

THE JEWISH MIND

by Raphael Patai

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A BOOK REVIEW

by Bill Bjoraker

Descriptive Statement

Dr. Raphael Patai is a prominent Jewish anthropologist and historian who teaches at the Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey. The book is a comprehensive analysis of the Jewish mind (or "modal personality" or "national character", variously so-called) as it has developed through history and as it exists in the present. It is written from a scientific anthropological perspective, and attempts to be objective and descriptive. The author demonstrates penetrating analysis in his integration of historical, literary, sociological, psychological, and cultural knowledge of the Jewish people and their history. The depth and breadth of his thinking are evident in his analysis of the dynamic and formative factors which have produced the great diversity within this worldwide community.

He describes the distinctive "constants" which unify the Jewish national character as over against all other Gentile people groups. The historic processes of these factors in the ongoing existential formation of the Jewish mind are brilliantly documented.

Patai, however, does not write from the perspective of belief in the Divine inspiration and authority of Scripture. The

transcendent elements of God's will and purpose, providence, judgement or destiny are not factors in any ontological way in shaping his conclusions. He writes on the phenomenological level and presupposes no theological absolutes. For one who accepts the authority of the Bible, his analyses and conclusions will be seen to be both distorted and incomplete in crucial areas.

Structure of the Book

Part I: "Preliminaries" effectively lays the groundwork for the rest of the book. Part II: "Six Great Historic Encounters", comprises about half the book, and reviews in depth the formative and lasting influences on the Jewish mind of each period. In the last section, Part III: "Journey Into the Jewish Mind", Patai analyzes the specific traits, characteristics, and values shaping the Jewish mind during this prolonged and diverse Gentile exposure. The cumulative result constitutes the distinctive features of the Jewish mind today.

PART I

The Author's Purpose and Methodology

In the first sentence of the first chapter, the author states his purpose as "an attempt to consider the Jewish mind as a product of Jewish culture, and Jewish culture as a product of the Jewish mind." (p.3). He contends that there is a dynamic reciprocal relationship between a people's culture and their group mind. The majority in a given people group will share certain beliefs and

values which will be expressed in certain unique cultural traits. He defines the concept of "group mind" as "the sum total of these shared mental traits" (p.4). After excluding the traits common to all humans, as well as those features which are unique to every individual human (such as fingerprints), Patai focuses on the traits unique to all Jewish people.

The author first deals with the major questions which must be asked in order to delimit and define the nature of the study and describe the methodology he used in his research and analysis. Patai asserts that the reason the Jewish mind differs from the Gentile mind is that the latter is the product of endogenous processes (internal to the group), while the former is to a much greater extent the product of exogenous processes (resulting from influences external to the group). He then identifies those exogenous processes that have worked through six major historic encounters of the Jewish people with Gentile cultures. He uses this data to explain the unity and yet great diversity within the Jewish people, with a view toward defining and describing the Jewish mind today.

This leads him to address the "Who is a Jew?" question. Patai considers the function of "ethnohistory" in the formation of group mind in general, and the uniqueness of Jewish ethnohistory in forming the Jewish mind in particular. He describes the irreducible essence of Jewishness as that which has informed the Jewish mind at all times and in all places.

Statement of the Thesis and Ideas Developed About the Thesis

THESIS: The Jewish Mind exhibits great internal diversity as well as certain constants which unify it and put it in a category "sui generis", distinct and different from any Gentile group mind.

MAJOR IDEAS:

- 1) The Jews have had more exposure to a greater variety, intensity, and duration of outside influences than any other people group.
- 2) Jewish diversity is the result of: a) the variance in development among Jews themselves in various countries b) the absorption of disparate Gentile influence 3) the Jewish migrations that brought together a variety of disparate peoples.
- 3) Each of the six major Jewish encounters with Gentile cultures has had a salient and lasting formative influence on the Jewish mind.
- 4) Throughout Jewish history (except for real shrinkage and erosion during the Jewish Enlightenment) there has existed an essential core of Jewishness. This core consists of two beliefs and two duties. Beliefs: in One God and in the special relationship (covenant or chosenness) between Israel and God. Duties: toward God and toward one's fellow human being.
- 5) The question, "Who is a Jew?" must not be defined solely as being a matter of race (great genetic variance exists), religion (many Jews are atheists), peoplehood (some Jews define themselves in purely religious and not racial or national terms), or merely a matter of being born of Jewish parents (there are biological Jews who reject and/or forsake their Jewishness in

contrast to non-biological Jews who are very Jewish). Patai asserts, "Thus, in the ultimate analysis, to be Jewish is a state of mind" (p. 23). "A Jew is a person who considers him/herself a Jew and is so considered by others" (p.24). This "consciousness of belonging" (p. 25), particularly apparent in efforts to pass the same feeling and consciousness on to one's children, for any combination of the above reasons, is ultimately wherein resides the essence of Jewishness.

6) That image a people has of its own history is a powerful formative force which functions to mold and shape its national character. Jewish ethnohistory has set the Jewish people apart from the Gentile world.

PART II

The Six Historic Jewish Encounters with Gentile Cultures

In Part II, the author builds the case for the first part of his thesis: the Jewish mind exhibits great internal diversity. Patai omits Israel's first period of 400 years in Egypt and offers no reason for this significant omission. In his analysis each encounter has one feature in common: each brought about Jewish involvement in new realms of cultural activity and the adoption of a new language. The encounters are:

1) Israel and Canaan - Upon entering Canaan, Israel adopted certain agricultural, religious, and literary elements of Canaanite culture that have had lasting effects. Canaanite phraseology and imagery is incorporated in the Bible. The patriarchal family

originally spoke Aramaic but learned the Canaanitic language before going down to Egypt. It became fully adopted while in Egypt and was still known during the times of the kings as "the language of Canaan" (Isaiah 19:18) or "Judean" (II Kings 18:26,28). Only in Mishnaic times was the term "Hebrew language" to appear for the first time.

2) **Jews and Hellenes** - The sweep of Hellenism and the lure of Greek wisdom brought Jewish involvement in a variety of Greek literary, artistic and philosophic forms. These forms were used to convey a thoroughly Jewish content. The Greek language was adopted to the high degree that the Hebrew Scriptures were translated producing the lasting legacy of the Septuagint.

3) **Hebrew Arabesque** - Secure in Talmudic law, the Jews under Islam had no qualms about following the Arabs into every cultural venture including, for the first time, secular science and poetry. In this Golden Age of Sephardic Jewry, the Arabic language was used widely by the Jews. The Arab attitude toward Arabic was adopted by the Jews in their attitude to Hebrew thus producing the first scholarly Hebrew linguistics.

4) **The Italian Renaissance** - Jews entered deeply into all areas of Renaissance culture, including the vices of the age, with a deeper participation than ever before in their history. The Italian language was fully adopted. In the ensuing culture, the balance shifted in favor of secular Italian over against religious Jewish themes.

5) **Jewish Dionysians: The Hasidim** - Hasidism was heavily

influenced by Ukrainian and Polish folk sectarian religious movements. As a reaction to East European Talmudism, it was a step away from traditional Rabbinic Judaism in the direction of a specific type of Gentile folk religion. The Yiddish language developed in this context.

6) **Enlightenment: Triumph and Tragedy** - The encounter of the Jews with the European Enlightenment caused the greatest shrinkage ever of the Jewish core. The internalization of the values of the Enlightenment comprised also the typical indifferent attitude to religion; nominal Christianity was paralleled by nominal Judaism. With emancipation and the development of modern nation states, Jews adopted the language of the nations in which they resided.

The Trend of the Millennia

After presenting the six historic encounters, Patai describes a trend in the flow of Jewish history indicating a gradual loosening of Jewish religious and cultural ethnocentricity:

- 1) the Hellenized Jews had more in common with the Greek pagans than the Biblical Israelites did with the Canaanites.
- 2) The Arabized Sephardic Jews had more in common with Arab culture than the Hellenized Jews did with the Greeks.
- 3) The Renaissance Jews were more imbued with the Renaissance spirit than the Sephardic Jews were with the Arab and Spanish culture.
- 4) The Hasidim absorbed more Gentile religious elements than had taken place since the Canaanite period.

5) During the Enlightenment, the essential Jewish core experienced its greatest shrinkage. The age-old cultural continuum of Talmudic learning broke up and the Gentile European Enlightenment's attitude of indifference or hostility to religion was largely accepted. A reductionist Judaism soon mirrored a reductionist Christianity. Unforeseen damaging consequences were to follow.

PART III

Patai now moves logically to describe the product of the six historic encounters, namely the modern Jewish mind, and to delineate its distinctive features. Here the author builds the case for the second part of his thesis: there are constants which unify the Jewish mind and put it in a category 'sui generis'." Following is a summary of the features described in the book:

1) Jewish Intelligence

Patai states, "In all places where I. Q. tests have been administered to compare scores between Jews and non-Jews, the former have performed better than the latter" (p. 536).
Explanatory factors:

a) Environmental Factors - Brain damage due to malnutrition was historically less frequent among Jews because of the Jewish mitzvah of charity and providing for the hungry. The high traditional value of care for pregnant women and the Jewish home environment gave much attention and stimulation to children, preventing social and intellectual deprivation. Over time, this worked through natural

selection to genetically produce a higher general level of intelligence.

b) Hereditary Factors - The ordeals and struggles of the Jews, which caused them to place a premium on mental acumen in the struggle for survival, operated as selective factors in raising the average intelligence of the Jews. In addition, Rabbinical/Talmudic scholars who excelled were given the best choices in marriage, whereas often the best minds in Christianity chose the monastic/celibate life. Over time this produced a disparity in intelligence between Jew and Gentile.

Patai does caution us, however, not to jump to a generalized conclusion. Because I.Q. tests are culturally conditioned and measure primarily the kind of intelligence valued in Western culture, and because intra-Jewish differences are considerable, he believes it is impossible to make any general (universal) pronouncement about Jewish intelligence.

2) Giftedness and Genius

All studies have shown that a disproportionately high percentage of highly gifted people and geniuses have been Jewish. Jews, who comprise .05 % of mankind, have won more than 15% of all Nobel prizes. Explanatory factors:

a) The pressure of Gentile persecution causing the survival of the most intelligent

b) Advantages enjoyed by the best scholars in mating and procreation

- c) Traditional high value of learning
- d) Healthy, stimulating home environment
- e) Urban living
- f) Necessity to make a living in commercial occupations in which intelligence is a necessity
- g) The challenge of the Gentile atmosphere

3) Special Talents

Exceptional abilities/ aptitudes in which Jews have, more than other peoples, excelled always and everywhere:

- a) Group survival/ identity preservation
- b) Religious virtuosity
- c) Linguistic- because of the dispersions to many countries
- d) Music: because it was traditionally the only direction artistic expression could take
- e) Finance- because it was thrust upon them

4) Personality and Character

Patai states that it is impossible to speak of "THE Jewish Personality" because the variance and diversity is so great. The discussion must be confined to the Jewish personality in a certain time and place.

For example, one could speak of Ashkenazi inquisitiveness, argumentativeness, and difficulty in obeying authority; Sephardic internalization of Spanish pride; Yemenite peacefulness and modesty; Moroccan aggressiveness; or American achievement

orientation.

It appears that in Western countries, Jews are characterized by greater intensity, sensitivity, and impatience than their Gentile countrymen.

A telling popular saying, "The Jews are like the Gentiles, only more so," expresses a large degree of reality.

5) An Intense Concern with Health

This may possibly be due to a survival-insurance mechanism rooted in the Jewish family and tradition which expresses itself in an explicit emphasis on health. Historically, the lower infant mortality rate, and death rate in general among Jews compared to Gentiles may be due to better hygiene and the ardent concern of Jewish mothers for their children's health.

The higher instances of mental illness may be due in large part to the negative effects of intensity as it is manifested in familial relationships such as parents high expectations for children and over-achievement orientation. The effects of stresses due to conflict with the Gentile environment may be a factor.

6) Jewish Self-Hate

A particularly Jewish manifestation of mental illness, this is brought on by the internalization of the antisemitic stereotype of the Jew. "Parasitism" is a charge that has persisted and was at times internalized by Jews. The logical conclusion was that Galut Jewry had earned its fate, and that the contempt of the Gentile

environment was justified.

Until the Enlightenment, the sense of collective guilt that the Jewish people felt was always balanced by a sense of collective excellence. The Enlightenment disturbed this balance by convincing the Jews that their own culture was inferior to modern European culture and that they must acquire European culture for their own good. Adoption of rationalistic secular humanism eroded the core Jewish elements of belief in God and of Israel's special relationship with God. With this basis for a sense of dignity and identity gone or greatly weakened, the scale was tipped on the side of collective guilt, and of being different for no reason. Finding themselves barred from full acceptance into European culture despite their best efforts at assimilation, produced frustration which in turn led to aggression. But this was not directed at the Gentile majority whose values and culture they admired and desired; it was rather turned inward toward their own group and themselves.

Often the Jewish ego created an escape hatch by turning the aggression toward other Jewish groups. Jewish sub-groups ruthlessly castigated other Jewish sub-groups (e.g. Ashkenazi vrs. Sephardi, Secular vrs. Religious).

An example of the internalization of the antisemitic stereotype of the Jew is Karl Marx. He himself, a Jew, was intensely antisemitic.

7) Central and Important Values in Jewish Life

The Family: Honor of parents by children, love and nurture

of children by parents brought family cohesion and made the home as center of religious life and human celebration. This value has been eroded since the Enlightenment.

Education/Learning: This has always been a high value.

Charity: The practice of social compassion, especially to their own, has always characterized the Jewish people.

Evaluation

Major Weakness - Patai is a humanistic anthropologist, strongly influenced by the Durkheimian functional-structuralist school of thought. As such he does not regard the Bible or religion seriously as having any absolute, revelatory truth or ontological validity. Religion is dealt with on the phenomenological level. The Bible is viewed as the collective myth of the Jewish people. His functionalist approach is very evident in chapter 3, "Ethnohistory and Inner History", in which he deals with the function of the Jewish perception of their history. His approach is not concerned with the objective truth of history but rather its function in the psycho-cultural processes that have molded the national character. This approach is valid in that it offers much insight into the Jewish mind. The problem is that it is reductionist; it reduces the objective reality of God's intervention in Jewish history to merely socio-cultural and psychological causes and processes. When one omits the spiritual and theological dimensions, an incomplete picture of reality emerges.

This approach flavors the whole book, and one needs to

constantly keep this in mind while reading it. I will offer a few examples here:

1) In chapter 4, "Israel and Canaan", he states, "the entire Israelite sacrificial ritual was adopted from the pagans..." (p.51). There is no recognition of the reality of God's revelation and commandments concerning the Mosaic sacrificial system.

2) The author's assessment of global Jewish influence, in chapter 1 (p.13-14), is a humanistic conclusion. This results in a distorted and magnified assessment of Jewish influence. I quote, "the Jewish ability to create ideas and values destined to influence the majority of mankind..." (p.14), "...Jewish thoughts have radiated out...and changed man and his world. After achieving religious insights which have conquered a major part of mankind, the Jews..."(p.14), "...all mankind today is affected in one way or another by the products of the Jewish mind...no other human group can boast of an even remotely comparable record" (p.14). God's hand of providence and intervention are not in any way recognized.

In reality, the Bible is a product primarily of God's mind, albeit through Jewish channels. God could have chosen another people through whom to bring His written Word and the Savior to the world. His choice of another people would have produced similar historic effects relative to that people which have been experienced by the Jewish people. The Bible, and Jesus of Nazareth's influence on the world, are certainly due to the fact that the Bible is God's Word and Jesus is God's Son, not because

they are Jewish.

3) In chapter 13, "Special Talents", Patai asserts that Jewish survival is solely a special ability of the Jewish people. This is true, but again the Divine element of God's covenant faithfulness in ensuring their survival is omitted.

Major Strengths- Despite incompleteness and some distortion resulting from his reductionist approach, Patai definitely achieves his intended purpose which was to describe the uniqueness of the group mind of the Jewish people. Having finished the book, the reader will be convinced of the thesis statement. The book definitely warrants a serious reading by anyone who is involved in Jewish studies. The book's strengths include:

1) The book deals with a major theme in an integrated fashion. The author uses his structure well to accomplish his purpose. Patai's thesis has been fully established.

2) The structure as well as the author's articulate verbal style demonstrate broad learning and make the book both intellectually stimulating enjoyable reading.

3) The book has several salient points of relevance for all desiring to understand and associate with Jewish people:

a) The author's treatment of the "Who is a Jew?" question brings clarification to an often foggy and over-simplified issue.

b) The author demonstrates clearly that it is not accurate or helpful to talk of the Jewish personality, without qualification because the diversity is so great. This helps

those who work with Jewish people not to stereotype, pre-judge, or oversimplify their understanding of a particular Jewish person or group. The book underscores the importance of determining the sub-group of Jews one is dealing with in order to appreciate their context and background.

c) The author powerfully describes the far-reaching extent and transforming effects of the "Haskalah" (the Jewish Enlightenment). This radical movement and its effects are crucial to an understanding of modern Jewish people. The phenomenon of "Jewish self-hate", clearly explained as a result of the Enlightenment sheds light on many emotional-psychological and identity problems Jewish people have. This understanding is very useful for anyone involved in pastoring or counselling Jewish people.

d) The Jewish people, in spite of their great internal diversity and powerful forces unleashed against them, have survived both the Enlightenment and the Holocaust and today remain a people "sui generis". Patai, while not acknowledging this as due ultimately to God's providence, nevertheless brilliantly shows the human outworking of that reality.

Conclusion

This book is a basal and seminal work, and provides a standard for comparing, contrasting, and generally understanding other books in its category. Any book written from an evangelical perspective should not be written without extensive reference to

this work. If one were to go through the whole book bringing a commitment to biblical truth, and do the work of integrating, synthesizing, correcting, and adding where needed, the result would be a brilliant, comprehensive, and definitive work on the Jewish mind.

As an evangelical missionary to the Jewish people, I would like to see everyone involved in Jewish evangelism read this book in depth. And I pray that from our midst, a Jewish believer will come forward with a definitive treatment of this theme from a biblical and Messianic perspective.