993).

of what Nora called an “acceleration of history,” which created, in turn, an acceleration in the pace of historical research. As part of this acceleration Jewish history became a new form of identity in Israeli academe and intellectual life, leading to the exploration of new topics of research. Especially evident are departments of archaeology of the land of Israel and the history of the Land of Israel. Those two academic domains have become, in some Israeli universities, full-fledged departments, sometimes institutes, and new academic journals have been established in order to further research in them (such as *Katedra* and *Shalem*). Moreover, the emphasis upon the importance of a certain topic—messianism—that was underestimated by previous scholars now flourished in several disciplines. In a certain sense, some Jewish historians became not only observers of past events but also participants in historical processes that influenced their professional approach.

Yerushalmi’s description of the belief in history as the faith of fallen Jews may be, at least to an extent, an exaggeration (p. 98). I cannot dispute his own feeling that the career of a Jewish historian may represent an existential rupture, perhaps a tragic one, with traditional Judaism. But this rupture is not only with traditional faith but also with the versions of *historia sacra* proposed by other Jewish historians, including his own teacher Salo W. Baron, as we will see below. The stark opposition between history and belief presupposes some form of religiosity that alone is conceived of as authentic and attributes to the corrosive acts of history an antireligious effect. By contrast, I would resort to a vision of a complex and multifaceted tradition in order to resolve what may be conceived of as a state of fall or of despair.⁶ Indeed, I claim that despite the rupture created by the ascent of history, there are nevertheless lines of continuity that shed light on the existence of a Jewish historical mode.

The question of the possibility of history existing within a traditional framework may be asked also from another angle: if two audacious thinkers such as Abraham ibn Ezra and Maimonides were able to offer and have accepted such a strong synthesis between rabbinic Judaism and Greek philosophy—prompting an intellectual reform of Judaism—why should not historiography become part of Jewish religion? If the Jews were the fathers of meaning in history, as Yerushalmi formulated it, why should that type of religious historian, who is seeking meaning in history—with respect to divine or demonic intervention in human affairs—

6. See also David N. Myers, *Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought* (Princeton, N.J., 2003), 172.

not be seen as continuing a broader Jewish religious enterprise?⁷ Are not some forms of medieval and modern philosophy on the one hand, and modern history on the other hand, forms of culture with which some elite Jews were confronted, forms of which they rejected some and accepted others?⁸ Is history, even when understood in immanent terms, so essentially alien to all possible forms of traditional Judaism that it cannot generate a new version of the religion that is less controversial than ibn Ezra's astrological and Maimonides' philosophical reforms were in the Middle Ages? Was the modest and quite restricted scandal that emerged after the publication of Azariah de Rossi's famous historical book *Me'or 'enayim*⁹ greater than that created by the dissemination of Maimonides' philosophical or even his halakhic writings? Was the marginalization of ibn Gabirol's philosophical book *Fons Vitae* paralleled by anything similar in debates over history such as the marginalization of the medieval *Yosifon*? The answer to these questions is quite obvious: ibn Gabirol's neglect of Judaism and the intellectual reform of Judaism by "the Great Eagle" attracted sharper, fiercer, and sometimes more prolonged debate than the modest historical tensions related to the work of the Italian Jewish historian.

It should be mentioned that some of the most important Jewish historians have been rabbis, including Baron, and in our generation Yerushalmi, Robert Bonfil, and David Ruderman. Thus, we may describe a more complex, though perhaps smoother, relationship between the transcendental type of understanding history, or historiosophy, by religious thinkers in the Middle Ages and the first generations of Jewish historians, on the one hand, and the apparent rupture and despair that is more commonly found among recent scholars of Jewish history, on the other. For example, it seems that it is only in recent decades that the basic formation of historians took place exclusively in universities at the expense of religious seminaries.

II: MULTIPLE TRADITIONS AND MODERNITY

Throughout Yerushalmi's book, the assumption of a unified Jewish people recurs (p. 94). It is this unified vision of traditional Judaism, as I

7. See the material collected in M. Idel, "That wondrous, occult power': Some Reflections on Modern Perceptions of Jewish History," *Studia Judaica* 7 (1998): 57–70.

8. See Ismar Schorsch, *From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism* (Hanover, N.H., 1996), 172.

9. See Joanna Weinberg's introduction to Azariah de Rossi, *The Light of the Eyes*, trans. J. Weinberg (New Haven, Conn., 2001), xvii, xlii–xliv, and Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 69–73.

understand his argument, that prevents religious Jews from adopting a critical approach to the canonized conceptualization of the past, or to collective memory. Or to put it in other terms, a homogenous traditional society seemingly confronts modernity with a negative attitude toward its critical demythologization. Or to put it in terms more explicitly found in Yerushalmi, the importance of ritual in traditional (read, rabbinic) Judaism represents an alternative to history (pp. 6–7, 52).¹⁰ Like Yerushalmi, I am among those scholars who do not assume that Jews had an especially strong historical sense or interest in immanent explanations. However, we should not see the vast and variegated literatures and forms of experiences known as Judaism as being so monolithic, static, and closed that they cannot absorb some historical understanding. To resort to one of Salo W. Baron's formulations: "The Jewish religion has little to lose and much to gain from a thorough knowledge of the past . . . In their subconscious, as well as conscious, historical feeling, modern Jews have much in common, both with one another and with their ancestors."¹¹ The assumption of the existence of a mysterious sense of union linking various generations of Jews that may be understood by fathoming the secrets of their history is quite obvious and is reinforced by another quote from Baron.¹² Thus, while in the generation shaped by the Jewish interwar experience—Salo Baron was an immigrant from Galicia—the history of the Jews is still understood as a unifying vision, whereas in the writings of his postwar followers in America, it was conceived to be a corrosive element. Indeed, I would say that alongside the Shoah, more has been written about the history of the Jews in America, which is a relatively short chapter in the long history of Jewish immigrations, than about any other major chapter in Jewish history. This may be just another interesting effort to create a sense of local identity by resorting to historical tools. Both in Israel and in America, history is still a form of situating oneself in place and time and creating new and unifying identities. History, like Jewish philosophy or mysticism, is a new way of looking at earlier strata of Judaism and contributes unifying as well as corrosive forms of understanding. Like these two other forms of Jewish literature, history also adopted a critical perspective on other manifestations of Judaism.

However, this development is just one form of organization of Judaism: in the Bible, what we call religion was constituted by a mixed discussions

10. See also p. 92, where he explicitly rejects an essentialist vision of Judaism.

11. *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York, 1937), 2:459.

12. *Ibid.*, 2:457–58. See also the discussion of Schorsch, *From Text to Context*, 156.

of ritual with descriptions of historical events. Though the latter was marginalized in the subsequent development of the religion, there was still a solid anchor in the founding document of this religion onto which new historical approach can graft themselves. In fact, kabbalistic and sometimes also philosophical forms of thought include some historical theorizing, which can be described as modern, or as I attempted to call it, *historia profana*. This is quite evident in the schemes concerning redemption that constitute a historiosophic approach, although an immanent one.

I would like now to present a theory of historical redemption as reflecting a natural process. According to a view of Abraham Abulafia, a messianic event could occur without any extraordinary intervention on the part of supernatural powers. A natural interpretation of the redemption is Aristotelian. It is based upon the assumption that all potentialities will, at some point in time, reach their actualizations. This idea runs as follows: since time is eternal, it is illogical to suppose that a potential reality will not at some point in time be actualized. Therefore, the notion of Jewish statehood, which is actually an idea that had already proved its feasibility, must again come to fruition at some point in the future.

Abulafia's insight into history, dealing with the rise and fall of nations, apparently convinced him that there was sufficient reason to believe that the Jewish people could rise again. This outlook can be better understood if we take into account the historical background of the times in which Abulafia was formulating his thoughts and writings. In his youth, during the fifties and sixties of the thirteenth century, the land of Israel was the focal point of a gigantic struggle between the major superpowers of the Middle Ages: the Mongols of the east; the Crusaders who were in control of parts of the country; and the Mameluks. The ongoing struggle between these three powers was unusual in these decades. In an unstable situation such as this, it would be fitting to suppose that the Jews could also be integrated in an historical process that would allow them a foothold or even a victory by exploiting the struggle between these superpowers. This background of a bitter struggle seems to be pertinent to an explanation of the rise of messianic expectations during times of great international crisis. It would seem that Abulafia is not the only one to recognize the messianism inhering in this particular historical situation. It is quite possible that this same background provides the basis for the thought of R. Yehudah ha-Levi when he pondered the success of the Crusades in the capture of the Land of Israel. This perspective can also be seen to relate to the modern Zionist ideal which flourished and gained strength against the background of the success of still another great power, Britain, to occupy the Land of Israel.

These crises are not crises of the history of Jewish people per se but international struggles that did not originate with the Jews. Yet it is likely that these fluid situations gave rise to underlying expectations of Jewish political and military activism. Obviously, as long as the international situation remained stable, the Jews had very little chance of regaining political power. The contemplation of human nature, especially in the ways in which nations rise and fall, appears very strongly in Abulafia's writings. For example in his *Sefer ha-malmed* or *ha-Melamed*, he states:

Even what will happen in the future such as the coming of the Messiah and the kingdom of Israel, are not impossibilities, or to be denied logically, because thus we see every day with the nations of the world. Sometimes these have dominion over those (and visa versa), and this is not a matter that Nature can deny but rather human nature decrees that it be so.¹³

Abulafia's theory of human nature had a certain historical influence. At the end of the thirteenth century, a Jewish intellectual, R. Joseph ibn Caspi of Provence, raised the possibility of the reestablishment of the Jewish state based on a consideration of the history of the rise and fall of nations throughout history. It is likely that through ibn Caspi this idea later appeared in a composition of Spinoza's, as has been suggested by Shlomo Pines.¹⁴ For his part, Spinoza suggested the possibility of a reestablishment of a Jewish state under certain political conditions. It is quite possible to assume a historical affinity between Abulafia and ibn Caspi.

13. MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale 608, fol. 304a. For the background of this text, see Moshe Idel, "Some Concepts of Time and History in Kabbalah," in *Jewish History and Jewish Memory, Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi*, ed. E. Carlebach, J. M. Efron, and D. N. Myers (Hanover, N.H., 1998), 170–76. For an interesting parallel to this view, see the mid-thirteenth-century Toledan thinker R. Yehudah ibn Matka's *Sefer midrash @bokbmab*. The text of ibn Matka was printed by Colette Sirat, "Juda b. Salomon Ha-Kohen—philosophe, astronome et peut-etre Kabbaliste de la premiere moitie du XIIIe siecle," *Italia* 1.2 (1979): 48, n. 21, and discussed in Idel, "Some Concepts of Time," 175.

14. Pines, *Between Jewish Thought and the Thought of the Nations* (Hebrew; Jerusalem 1977), 277–305. On this issue, see also Y. H. Yerushalmi, "Spinoza on the Existence of the Jewish People" (Hebrew), *Proceedings of the Israeli Academy of Science* 6.10 (1983): 171–213. See also Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi, the Mystical Messiah*, trans. R. J. Z. Werblowsky (Princeton, N.J., 1973), 544, and Aviezer Ravitsky, "'To the Utmost of Human Capacity': Maimonides on the Days of the Messiah," in *Perspectives on Maimonides: Philosophical and Historical Studies*, ed. J. L. Kraemer (Oxford, 1991), 225, n. 7.

This background could also provide the explanation for how Spinoza came to know of this natural conception of history; the evolution of the idea remains a subject open to further in-depth investigation. For our purposes, we take note of the rise of a certain train of thought that is more characteristic of the secondary elite among the Jews in the Middle Ages—kabbalistic and philosophical—than of popular thought that tended to link redemption to a total disruption of history and nature.

Abulafia and Spinoza are among the few Jewish thinkers who have been formally banned by rabbinic authorities; Ibn Caspi has been marginalized and was rediscovered only in the nineteenth century by maskilim. Nevertheless, the idea they proposed had a huge impact, on both secular and religious Jews, and changed their frame of thought whether or not they participated in the Zionist political idea. However, what I would like to point out is that while the later two thinkers have never been published by Orthodox printers, in the case of Abulafia, whose writings had never been printed by religious thinkers, the situation has changed dramatically in the last decade when almost all his known writings have been published by Orthodox editors, sometimes with the formal approval of halakhic authorities in *Me'ah She'arim* and distributed in bookshops there in thirteen-volume sets alongside other canonical sets of the Bible, Talmud, and Lurianic Kabbalah. *Sefer ha-melamed*, the book from which I quoted above, was one of the last in the series, and its editor, Amnon Gross, chose to preface this volume with the following statement:

Behold we have thereby to bless on the accomplished work (*levarekb 'al ha-mugmar*), may the name of the King of Kings of Kings, the Holy one, blessed be He, be praised, that He had mercy and pity on us and removed the bad decision (*gezirah*) from this house, the house of our rabbi Abraham Abulafia, and changed this house to an altar for the union of the Holy One, blessed be He, and His Shekhinah, and the entire people of Israel.¹⁵

To be sure, this is just one of the modest ways of introducing Abulafia found in the twelve introductions to the volumes of the new set. It shows that Orthodoxy is much more open than we imagine, and that dramatic spiritual changes there are far from impossible—at least in terms of books written in Hebrew and intended for a religious audience. Therefore the difference between some medieval and premodern views of major topics,

15. *Mafta'ah ba-re'ayon, ba-@besbek ve-ba-melamed* (Jerusalem, 2002), 1. The passage quoted above from the manuscript is found on p. 38.

and what is conceived today to be the Orthodox perspective, does not necessarily hinge on content. The problem of the historian or of the academic scholar is that he chooses the audiences that he would like to address and resorts to a particular language, terminology, and conceptual structure. Yerushalmi complains about the fact that an audience that he chose deliberately to ignore would not be open enough to the modern inclinations to history. Does this consist of building a bridge to “his people,” as Yerushalmi put it? (p. 100). In the case of Maimonides, ibn Ezra, and Abulafia, we find attempts at addressing in new ways the age-old problems that unified most of the Jews. With Spinoza and the more recent Jewish historians, however, the main group of reference is not the Jewish community but rather a more dispersed, invisible, and universalistic community of scholars, dead and alive, united by some overlapping academic practices, whose validity has been aggressively questioned in the last generation, more and more by their peers.

Nevertheless, Yerushalmi's book was canonized by those audiences to whom its author consciously and systematically addressed himself: academics and the intelligentsia, both Jewish and non-Jewish. No author is capable of addressing radically disparate audiences at the same time. In fact the book became an academic best-seller. As such, I assume that Yerushalmi was read by more modern Jews than was Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, and thus shaped their identity. No less than Harold Bloom declared that “it may be a permanent contribution to Jewish speculation upon the dilemmas of Jewishness and so it may join the canon of Jewish wisdom literature.”¹⁶ This is a significant statement about canonization coming from a scholar who is concerned mainly with defining the canon. The number of the book's translations is quite considerable: I know of Hebrew, French, German, Italian, and Spanish, and there may well be many more, all this in twenty-five years. These translations create a new ambiance that, over the long term, will push religious understandings of Judaism in a more historical direction—which may come to be seen as traditional. This is not just a matter of the impact of Yerushalmi's book but of the entire academic enterprise: universities are strong institutions, which disseminate critical approaches to all the audiences, religious or not, that attend them and thus create new intellectual contexts, which infiltrate slowly even into the most secluded circles of Orthodoxy.

In other words, the fallen Jews may sometimes be less fallen, and the traditional ones less traditional, the net effect of which is to mitigate the stark opposition between critical history and collective memory.

16. See his foreword to *Zakhor*, xiv.