

Source Sheet Class 1-2000 Years of Jewish History-Rabbi Menachem Levine

Source 1

To know yourself means to be aware of what it is that makes you who you are. And in this respect, the one thing which reveals this knowledge is history.

The History Guide: A Student's Guide to the Study of History

It is sometimes said that historical facts do not matter. But citizens who fail to know basic landmarks of history and civics are unlikely to be able to reflect on their meaning. They fail to recognize the unique nature of our society, and the importance of preserving it.

LOSING AMERICA'S MEMORY: American Council of Trustees and Alumni

Source 2

"**The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory.** Destroy its books, its culture, its history, Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was. The world around it will forget even faster."

Czech historian Milan Hubl in Milan Kundera's The Book of Laughter and Forgetting

Source 3

... Jewish history covers not only vast tracts of time but huge areas. The Jews have penetrated many societies and left their mark on all of them. **Writing a history of the Jews is almost like writing a history of the world, but from a highly peculiar angle of vision.** It is world history seen from the viewpoint of a learned and intelligent victim.

(Christian historian) Paul Johnson, A History of the Jews, Prologue

Source 4

"I will insist the Hebrews have [contributed] more to civilize men than any other nation. If I was an atheist and believed in blind eternal fate, I should still believe that fate had ordained the Jews to be the most essential instrument for civilizing the nations ... **They are the most glorious nation that ever inhabited this Earth. The Romans and their empire were but a bubble in comparison to the Jews. They have given religion to three-quarters of the globe and have influenced the affairs of mankind more and more happily than any other nation, ancient or modern.**"

- John Adams, Second President of the United States

(From a letter to F. A. Van der Kemp [Feb. 16, 1808] Pennsylvania Historical Society)

Source 5

Why have I written a history of the Jews?

.... the book gave me the chance to reconsider objectively, in the light of a study covering nearly 4,000 years, the most intractable of all human questions: what are we on earth for? Is history merely a series of events whose sum is meaningless? Is there no fundamental moral difference between the history of the human race and the history, say, of ants? Or is there a providential plan of which we are, however--humbly, the agents?

No people has ever insisted more firmly than the Jews that history has a purpose and humanity a destiny. At a very early stage in their collective existence they believed they had detected a divine

scheme for the human race, of which their own society was to be a pilot. They worked out their role in immense detail. They clung to it with heroic persistence in the face of savage suffering. Many of them believe it still. Others transmuted it into Promethean endeavours to raise our condition by purely human means. The Jewish vision became the prototype for many similar grand designs for humanity, both divine and man-made. **The Jews, therefore, stand right at the centre of the perennial attempt to give human life the dignity of a purpose.** Does their own history suggest that such attempts are worth making? Or does it reveal their essential futility?

(Christian Historian) Paul Johnson, A History of the Jews, Prologue

Source 6

If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one per cent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of star dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world's list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning are also away out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all the ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it. **The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?**

Mark Twain ("Concerning The Jews," Harper's Magazine, 1899 see *The Complete Essays of Mark Twain*, Doubleday [1963] pg. 249)

Source 7

"What is the Jew?...What kind of unique creature is this whom all the rulers of all the nations of the world have disgraced and crushed and expelled and destroyed; persecuted, burned and drowned, and who, despite their anger and their fury, continues to live and to flourish. What is this Jew whom they have never succeeded in enticing with all the enticements in the world, whose oppressors and persecutors only suggested that he deny (and disown) his religion and cast aside the faithfulness of his ancestors?!"

The Jew - is the symbol of eternity. ... He is the one who for so long had guarded the prophetic message and transmitted it to all mankind. A people such as this can never disappear.

The Jew is eternal. He is the embodiment of eternity."

Leo

Tolstoy (What is the Jew? quoted in *The Final Resolution*, pg. 189, printed in *Jewish World periodical*, 1908)

Source 8

"If we had lived in the second millennium BC, the millennium of Abraham, and could have canvassed all the nations of the earth, what would they have said of Abraham's journey? In most of Africa and Europe, they would have laughed at Abraham's madness and pointed to the heavens, where the life of earth had been plotted from all eternity ... a man cannot escape his fate. The Egyptians would have

shaken their heads in disbelief. The early Greeks might have told Abraham the story of Prometheus ... Do not overreach, they would advise; come to resignation. In India, he would be told that time is black, irrational and merciless. Do not set yourself the task of accomplishing something in time, which is only the dominion of suffering. On every continent, in every society, Abraham would have been given the same advice that wise men as diverse as Heraclitus, Lao-Tsu and Siddhartha would one day give their followers: do not journey but sit; compose yourself by the river of life, meditate on its ceaseless and meaningless flow.”

“The Jews started it all—and by ‘it’ I mean so many of the things we care about, the underlying values that make all of us, Jew and Gentile, believer and atheist, tick. Without the Jews, we would see the world through different eyes, hear with different ears, even feel with different feelings ... we would think with a different mind, interpret all our experience differently, draw different conclusions from the things that befall us. And we would set a different course for our lives.” –

Professor Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts Of The Jews*

Source 9

“There is a striking point that runs through Jewish history as a whole. Western civilization was born in the Middle East, and the Jews were at its crossroads. In the heyday of Rome, the Jews were close to the Empire’s center. When power shifted eastward, the Jewish center was in Babylon; when it skipped to Spain, there again were the Jews. When in the Middle Ages the center of civilization moved into Central Europe, the Jews were waiting for it in Germany and Poland. The rise of the United States to the leading world power found Judaism focused there. And now, today, when the pendulum seems to be swinging back toward the Old World and the East rises to renewed importance, there again are the Jews in Israel...”

Professor Huston Smith: *The Religions of Man*, New York: HarperCollins, 1989

Source 10

“No sensible person would deny that the knowledge of the history of our nation, in general and in detail, is indispensable for every intelligent person whose portion is G-d’s Torah – so that he may know what G-d did with this Nation, how the people of our Nation always rise and fall and are led by G-d’s particular Providence, and that in every generation ‘they’ rise up to annihilate us and at all times G-d appoints a faithful savior who endangers his life to save this great multitude: Great is the Sheperd who saves them”

Rav Zvi-Hirsch Hayyoth of Brody, in *Kol Sifrei Maharitz Chayoth* p 406-407

Source 11

[History is like] doing a jigsaw puzzle where the pieces are scattered all over the house in several boxes, some of which have been destroyed, and where once it is put together, a significant number of the pieces are still missing. The nature of the resulting picture will depend partly on how many boxes still survive and have been tracked down, and this depends partly on having some idea of where to look; but the picture's contours can still be filled in, even when not all the pieces have been located. We *imagine* the contours in this situation, and have to speculate on quite a bit of the detail; at the same time, **however, the discovery of the existing pieces does set quite severe limits on the operation of our imagination.** If they only fit together to produce a picture of a steam-engine, for instance, it is no good trying to put them together to make a suburban garden: it simply will not work.

Professor Richard Evans, *In Defense of History*. (p. 89)

Source 12

So why did the Roman Empire fall? Don't expect any one reason to suffice! We're talking about a 500-year-plus empire here! It had incorporated many cultures, depended on a vast network of trade, tried to defend many borders, and recently switched religions (sort of). Expect a cluster of reasons. Expect scholars to argue over which reasons were more important. Expect complexity ... [And yet] **All interpretations are not created equal. Some are more cogent than others. Some have more evidence in their favor. Some are false and some are lies. Even though history is more than a bunch of facts, evidence still counts for a lot.**

Gerald W. Schlabach: A Sense of History

Source 13

Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations; ask thy father, and he will declare unto thee, thine elders, and they will tell thee.

Deuteronomy 32:7-9

זְכוֹר יָמוֹת עוֹלָם, בְּיַנּוּ שָׁנוֹת דָּר-דָּר
שְׁאַל אָבִיךָ וַיְגַדֶּךָ, זְמַנֶּיךָ וַיֹּאמְרוּ לְךָ.
דְּבָרִים פָּרָק לֵב ז:

Source 14

It is interesting to note that the Bible itself in recording the great sweep of history over more than a millennia, deals not with historical, abstract, impersonal forces that push individuals around and into the corner of the story, but rather it depicts almost exclusively the stories and lives of individuals. And it is clear from the biblical narrative that these individuals through the exercise of their divinely granted freedom of will create the events and policies that we call history. To a great extent Marxism absolves humans from any responsibility for their actions. It postulates that things must happen in a certain way and that humans are powerless to stem that tide or defeat those forces that guide history.

Judaism, having postulated that G-d grants humans ultimate free will and freedom of action and behavior, makes humans responsible and acutely accountable for decisions, behavior, policies and actions. **Thus, humans, individuals like you and me, are the true creators of history and its events. The individual is not a passive pawn in shaping events that affect human life. Rather, humans are the active catalyst that creates events and propels the story of human history onward.**

Rabbi Berel Wein

Source 15

Therefore a person must see himself the entire year as if he is half righteous and half wicked; and so for the entire world, half righteous and half wicked:

If he commits one sin, has tipped the balance for himself and the world to the side of wickedness, and caused them destruction; if he has done one mitzvah, he has tipped the balance for himself and the world to righteousness and caused them salvation.

Maimonides, Laws of Repentance 3:8

לפיכך צריך כל אדם שיראה עצמו כל השנה כולה, כאילו חצייו זכאי וחצייו חייב; וכן כל העולם, חצייו זכאי וחצייו חייב: חטא חטא אחד--הרי הכריע עצמו והכריע את כל העולם כולו לכף חובה, וגרם להם השחיתה; עשה מצוה אחת--הרי הכריע את עצמו והכריע את כל העולם כולו לכף זכות, וגרם להן תשועה והצלה.

הלכות תשובה פרק ג: ח