
L'historiographie israélienne aujourd'hui, (Israeli historiography today)

edited by Florence Heymann and Michel Abitbol, CNRS Editions, Paris, 1998.

Denis Charbit



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The “new historians” are the latest fad. Their work has been given astounding media coverage compared to the relative lack of interest usually paid to university research, limited too often to a coterie of specialists and students. The reasons why historical research is in this very unusual limelight are obvious. It was clear from the start that the issues raised by the new historians were much more than scholarly queries. Rather than dealing with scientific issues or methodological problems, they tampered with national identity, collective memory, the “national folktale” and shook the public’s clear conscience to the core. In this respect, despite some excesses, their work has been salutary.

The volume is prefaced by Florence Heymann and Michel Abitbol, who are both concerned with redefining the context in which the new historians emerged and the importance of public debate which they have prompted. The prime merit of this collection of articles is to show that beyond the hesitation or annoyance associated with anything trendy, current Israeli historiography, whether it claims to be part of the new history movement or not, is based on scientific efforts and tested methods. Furthermore – and this is the most interesting feature in the choice of articles – the newest and most daring Israeli historiography does not restrict itself to simply retracing the history of the organized Yeshuv in the critical period from the Holocaust to the end of the first decade following the creation of the State of Israel. Rather, in the field of Jewish studies in general, there is an overall trend towards revising, re-examining and revisiting the contribution of over a century of Zionist and Israeli historiography. This trend applies to many other topics than the oft-examined indifference or negligence of Ben Gurion concerning the reality of the Holocaust (Tom Segev), Israel’s responsibility for the creation of the Palestinian Arab refugee problem (Benny Morris), the presumed collusion with Transjordan (Avi Shaiim) or finally the reprisal policy against armed or civilian Palestinian infiltration up to the Sinai campaign of 1956 (Benny Morris). These studies – whose importance is as critical to the national conscience as it is to historical research itself – may hide the forest for the trees. A “forest” which,

because it focuses on the less political features, less current topics, still deserves to be explored: this revisionist movement also covers earlier periods, as is shown by the article by Israel Yaacov Yuval on the Passover Haggada. The author's conviction and ability to persuade even the non-initiated is aimed at showing that the Haggada was not written during the period of the Second Temple, as was always believed, but was contemporary to the spread of Christianity. The author provides multiple proofs to confirm his hypothesis, and explains for instance that the lack of mention of the role of Moses in the story of the exodus from Egypt was a deliberate attempt to avoid an analogy with Jesus. The Haggada, according to Yuval, was a response to the Christian interpretation of the Passover, a polemical text to cope with the challenges of Christian tradition. This gives weight to the perception of the two monotheistic religions as sister-religions rather than the classic view of Judaism as the mother-religion.

Moshe Idel's article is an attempt to revise the corpus established by Scholem, while recognizing his debt to him. He reevaluates the ecstatic mysticism of Abulafia. By so doing he assesses the phenomenological approach which only received scant attention from his illustrious predecessor, and suggests that the disciples of Scholem maintained this covert stance, hence becoming the guardians of a monolithic temple and condemned to re-enact the philological approach. Moshe Idel's work thus shows that this revisionist fever should not be attributed to the 'new historians.' His critical overview of their respective discipline in fact preceded them by several years. The same can be said for the sociologists who, inspired by Marxism or the critical Frankfurt School had for some time challenged the modernizing and functionalist vision of such authors as Eisenstadt. In this instance, however, one "great tale" was replaced by another "great tale." This is no longer the case today, as is shown by Amos Funkenstein in a timely evaluation of "founding stories" in Jewish history.

This panorama highlights the vitality of Israeli research and its ability to strip to the core. It cannot be accused of resting on the laurels of the elder generation, who is constantly presented as having lost much of its former splendor. This new movement is not aimed at innovating on a methodological level and it does not try to mix social, economic, and cultural history with the history of ideas and institutions. It is a 'revisionist' spirit – in the noble and legitimate sense historical research has given to the term – which motivates these historians schooled in Jewish and Israeli studies. It consists of asking rude questions, advancing astonishing hypotheses, digging deeper into unknown territory, exploring new interpretations, with a special inclination for those that challenge classic thought. In this way, the 'new history' of Israel has nothing in common with what the term has come to mean in France. Morris is not Braudel,

Pappe is not Le Goff. What they have done for the history of Israel is comparable to what Francois Furet did for the French Revolution; they introduce a critical, less ideological reading. Just the way the Revolution should not be accepted as a whole, neither should the history of Israel. The reasons for preserving such a rigid ideological front are no longer valid, they argue. One considerable feature however differentiates them: Furet attacked a firmly established Jacobin historiographic tradition whereas the new historians oppose the official Epinal-style caricature approach. They created a stir in the university less because of the indisputable facts they presented and framed than because of their evaluation and the interpretations they at times made. What also sparked controversy, in my opinion, was their imprecatory tone and their irresistible tendency to sit as judges (always a temptation for a modern-day historian). They displayed merciless severity for the winners for whom they grant little or no extenuating circumstances, yet commiserated to the utmost with the losers.

This collection is aimed at being an accurate reflection of today's research. For this reason the reader should not be surprised to find several articles which are less examples of this new trend than considerations on the rise of new historiography, a movement which analyzes itself while contributing to the field (see the articles by Benny Morris and Uri Ram).

For those who lament the crisis in values, institutions, etc., this new historiography proves that any crisis has its good points in that it prompts self-assessment. This helps explain the type of reception reserved for the "new historians". Because society is itself mature enough for self-assessment, they were welcomed with relative serenity (with the exception of Israel's responsibility in the expulsion of Arabs from 1948 Palestine). In this respect, the review article by Dina Porat on the attitude of Ben Gurion during the Holocaust, even though it is dated and could not include the polemical theses put forward by Tom Segev, Idit Zartal and Yosef Grodjanski, prompts reconsideration of the newness of their criticisms and attacks on Ben Gurion should be put in perspective. She shows that there was longstanding criticism of Ben Gurion. In other words, rather than running counter to society, the new history formulates in explicit terms what common sense has been saying for some time. Reading the article by D. Porat one wonders whether this new history does not consist in some cases of using criticism to demolish myths which have been faltering for a fairly long time.

Overall it is clear that the scales are shifting in the other direction. After the initial era of the "science of Judaism" in Europe which stressed the contribution of Jews to universal history for purposes of justification (obtaining emancipation or legitimizing these decrees), the Zionist historiography which

developed in Palestine emphasized a long hidden and negated feature of that era: namely, the Palestinian centered view.

This view, by shifting from counter-history to official history, has itself elicited the opposing reaction, this time from Israel rather than the Diaspora. For, as Israel Bartal suggests, what happened to Zionist historiography is the natural process of all new historiography: iconoclastic at its inception, little by little institutionalized, it becomes official truth and then collapses, the victim of its own success.

This ideological, or at least implicated reading of the previous period is now been succeeded by research which is perhaps more objective or at least more independent and freed from internalized social pressure. It presents a less sanctified vision of Jewish history which nonetheless does not make it an extricated historiography since it remains Judeocentric in the final analysis. The harshness of tone, the violence in the judgments and in the condemnation of the “elders”, the strategy of suspicion, or fear of manipulation appear to be unlikely heralds of a more tranquil era, relegated to the future, which would be a true sign of accepted normalcy.

Denis Charbit
Tel Aviv University