
The Immortal Jew

Liz Rubin

Ruthe R. Wisse

Jews and Power

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Mark Twain asks the poignant question, “All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?” In his essay “Concerning the Jew,” Twain discusses the historical plight of the Jew, analyzing the Jewish nation’s uncanny ability to withstand a deluge of destructive forces: powerful enemies, political inferiority, sub-class status, the world’s will for its annihilation.¹ He highlights the unique existence of Jews, beginning his essay with a telling statement of the Jews’ seeming insignificance. Noting that “if the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race...Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of, but he is heard of, has always been heard of.” Countless writers and anthropologists have dealt with the ubiquitous “stubborn Jew,” each attempting to propose a possible answer to the continued Jewish existence and pivotal role Jews play in global politics. As of yet, no one has been able to satisfactorily explain this phenomenon.

Harvard professor of Yiddish Language and Comparative Literature Ruth R. Wisse brilliantly poses an answer to Mark Twain’s dilemma in her book *Jews and Power*. Instead of offering merely a focused answer to the Jews’ continued survival, Wisse embarks on a study of the political history of the Jews, indirectly solving the immortality dilemma while simultaneously proving her thesis on her book’s title, “Jews and Power.” Her study of “the political aspect of the Jewish experience” reveals that, while the Jews are numerically insignificant, their innate ability to adapt to environments and their motivation to succeed despite adversity elevate them to a level beyond their proportional

value.

Moral values have always been at the core of the Jewish existence. Books like *Ethics of Our Fathers*, a mishnaic collection of positive character traits written around the sixth century, and *The Path of the Just*, a book on practical Jewish ethics written in the eighteenth century, attempt to define the values essential to fulfilling the role of a proper Jew. Wisse claims that this belief in morality and human values lies at the crux of the continued Jewish existence, its simplicity and strength ensuring continued survival. She opens her prologue with a story of a Jewish mother instructing her child, Shmuel Zygelboym, to strive to remain a decent, moral human being, a *mensch*, in the face of Nazi brutality. Picking up her brutally beaten son, “Rather than warn against his tormentors, [his mother] warned him not to become like them.” This story exemplifies the Biblical command to not follow in the ways of the nations of the Diaspora and to remain true to intrinsically Jewish morals. Attributing her book to the honor of the strong sense of morality rooted in Jewish culture, she lauds the Jews for their commitment to social justice.

While Wisse conducts a critical analysis of the political history of the Jews, she also criticizes the Jewish tendency to concentrate too heavily on social improvement and neglect political structure or defense. Zeroing in on specific examples, she illustrates the pervading weakness in the universal Jewish personality. Adopting the role of the “middleman,” a people of divine superiority and importance with the perceived obligation to keep a low profile, the Jews, as a people, have failed to practice the abilities necessary to succeed as an autonomy. As a result, when the Jews did receive political autonomy in 1948, in the return of their own country, Israel, they were, and still are, left to grapple with the essential qualities of a successful political force.

Intrinsically connecting the politics of the Jews to the politics of the anti-Semites, Wisse approaches her thesis with a chronological analysis. Splitting her book into three eras, she in essence claims that the Jews took three different approaches to their adversaries, depending on the political climate of the time.

An honest political history starts from the beginning. Going back to biblical times, Wisse discusses the exiled Jews in the Diaspora, attributing Jewish survival in a time without political recognition to their intense religious belief in God and ultimate salvation. The Unanticipated Consequences of Emancipation, the next sequential era, follows the Jewish reaction to the intense waves of anti-Semitism and political responsibility that came with political equality and recognition. Wisse modernizes her analysis with the final chronological stage in modern Jewish history, the “Return to Zion,” addressing how the Jews, who lacked political independence since the days of the Second Temple, had to refocus their mindset in order to act as a viable and productive sovereign entity. Their success is due directly to adaptation.

Spanning 18 centuries of political history is a vast task that few can accomplish successfully. Wisse, however, addresses almost every major political event in Jewish history from the Temple era until today, giving enough background information to keep the reader informed while never drifting towards the “land of no return” of an in-depth recounting of history. From a discussion of Flavius Josephus to a detailed history of the creation of the Israeli Defense Forces, Wisse uses history to structure her thesis, weaving together events with a cohesive analysis. By organizing each chronological study with clear headings, she sets up an understandable structure that not only presents a clear picture of her analysis, but also proves her claim of the logical progression of political development. She discusses historical themes, important stereotypical characters, and presents charades that perfectly exemplify her points and clarify her discussion.

Jews and Power has the satisfying duality of an interesting, quick read and an intelligent, complex political study. Anecdotes like the story of Shmuel Zygelboym and excerpts from literature and poetry complement the analysis and keep the reader interested. Her tangential occupation with the popular culture of the time complements her dense subject matter. Littering political history with bits of Yiddish, sketches of prominent characters, and frank remarks,

Wisse engages the reader in her analysis and development of her thesis.

In a brief but comprehensive book, Wisse succeeds in proving her argument. Never feeling like a dense list of facts or a desperate attempt to explain something beyond her understanding, *Jews and Power* addresses the issues of Jewish existence and perseverance head-on in approachable language. Wisse clutches at no straws; she lays out the issues, explains her examples, and bundles up her thesis into a neat, understandable package. Wisse leads her readers to their own conclusions based on the facts presented, only offering her own satisfying solution once the reader has the necessary tools and background in order to properly appreciate her insight.

Adapting Jean-Francois Revel's analysis of democracy, Wisse concludes: "Jews probably could have endured in the Diaspora had theirs been the only type of political organization in the world. But their political system was not basically structured to defend itself against outside enemies seeking its annihilation." In addition to showing this statement to be the truth, Wisse sets up a basic structure and plan for the Jews to overcome this analysis and emerge as a politically successful nation in the future.

Liz Rubin is a freshman planning to major in Health and Societies with an undecided minor. She also writes for The Daily Pennsylvanian and participates in Tzedek as a Fellow on campus.

Notes

- 1 Mark Twain, "Concerning The Jews" Harper's Magazine March 1898.