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Introduction

The Modern Age is the Jewish Age, and the twentieth century, in particular, is the Jewish Century. Modernization is about everyone becoming urban, mobile, literate, articulate, intellectually intricate, physically fastidious, and occupationally flexible. It is about learning how to cultivate people and symbols, not fields or herds. It is about pursuing wealth for the sake of learning, learning for the sake of wealth, and both wealth and learning for their own sake. It is about transforming peasants and princes into merchants and priests, replacing inherited privilege with acquired prestige, and dismantling social estates for the benefit of individuals, nuclear families, and book-reading tribes (nations). Modernization, in other words, is about everyone becoming Jewish.

Some peasants and princes have done better than others, but no one is better at being Jewish than the Jews themselves. In the age of capital, they are the most creative entrepreneurs; in the age of alienation, they are the most experienced exiles; and in the age of expertise, they are the most proficient professionals. Some of the oldest Jewish specialties—commerce, law, medicine, textual interpretation, and cultural mediation—have become the most fundamental (and the most Jewish) of all modern pursuits. It is by being exemplary ancients that the Jews have become model moderns.

The principal religion of the Modern Age is nationalism, a faith that represents the new society as the old community and allows newly urbanized princes and peasants to feel at home abroad. Every state must be a tribe; every tribe must have a state. Every land is promised, every language Adamic, every capital Jerusalem, and every people chosen (and ancient). The Age of Nationalism, in other words, is about every nation becoming Jewish.

In nineteenth-century Europe (the birthplace of the Age of Nationalism), the greatest exception was the Jews themselves. The

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most successful of all modern tribes, they were also the most vulnerable. The greatest beneficiaries of the Age of Capitalism, they would become the greatest victims of the Age of Nationalism. More desperate than any other European nation for state protection, they were the least likely to receive it because no European nation-state could possibly claim to be the embodiment of the Jewish nation. Most European nation-states, in other words, contained citizens who combined spectacular success with irredeemable tribal foreignness. The Jewish Age was also the Age of anti-Semitism.

All the main modern (antimodern) prophecies were also solutions to the Jewish predicament. Freudianism, which was predominantly Jewish, proclaimed the beleaguered loneliness of the newly “emancipated” to be a universal human condition and proposed a course of treatment that applied liberal checks and balances (managed imperfection) to the individual human soul. Zionism, the most eccentric of all nationalisms, argued that the proper way to overcome Jewish vulnerability was not for everyone else to become like the Jews but for the Jews to become like everyone else. Marx’s own Marxism began with the proposition that the world’s final emancipation from Jewishness was possible only through a complete destruction of capitalism (because capitalism was naked Jewishness). And of course Nazism, the most brutally consistent of all nationalisms, believed that the creation of a seamless national community was possible only through a complete destruction of the Jews (because Jewishness was naked cosmopolitanism).

One reason the twentieth century became the Jewish Century is that Hitler’s attempt to put his vision into practice led to the canonization of the Nazis as absolute evil and the reemergence of the Jews as universal victims. The other reasons have to do with the collapse of the Russian Empire’s Pale of Settlement and the three messianic pilgrimages that followed: the Jewish migration to the United States, the most consistent version of liberalism; the Jewish migration to Palestine, the Promised Land of secularized Jewishness; and the Jewish migration to the cities of the Soviet Union, a world free of both capitalism and tribalism (or so it seemed).

This book is an attempt to tell the story of the Jewish Age and explain its origins and implications. Chapter 1 discusses diaspora

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Jewish life in a comparative perspective; chapter 2 describes the transformation of peasants into Jews and Jews into Frenchmen, Germans, and others; chapter 3 focuses on the Jewish Revolution within the Russian Revolution; and chapter 4 follows the daughters of Tevye the Milkman to the United States, Palestine, and—most particularly—Moscow. The book ends at the end of the Jewish Century—but not at the end of the Jewish Age.

The individual chapters are quite different in genre, style, and size (growing progressively by a factor of two but stopping mercifully at four altogether). The reader who does not like chapter 1 may like chapter 2 (and the other way around). The reader who does not like chapters 1 and 2 may like chapter 3. The reader who does not like chapters 1, 2, and 3 may not benefit from trying to carry on.

Finally, this book is about Jews as much as it is about the Jewish Century. “Jews,” for the purposes of this story, are the members of traditional Jewish communities (Jews by birth, faith, name, language, occupation, self-description, and formal ascription) and their children and grandchildren (whatever their faith, name, language, occupation, self-description, or formal ascription). The main purpose of the story is to describe what happened to Tevye’s children, no matter what they thought of Tevye and his faith. The central subjects of the story are those of Tevye’s children who abandoned him and his faith and were, for a time and for that reason, forgotten by the rest of the family.

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