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JUDAISM

Judaism Today
by Dan Cohn-Sherbok

CONTINUUM • 2010

An Introduction to Judaism
by Nicholas de Lange

HODDER • 2012

Judaism: All That Matters
by Keith Kahn-Harris

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS • 2000

What Do Jews Believe?
by Edward Kessler

GRANTA • 2006

It's not easy to write an introduction to Judaism. Judaism is a plural, complex, nuanced set of traditions which are difficult to present without either overwhelming the reader or simplifying to the point of dishonesty. In addition, it's impossible to frame an objective presentation of Judaism and the diverse tendencies it contains without implicitly buying in to one of those tendencies yourself. Introducing Judaism is inherently an ideological practice, where the ideology in question is communicated not only in explicit terms, but also between the lines.

In previous generations, introductions to Judaism fell mainly into one of two categories: practical halachah (aimed at a Jewish readership) and apologetics (aimed at a non-Jewish one). The genre of practical halachah derives from the tradition of legal codes aimed not at rabbis but at observant laypeople who, unable to unscramble the Talmudic sources for themselves, wanted a clear guide to religious life. The best example is Shlomo Ganzfried's mid-19th century *Kitzur Shulhan Arukh* which summarised the requirements of Jewish law in a clear, authoritative way. This tradition leads to contemporary halachic guidebooks such as Conservative Rabbi Isaac Klein's *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, published in the 1970s, and Isidore Fishman's *Introduction to Judaism*, which I remember as the set text for United



Synagogue bar mitzvah boys in the 1980s. These books, while generally presenting themselves as neutral presentations of Jewish practice, have a clear, if implicit ideological agenda: not only do they buy into particular halachic schools of thought, but they also see Judaism as a system of obligatory religious practice and seek to enable or inspire the reader to take part in this system.

The second category of introductions to Judaism is the tradition of apologetics. Here, the ideological content is much clearer, usually articulated as the rationale for the book. Jewish apologetics existed in the ancient and medieval periods, but came to the fore in the 18th and 19th centuries as Jews struggled to rationalise and defend their culture under the impact of the Enlightenment, integration into European society and antisemitism. One of the earliest examples is Moses Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* (1783), a theological tract which presents Judaism as a religious system in a manner comprehensible to contemporary Protestant readers, in order to prove Judaism's religious legitimacy and to advance an argument for granting civil rights to Jews. Louis Jacobs's *We Have Reason to Believe* (1937) self-consciously located itself as part of the apologetic tradition. It set out the core principles of a rationalist Jewish theology but unintentionally sparked controversy within fundamentalist sections of the Jewish community who were not prepared to accept the fruits of modern biblical scholarship.

The present clutch of introductions to Judaism

does not fall neatly into either of these categories. Nor is their intended audience well defined. Perhaps this is indicative of the modern Jewish condition, in which origins do not guarantee knowledge or commitment and where clear lines cannot be drawn between Jewish and non-Jewish audiences. In these books, there's no clear gap between text, writer and audience. Readers, whether of unambiguous Jewish status or not, are part of the phenomena they're reading and writing about. This creates a hermeneutic circle in which the writers and readers all have positions which derive from and interact with the material under discussion. Two recent books try to negotiate this complexity in a sensitive, transparent and knowing way. Two others are barely-disguised polemics, each tacitly adopting a set of contentious positions without making this clear to their readers who, as novices to the subject, have very little chance of contextualising them or subjecting them to critique.

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an Cohn-Sherbok is an American Reform rabbi and academic who has published over 80 books during his mostly UK-based career.

Judaism Today is clear and punchy, but ultimately deeply idiosyncratic and, on closer reading, extremely contentious. His book presents the foundations of Judaism as a set of core histories, beliefs and practices, traces the development of modern

Judaism through the 19th and 20th centuries (with a focus on the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel), and concludes by surveying the outcome of this history—the emergence of the kaleidoscope of modern Jewish movements.

Cohn-Sherbok starts with the background. He traces the history of the Jews from Abraham's origins in Mesopotamia through the biblical period and into the rabbinic, medieval and modern eras. Given the contested nature of biblical historiography, I was waiting for the author to break his narrative to explain that the foregoing should be understood less as history and more as a foundational myth. He doesn't. The conclusion to be drawn by beginner readers is that the biblical account actually happened. That this should be claimed — or even implied — by an author who presumably knows better, raises the question of Cohn-Sherbok's pedagogical approach. In contrast to Kahn-Harris and de Lange who endeavour to teach Judaism in all its complexity from the outset, Cohn-Sherbok flattens out the tradition for his audience, presumably on the assumption that they'll learn the complexities for themselves as they progress in their studies.

Next, Cohn-Sherbok surveys "the basics" — a list of core Jewish beliefs and practices. In doing so he bases himself on canonical, pre-

modern sources and makes no reference to the diversity of perspectives on each of these issues in the contemporary Jewish world. He takes an entirely ahistorical perspective and references neither academic Bible scholarship nor non-fundamentalist accounts of the origins of the Oral Torah. He sums up revelation, for example, in line with Maimonides's fundamentalist view in his Thirteen Principles of Faith (which a close reading of the same author's philosophical work reveals even he did not subscribe to in a simplistic sense) and explains that the prayer book was codified after the destruction of the Temple in 70CE, making no reference to the flexible, evolving nature of Jewish liturgy over the centuries. More significantly, Cohn-Sherbok puts belief before practice, sketching a Judaism defined by a clear set of theological principles, from which religious practices subsequently flow. Anyone familiar with Jewish tradition would probably find a picture of near theological anarchy underpinned by an a priori commitment to an authoritative shared practice

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— which has itself unravelled in the modern period — more convincing.

Cohn-Sherbok's book suffers from two major flaws. The first is a tendency towards disproportionately long discussions of particular issues, marked by an encyclopaedia-like inclination to roll out every possible piece of information on the subject. Thus the book contains a section on Holocaust denial longer than the section on the Holocaust itself, and an eight-page section on faith after the Holocaust which surveys over 20 different thinkers. Similarly, the chapter on modern Jewish movements examines the major Jewish denominations before moving on to Jewish Buddhists, Messianic Jews, Kabbalists, feminists, gay and lesbian Jews, and Jewish vegetarians. While this is admirably non-judgmental, it feels somewhat arbitrary (why include Messianic Jews but not Jewish anti-Zionists? Why Jewish Buddhists but not Jewish Yogis?) and also seems to involve a category error in that it includes in the same list organised religious denominations, informal tendencies which cut across denominations, and groups which most people would not recognise as Jewish at all.

Cohn-Sherbok attacks the modern Jewish movements for presenting their doctrines as religious truth, in contrast to the inherently subjective nature of all conceptions of the divine. While fundamentalist views certainly exist in parts of the Jewish world, the majority of Reform, Masorti/Conservative and even modern Orthodox thinkers are actually well aware that many of their religious formulations are of human origin. Against this straw target, Cohn-Sherbok presents his alternative — a Pluralistic Judaism which recognises the subjective nature of belief, respects human autonomy, and regards Jewish affiliation, belief and practice as matters of personal choice. These prescriptions are both less realistic and more conservative than he seems to think. As a description of current reality, Pluralistic Judaism is essentially accurate: the contemporary world is certainly awash with incompatible Jewish narratives in which the only ultimate arbiter of belief and practice is the individual Jew. But Cohn-Sherbok claims more than this: Jewish factionalism is presented as a problem to which Pluralistic Judaism is a solution. But while many Jews undoubtedly accept this kind of individualism (and for them, the prescription is hardly radical), those who have reservations — the large numbers of Orthodox, Masorti and maybe even Progressive Jews who want to preserve some sort of normative, if not halachic, boundaries to the tradition and to the Jewish community — have no reason to. Ultimately, this kind of Pluralistic Judaism risks becoming just one more ingredient in the

sectarian mix, accepted by some, rejected by others, but certainly no panacea.

In some ways Keith Kahn-Harris's new book, *Judaism: All That Matters*, resembles Cohn-Sherbok's. It too paints a picture of classical Jewish history leading to the rupture of modernity and the emergence of the contemporary, fragmented and pluralistic Jewish world. But Kahn-Harris takes a very different approach. Against Cohn-Sherbok's uncritical, monolithic presentation of Jewish history, here the controversies and debates surrounding the Jewish past are openly aired — even if only in a few sentences. On Israel, for example, Kahn-Harris describes the emergence of Jewish-Arab hostilities without pinning blame on one side or another, unapologetically discusses the Naqba and atrocities perpetrated against Palestinians during the War of Independence, and sympathetically describes the tensions in Israeli society between universal and Jewish values. He concludes with the insight that, contrary to its goals, Israel has not united the Jewish people nor made Jews feel more secure. While his presentation of contemporary Israel will arouse angry reactions in certain quarters, Kahn-Harris manages to provoke Left and Right in equal measure and, more importantly, avoids sounding judgmental.

Kahn-Harris is a sociologist who is involved in a wide range of UK Jewish institutions and activities. His understanding of the nuances of the contemporary Jewish world is often spot on, and he communicates this understanding in a clear and engaging way. His appreciation of the diverse, multi-vocal character of contemporary Judaism is reflected in a determination to make his own take on Judaism clear from the outset. He begins with a disclaimer: this book is about the Jewish people, not just the Jewish religion. In this way he both provides a rationale for his content (why discuss Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a book about Judaism?) and makes a clear, perhaps ideological, statement that the Jews cannot be understood as a religious group in the usual sense.

Kahn-Harris also immediately clarifies another organising principle: Jewish pluralism goes all the way down. There's no substratum of Jewish identity which we can all agree on. Thus he answers his initial question, "Who are the Jews?" in several mutually contradictory ways. The next chapter, "Judaism on one foot," continues this line. Kahn-Harris quotes the famous story of Hillel and the convert who asks to be taught the Torah standing on one foot. Rather than focusing on the ethical content of Hillel's answer ("what is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour") he emphasises the

subsequent sentence: “That is the whole Torah, all the rest is commentary — now go and learn.” The message is that Judaism is primarily about practice and study. The chapter ends with the well-known Talmudic story in which Rabbi Eliezer, having invoked miracles to resolve a debate against all the other sages, is roundly instructed that the Torah is not in heaven and that the rabbis are empowered to make decisions by majority vote. Thus Kahn-Harris leaves us in no doubt as to his anti-fundamentalist, pluralist conception of Jewish tradition.

Nicholas de Lange echoes this position in his much longer book, *An Introduction to Judaism*. At 200 pages compared to Kahn-Harris’s pamphlet-length piece, it can in some ways be seen as the “go and learn” to Kahn-Harris’s Torah. De Lange quotes at length from primary sources, in an effort to evoke something of Judaism’s textual, literary character. At times, he gets sucked associatively into an extraordinary level of detail; 10 pages into his introduction to Jewish demography, for example, you’ll find a discussion of international Jewish organisations such as the World Jewish Congress and the international umbrella organisations for the major denominational movements which, as de Lange himself admits, hardly anyone — even committed Jews — has ever heard of. Similarly, his description of Passover is so elaborate, you wonder whether anyone lacking basic familiarity with the Seder will be able to make sense of it; it feels as if de Lange is writing not for novices but for people who have experienced Jewish life and now want to impose some order on their experience. Yet this propensity says something not only about the intended audience, but also about the author’s conception of Judaism. Like Cohn-Sherbok, de Lange is an ordained Reform rabbi, but is also a Cambridge professor of Hebrew and Jewish studies and an accomplished translator of some of the most important works of contemporary Israeli literature. Accordingly, his book is more literary in tone and, perhaps, more Talmudic — inductive, associative, detailed — in methodology.

In the two books previously discussed, a survey of Jewish religion forms a preface for the main discussion of the emergence of contemporary Jewry and modern Judaism in the 19th and 20th centuries. De Lange reverses this order, introducing us to Jewish demographics and history as a backdrop to the core topics of Jewish books, religion, practice and theology. This contemporary focus extends even to the book’s historical sections, which sketch out a narrative — being careful to avoid factual assertions which do not accord with the results of scholarship — before embarking on a thematic discussion of “enemies of the nation”.

These enemies are not concrete historical agents, but phenomena such as universalism, individualism, assimilation and genocide, all of which threaten the existence of the Jewish people. The discussion is nuanced: de Lange analyses each factor for its positive contribution to Jewish life as well as the threat it poses. Even the Holocaust, he claims, had the unintended effect of strengthening Jewish commitment in the postwar period.

The chapters on religious belief and practice are similarly nuanced. In the section on the family, de Lange is sensitive to varying styles of Jewish observance, describing traditional religious behaviour using formulations like “in some homes” and “in observant homes”. Thus he avoids assigning normative status to particular expressions of Jewish practice, and circumvents the common pitfall of equating observance with Orthodoxy. He also dispassionately analyses the decline of the traditional Jewish family in light of historical pressures such as the need for economic advancement, assimilation, the influence of Marxism and individualism, but perhaps betrays a prejudice in relation to intermarriage: “Even if the worst comes to the worst and a non-Jewish marriage partner appears, there are various expedients that can minimise the disaster.” It’s unclear to what extent, if at all, this comment is intended ironically. When talking about God, de Lange recognises the challenges posed by Judaism’s lack of official doctrine and the current atmosphere of unbelief: it’s hard to exclude even atheism from the range of acceptable Jewish opinions, when atheism shades into agnosticism and from there into scepticism over the possibility of knowing God — a question which originates in normative, medieval Jewish philosophy. Even in a book ostensibly for beginners, ideas such as these are present in all their complexity.

The same cannot be said for Edward Kessler’s *What Do Jews Believe?* Kessler is an academic and journalist, active in the area of interfaith dialogue between Jews, Muslims and Christians. While his book starts out with explicitly pluralist assumptions (“As a general rule, if you’re told that all Jews believe x or y, you know the person proposing the view is wrong!”), the book is characterised by inaccuracies, vague concepts, ill-fitting quotations, attempts at populism and humour and, occasionally, a didactic, judgmental tone. Describing the emergence of the United States and Israel as the two centres of the Jewish world following the Second World War, for example, Kessler concludes that “there

are indications that, perhaps for the first time in Jewish history, a true dialogue between Israeli and Diaspora Jews is developing. It is certainly very much needed." Perhaps, but Kessler seems to have forgotten the Talmudic period, when a meaningful dialogue between Israel and Diaspora was very much in evidence. Kessler similarly puts aside the need for empirical evidence in his analysis of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Israelis are angry because of the Palestinians' abandonment of negotiations and their resort to violence; Palestinians are angry because they live in poverty and in constant fear; "yet in their hearts both Israelis and Palestinians know that good neighbours are better than good guns." He concludes prophetically: "At some point in the future, morality and expediency will coincide and Israelis and Palestinians will have the opportunity to bring peace to the region."

Kessler's discussion of monotheism is similarly imprecise. His basic point is a good one: that Jewish belief is caught in the tension between the biblical idea of a personal God and the philosophical concept of the divine. But his subsequent discussion of Maimonides is riddled with inaccuracies: he claims that Maimonides's works, including the *Guide for the Perplexed* and the *Thirteen Principles of Faith*, seek to harmonise Aristotelian philosophy with the Bible. While this is true of the *Guide*, it is certainly not true of the *Thirteen Principles*, which in any case are not a stand alone work but a short part of Maimonides's commentary to the Mishnah. Similarly, Kessler illustrates Maimonides's negative theology by explaining that "one cannot say for example that God exists". Unfortunately for Kessler, the fact of existence is the only positive thing Maimonides thinks we can posit about God.

Kessler chooses to illustrate the varieties of Jewish belief by surveying a surprising collection of characters—Woody Allen, Golda Meir, Hugo Gryn, Jonathan Sacks and Andrea Dworkin. If the book is about Jews, then this chapter provides an interesting snapshot of the modern Jewish people, although the selection of illustrations is arbitrary in the extreme. If it's about Judaism as a religious or a cultural phenomenon, it fails to shed light in any meaningful way on the variety of Jewish belief in the world. More seriously, Kessler's overall conception of Jewish identity is mired in vagueness. He visualises Judaism as a triangle whose points represent God (or religion), Israel (or nation) and People (or culture). You can plot particular expressions of Jewishness as points on the triangle, where proximity to one corner implies distance from the other two. Not only is this conception flawed (does a stonger relationship with God mean a weaker relationship with Israel?) but his terms are hopelessly confused. By "Israel" Kessler means land, not

people, although his claim that ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionists are located at the religious tip of the triangle—thereby excluding nation and culture from their identities—indicates that he is confusing the State of Israel (with which Orthodox anti-Zionists don't identify) with the Land of Israel (an important religious concept for them). Similarly, if "People" translates as culture, the model seems to exclude the social, collective aspect of peoplehood as an ingredient of Jewish identity. Kessler also understands "culture" in exclusively secular terms, as something distinct from religion; the core concept of Torah as the religious-literary culture of the Jews seems to be missing from Kessler's picture of Judaism.

However confused Kessler's model of Jewish identity might be, it does provide a convenient way of deciphering the basic conceptions of Jewishness at the heart of the other three books. Dan Cohn-Sherbok, the rabbi and theologian, sees Judaism as a system of practice and (primarily) belief—he is located at the religious point of the triangle. For Keith Kahn-Harris, the sociologist, the Jews are essentially a social unit—a people. Nicholas de Lange, the linguist and translator, understands Judaism as a lived culture, grounded in literary texts. These definitions are over-simplistic, but they do make the point that when we look into Judaism, we all tend to see ourselves. This is true in an additional sense. All four authors are either ordained Reform rabbis (de Lange and Cohn-Sherbok) or committed members of Reform Jewish communities (Kahn-Harris and Kessler). While none of the books even implicitly advocates a specifically Reform agenda, this fact might explain a certain similarity between their conceptions of Jewish pluralism. De Lange and Cohn-Sherbok both see ultra-Orthodoxy as essentially continuous with pre-modern Judaism. Kahn-Harris concedes that Orthodoxy was a new phenomenon (how could a movement which is primarily a reaction against modernity be anything else?) but still describes it first, even though historically its emergence post-dated that of Reform. Conversely, all three writers group the non-Orthodox streams together under the "progressive" banner and characterise them all as attempts to modify Jewish belief and practice. The position which emerges from all these accounts is that traditional Judaism is essentially static, that Orthodoxy is in some way a continuation or retrenchment of this position, and the only alternative is to alter, or reform, the tradition. None of the authors considers the possibility that this conception is itself denominationally specific. In fact, it could

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be argued that it serves the common interests of leftwing Progressive and rightwing Orthodox Jews, all of whom conceptualise the tradition as static and monolithic and differ only over whether to defend or dismantle it.

In fact, Jewish ideologies are always tied to conceptions of Jewish history, which, in turn, are ideologically conditioned. Leftist historians have tended to see Jewish history as a function of class conflict, while Zionists have interpreted it in terms of the dynamic connection between the Jewish people and the land of Israel. The ideology of Orthodox Judaism, which aims to conserve the tradition against the onslaught of modernity, depends on and feeds a conceptualisation of Jewish history as fundamentally static: while historical events have washed over the Jewish people in every generation, the foundation of Torah has remained essentially unchanged, even if its interpretation and application have evolved. Reform thinkers have tended to accept this view as a picture of medieval Judaism but have chosen instead a particular historical juncture as the locus for their identity: the destruction of the second Temple and the emergence of early rabbinic Judaism. This is seen as Judaism's radical birthplace, a time in which rabbis revolutionised Judaism, abandoning the Temple cult and replacing it with a dynamic, evolving oral tradition committed to the pursuit of justice. Thus the modern Reformers' radical break with medieval tradition is legitimised and granted Jewish authenticity. Other Jewish thinkers have developed an affinity for the Talmudic period in its post-revolutionary phase. Talmudic Judaism is seen as diverse,

non-dogmatic, stable, and open to continuous evolution and development. The authentic heirs to the tradition in this view are not the ultra-Orthodox but the centrist movements: liberal Orthodoxy, Masorti and right-wing Reform. Kahn-Harris who, earlier in his book, makes clear that this is his stated position on Judaism, unwittingly sums this up with a joke: How many Conservative Jews does it take to change a light bulb? We'll set up a committee. — **JQ**

Matt Plen is the Chief Executive of Masorti Judaism in the UK and a PhD student at the Institute of Education, where he researches Critical Pedagogy and Jewish ideologies of social justice.

