

Reviewed in this Essay: [*The Veterans of History: A Young Person's History of the Jews*](#), by Mitchell Silver. Center for Jewish Culture and Social Justice, 2014, 334 pages.

Four Millenia of Great Diversity: Jewish History for Teens

by Gerald Sorin

[From the Spring, 2015 issue of [Jewish Currents](#)]

MITCHELL SILVER IS A CONSUMMATE STORYTELLER, and in *The Veterans of History* he has produced an accessible, concise, and invaluable young person's history of the Jewish people. At the same time, he has provided a rich, compelling narrative that can be read profitably by readers of all ages, Jews and non-Jews alike. Openly secular and liberal, Silver (an occasional writer for this magazine) is nonetheless scrupulously objective, and *Veterans* provides a solid historical basis for beginning an exploration of Jewish identity rooted in cultural literacy and traditions of social justice.

He starts with the Hebrew Bible, which contains, he says, many stories that are “completely made up.” Yet he is not dismissive of the “real” historical evidence in the Torah, and as importantly, he understands the power of a people's narrative, even as it undergoes reinterpretation, to reveal the nature and quality of group identity and values. In Jewish culture, for example, there is a salute to and reinforcement of the love of freedom in the annual celebration of Passover, even though much about the Jews-in-Egypt tale as told in Genesis is in dispute.

Silver writes that while we cannot be certain of the facts in biblical stories about Abraham or Moses, we do have evidence that in or around 1300 BCE, Hebrew-speaking tribes began to invade Canaan. Here, surprisingly, Silver does not allude to God's genocidal command to “conquer and utterly destroy” the Canaanites (Deuteronomy 7, 1-5) — which is the only time that Silver misses an opportunity to teach, in this case by showing how Jews, in many important and progressive ways, have, like other peoples, ignored or even discarded what they now regard as immoral parts of their own scripture.

Objective though he is, Silver is not afraid to make judgments. He writes, for example, that “other than being a good general, Saul probably wasn't a very good king at all”; and although David “is still remembered by some Jews as a model of what a leader should be... he was judged to have committed some very serious sins, such as killing innocent people.” Given the importance many modern Jews attach to Khanike, Silver is fearless enough to write not only that Judeans, led by the Maccabees, fought off the oppression of the Seleucid Greeks, but that the Hasmonean dynasty they established eventually went on to conquer new territories, often forcing their victims to convert to Judaism. On the other hand, he notes, when Jews themselves were no longer being forcibly converted — “Pope Gregory (590-604),” he writes, “called the Jewish religion vomit, but said that Jews shouldn't be killed and shouldn't be forced to convert” — Jews nevertheless sought to live separately from non-Jews. Although Silver seems to suggest a

negative dimension to this, he admits, in a somewhat resigned tone, that Judaism and the Jewish people would not have survived without exclusion until modern times. “[W]hat is most interesting,” he writes, “is not how the Jews in some ways became similar to the people they lived among. That is to be expected, for people living together always learn from each other and influence each other. What is most remarkable is that without a country... without their own government... the Jews didn’t just melt into other nations. Instead, scattered across many countries, the Jews remained a separate people.”

SILVER MOSTLY EMPHASIZES THE POSITIVE, suggesting, for example, that the Prophets thought “it was more important to be a good person than to just go through all the rituals in the right way without caring about justice.” In explaining the belief that pious Jews will be resurrected after the coming of the messiah, Silver the secularist is non-judgmental: “These ideas,” he writes “appeal to poor people who don’t have good lives and to people who believe that God is just, but don’t see much justice in the world around them. They think or hope that something will happen after death or in the future that will make up for all the unfairness. These ideas also explain why God is letting bad things happen now.” These few lines are clearer to me than several other more “sophisticated” disquisitions on theodicy I’ve read over the years. He writes with this kind of simple clarity throughout the book and rarely lapses into oversimplification.

It is not possible to convey fully the richness of *The Veterans of History* without writing about the substance and interpretive thrust of every chapter, but perhaps a recitation of some of its ninety-five chapter and section titles will give a sense of how much Silver has packed into three hundred pages: Resistance to Rome; The Beginning of Christianity; Talmudic Times; Under Islam; Medieval Christendom; Sephardim and Ashkenazim; Ladino; Daily and Religious Life in Eastern Europe; Yiddish; Capitalism and the Enlightenment; Spinoza; the French Revolution; Moses Mendelssohn; Pogroms; *Sheyne* and *Proste Yidn*; Socialism and Capitalism; Zionism; Murderers, Accomplices, Bystanders and Rescuers; the Middle East Region and the Chances for Peace...

Although the book covers some four thousand years, more than half is devoted, understandably, to the last three hundred, and thirty percent to the past century — understandably, since the 12- to 17-year-old Jews to whom this book is addressed will likely be more interested in the lives of their ancestors only as far back as their great-grandparents. So Silver gives great attention to more recent phenomena: Jewish entry into “the modern Western world,” “New Ideas, New Troubles, New Hopes” in Eastern Europe, and immigration to America. He then turns significant consideration to the Holocaust, the birth of a Jewish state, and an analysis of modern Jewish identity as reflected in the values and behaviors of the more than ten million Jews (of about fourteen million worldwide) who live in the United States and Israel.

In his discussion of mass immigration to the U.S. (1880-1924), Silver does a good job of describing the tensions inherent in leaving family members behind, even if only temporarily; and he shows why some people such as rabbis and other *sheyne yidn* were not entirely ready, despite the ever-present threat of persecution, to give up whatever power, property, or position they

possessed in Eastern Europe. His statement, however, that at first only the poorest came is questionable: The poorest could neither afford the bribes it took to escape the old world, nor the cost of the ship ticket it took to get to the new.

Silver also maintains that New York City, to which he gives too exclusive attention, was confusing to immigrants, a strange place where nothing seemed certain. In the *shtetl* communities, he notes, while one could achieve position and place by accumulating wealth or scholarship, the quality most often praised was *mentshlikhkayt* — a combination of morality, sensitivity, honesty, and kindness — but for many immigrants, the American urban environment did not seem particularly friendly to *mentshlikhkayt*. Silver neglects to tell us, however, that nearly half of the immigrants, especially those who came after 1897, had already migrated to cities and factory work after leaving their *shtetlakh* and before coming to the U.S. He also doesn't tell us enough about how quickly Jews in the U.S. recreated some of the more positive aspects of *shtetl* life, particularly community and communal responsibility. More and earlier attention in his book to the social settings of workplaces, candy stores, rooftops, and street life, and to more “formal” Jewish organizations like *landsmanshaftn* (mutual aid groups) and *shtiblekh* (storefront shuls) would have made clearer how Jewish immigrants, as Silver himself says later, “turned New York into a great Jewish city.”

SUCH ATTENTION WOULD ALSO have made a better transition to his remarkably good discussion of labor unions, including those of non-Jewish immigrants — Chinese, Korean, and Central American — who in the late 20th century, like Jews before them, had to battle the sweatshops. Silver goes on to an equally good discussion of political life, writing that while the majority of Jews were not radical leftists, significant numbers became “the backbone of American socialism.” The following excerpt is typical of Silver's ability to say something important and concise about a provocative set of issues without making judgments:

American socialists, unlike European socialists... agreed that the First World War was bad for all working people and shouldn't be supported by socialists. But like the European socialists, the Americans... had big, angry disagreements about the Soviet Union. Some American socialists thought the Soviet Union was a real socialist government that was good for the world's working people. These socialists became Communists. Other socialists thought the Soviet Union was a terrible dictatorship that didn't give workers, or anyone else, freedom. They continued to call themselves Socialists. Over time, the Communists and the Socialists broke into even smaller quarreling groups. By the 1930s the immigrants' children were filling up City College in New York, and each little socialist group had its own table in the cafeteria. The Communists who followed Trotsky were at one table and the Communists who followed Stalin at another. There were Bundist tables and Socialist Party tables, and different kinds of Zionist tables, too.

There are strong sections on the daily and religious life of first- and second-generation (c. 1890-1910) Jews, but Silver's prevailing focus on New York can give the erroneous impression that the Lower East Side was the only important enclave of Jewish American life in this era. And in speaking of the Yiddish press, Silver makes one of his very few steps into unwitting bias: He mentions only the liberal, socialist, and Communist Party papers, neglecting some more widely

read publications including the *Tageblatt* and the *Morgn Journal*, the first truly successful Yiddish morning papers.

In addition, given Silver's political proclivities and his understandable and agreeable emphasis on the confluence of modern Jewishness and political liberalism, his paragraphs about African-Americans and Jews in the third generation (c.1940s–1960s) seem too reproachful, or perhaps lacking in appropriate context. In the years after World War II, Jews were leaving the outer boroughs of New York City for the suburbs. As they made more money and became more "Americanized," they wanted more creature comforts and bigger homes. "In addition," Silver tells us, "African-Americans began to move into many of the old Jewish neighborhoods." This, he argues, created tension because the Jews were wealthier and owned the stores and the buildings in which blacks were customers and tenants. Jews had come to be "treated as 'whites' in America," he explains, while African Americans who had been here for hundreds of years were "still treated worse than the newest immigrants." They were discriminated against and violently mistreated in many parts of the country, and there was growing crime in poor black urban areas. Some Jews who "picked up... traditional American racist attitudes," Silver says, feared that African-Americans were "taking over" their neighborhoods. This was another reason Jews left the cities.

Yes, but "white flight" was a more complex process than Silver manages to detail. Perhaps more importantly, there might have been in this section a reminder of something Silver himself had said some dozen pages earlier: "Politically, from the 1930s till the 1960s" Jews in many ways "resembled other working-class Americans," yet even as they became affluent, Jews "didn't leave behind all socialist feelings and hopes for a better world." Thus "Jews, more than any other 'white' group, became allies of African-Americans fighting for civil rights."

On another matter, Silver rightly points to the intensification of anti-Semitism in the U.S. in the 1920s and 1930s. Without downplaying anti-Jewish feeling and behavior in the nation, he shows that Jews nevertheless experienced significant social mobility, evidence that "America was different," with virtually no official systematic discrimination. Most educational and economic institutions were open to Jews. While they had to fight anti-Semitic attitudes and beliefs, they had "won the fight against anti-Semitic public policies."

In fact, Silver argues, Jews had become so accepted and prosperous in America by the 1960s that some Jewish leaders (including Silver himself) worried that Jews would disappear in the U.S. It is this "worry," it seems to me, that Silver ought to have brought more explicitly front and center. Instead, for the next seventy pages, the author focuses mostly on the Holocaust and the creation and development of the State of Israel. These are unquestionably important topics, which Silver writes about perceptively. Yet neither Holocaust awareness nor being actively pro-Israel are adequate for a meaningful, day-to-day Jewish identity, not even if added together with fighting against anti-Semitism. What will it take, then, to be a Jew in an America where being completely free to be Jewish has also meant being free not to bother being Jewish at all?

In his final fifteen pages on "Jewish Identity Today," Silver revisits a theme hinted at throughout: that Jews, seemingly against all odds, have mostly remained liberal, even after becoming disproportionately wealthy and influential. Perhaps, he says to his young readers,

“after reading this book you will not find [this] so surprising.” Perhaps, yes — but they will also find, he acknowledges, “many different political ideas... [and] many politically conservative Jews throughout the world.”

SILVER HIMSELF ROOTS his own Jewish identity in political progressivism. He writes about his “biases” in his introduction to the book: “I believe that all people should have a chance to live a free and a good life, and that we all have some responsibility to try to make that happen. I think it is a great evil to treat people unequally because of their race, or sex, or culture.” He also identifies as an Ashkenazi with a strong interest in Yiddish, and as a non-religious Jew. Finally, he is a Jew who wants to “figure out ways to keep Jews Jewish.”

With all his identifiers, Silver still wants to be objective, to acknowledge the great diversity of identities among Jews around the world, and to write a book relevant to all of them. In this regard, he has more than succeeded. Yet if *The Veterans of History* had been more consistently focused and emphatic about the confluence of political liberalism and modern Jewishness, I believe it might have had more of a chance to encourage and enable the young Jews he teaches to identify with and commit themselves to the great sweep of modern Jewish progressive experience.

Gerald Sorin’s biographies include *Howard Fast: Life and Literature in the Left Lane* (2012) and *Irving Howe: A Life of Passionate Dissent* (2002). He is Distinguished Professor of American and Jewish Studies and director of the Louis and Mildred Resnick Institute for the Study of Modern Jewish Life at the State University of New York at New Paltz. His other books include studies of New York abolitionism and several on the American Jewish experience.

[You can purchase *THE VETERANS OF HISTORY on the Jewish Currents Pushcart*. **Subscribers to the magazine get FREE shipping.**](#)