Review of David Biale's *Not in the Heavens*

By Mitchell Silver

David Biale's book is better than its argument. *Not in the Heavens* is not without merit as an argument, but its thesis, depending on how it is interpreted, is either trivially true or not fully persuasive. However, in the course of making this deficient argument, Biale gives us a concise, smart, and illuminating history of secular Jewish thought. He weaves a series of intellectual biographies into a tapestry of telling details, subtle colors, and arresting patterns, to create a panorama of secular Jewish thinkers' struggles with the modern Jewish predicament created by severing Jews from the God who they long believed chose them to do his bidding.

But before an appreciation of the picture Biale provides, I turn to the inadequacies of his argument: Biale's broadest central claim is that Jewish secularism, which for him involves the rejection of some or all of Jewish religious thought, is connected to that very thought. But how could it have been otherwise? The act of rejection requires engagement with the rejected. If Jewish secularism opposes, in some fashion, Jewish religion, and opposition is conceded to be a type of connection, we know by the meaning of our terms, before any evidence is adduced, that Jewish secularism is connected to Jewish religion. The hollowness of Biale's broad thesis is most evident when he tells us that the subjects of his book are "Jewish secularists,… as opposed to mere secularists" (p.176) and that the former "are defined by this dialectic between modern rationalism and the Jewish tradition." In other words, the subjects of his book are selected by how well they illustrate its thesis. A Jew whose secularism is arguably *not* significantly formed by his Jewish ancestry (e.g., Ferdinand LaSalle, Leon Trotsky, Karl Popper) is simply not part of Biale's story. So the Jewishness of "Jewish" secularism is baked into its definition. In effect, Biale has stipulated his general thesis.

At times Biale suggests more specific and richer theses, whose truth do not simply fall out of their meanings. For instance, he argues that traditional Jewish religion is not merely discarded by Jewish secularism, it rather provides the sources of Jewish secularism; Jewish secularism is constituted from, not merely connected to, Jewish religion. It is religion transformed-- and transformation is a very particular kind of connection. Writing in this vein, for example, Biale ties Spinoza's political thought to God's covenant with Israel.

In another interpretation of his argument, we can attribute to Biale an even stronger thesis -- the claim that the trajectory of Jewish religion is essentially secularist. In this mode, Biale suggests that monotheism itself, insofar as it dismisses many gods, should be viewed as a step towards secularism.

These more pointed claims enlighten but do not convince. Consider the hypothesized biblical covenentalism as the inspiration for Spinoza's social contractarianism. Are not alternative explanations readily available? Locke and Hobbes, near contemporaries of Spinoza and hardly

Yeshiva products, (unless we saddle them with derivative Yiddishkayt transmitted via Christian tradition), demonstrate that secular social contract theory needed no Sinai soaked imagination to be formulated. Of course, *possible* alternative explanations hardly disprove that Spinoza's social contractarianism wasn't Torah rooted, but some do suggest that Spinoza's political thought might be caused by the same non-Jewish factors that shaped non-Jewish social contract theorists.

In general, Biale offers a coherent and plausible story, but the perspective is severely restricted. By telling the genealogical tale of Jewish secular thought with such a determinedly Jewish focus, one suspects that Biale has distorted the nature of Jewish secularism's full intellectual inheritance. Were his subjects' ideas not crucially shaped by Feuerbach, Strauss, Voltaire, Kant, and Darwin? While Biale never denies non-Jewish influences on the thought of his chosen ones, by leaving these non-Jewish potential influences largely unaddressed, he gives an absolute heft to the Jewish religious tissue in Jewish secularism, that in relative terms might appear minor appendages of the total corpus. Many of the thinkers he discusses were arguably more influenced by Herder and Hegel than by Maimonides and Isaac Luria.

The suggestion that major elements of Jewish religious tradition tend toward secularism is even more vulnerable to counterexamples. A religion that structures myriad daily aspects of its adherents lives through rituals commanded by God, many if not most of which have no secular function, is not convincingly cast into the role of proto-secularism by viewing some of its doctrines and customs in a rationalist or universalist light. None of this implies that any of Biale's specific theses are false. But on the limited data offered in *Not in the Heavens,* skepticism is in order.

The thinness of *Not in the Heavens* theoretical trappings does not diminish its historical and scholarly substance. A major virtue of the book is its reader-friendly presentation of valuable past debates and insights. Seriously learned, but thoroughly accessible, *Not in the Heavens* reintroduces important strains of thought and sharp analyses that might otherwise be lost to general contemporary Jewish discourse. A few examples: the most common reading of Spinoza takes him as reducing God to nature, in a move that is viewed as tantamount to atheism. But Biale recalls Salomon Maimon's counter -reading, wherein Spinoza, by denying the "multiplicity of substances" (the position most compatible with to materialist empiricism) and asserting the essential unity of being, affirms a radical, and --in its anti-empiricism-- transcendent monotheism (p.32). Consider too Heinrich Heine's ironic and disheartening observation that "the very people who have given the world a God, and whose whole life was inspired by devotion to God, were stigmatized as deicides" (p.75) or Ahad Ha'am's arresting claim that Jews, as Jews, could only appropriate European modernity in Hebrew because "only Hebrew had the capacity to imitate without assimilating" (p.143).

Biale does more than just organize and report valuable historical insights from past Jewish secularists. He adds to the stock of Jewish self-understanding with many keen and historically sensitive comments . He notes the interesting fact that for central European Jews of the late 19th

and early 20th century, it was not uncommon to return to an "idiosyncratic, nonreligious Jewish identity not inherited directly from [their] parents" (p.42). He explains why the conflict between secularist and religious traditionalists was more vituperative in Eastern Europe than in most other places by remarking how little space there was for compromise in that illiberal setting (p.180). And he makes the important point that secularists made Russian, German, and English into important Jewish languages. (I have long felt that Jews who could not read Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Arthur Miller in the original are at least as as Jewishly handicapped as those who must read S.Y. Agnon, Amos Oz, and Etgar Keret in translation).

The real scaffolding on which Biale hangs this valuable compendium of modern Jewish thought is not the putative argument for slippery theses. Rather, it is his framing of the modern Jewish predicament as a consequence of the "ungluing" of God, Torah, and Israel (p.92). Traditionally, Jews were seen by others, and saw themselves, as the people formed by a common devotion to ordering their lives by " the Book," —the Hebrew Bible, Talmud, and their Rabbinic elaborations. The Book--Torah-- revealed God who in turn gave the book authority. God, text and people were mutually defining.

Secularization dispensed with God, and unmoored the texts from their ancient source of transcendent authority. But without God, the texts lost their authority. Without texts with commanding authority, there was no prescribed mode of life, and, given the absence of the national territory, no prescribed mode of life appeared to presage the end of Jewish history. The death of God threatened the Jewishness of Jews, not just their creed. Jewish secularists, by virtue of their secularism and their Jewishness, buried God, but still wanted to keep their peoplehood out of his grave.

Biale narrates the Intellectual Lives of the Secularist as exploration s of and responses to this dilemma: might secularists discover (or invent) a this-worldly authority for the texts? Is there a cultural, ethical, political or geographical substitute for Torah that might sustain Jewish nationality? Indeed, absent a commanding God, what purpose is there in sustaining the national identity? And how could that be done without marching in lockstep to a voice from Sinai?

Biale gives us a survey of how Zionist, Yiddishists, socialists, historians, philosophers, and poets have grappled with these questions. He doesn't lay his cards on the table, although he teasingly describes himself as a"postsecularist" who celebrates Yom Kippur (exactly how?) among the Redwoods, where, for Biale, God is a kind of trope. But *Not in the Heavens* is a testament to a more traditional secular, Jewish response to modernization: it is through our willingness to study, hew meaning, and identify with Jewish history that the Jews will remain a people. Biale thinks he prays with "the Almighty (if he exists) … among the giant ancient redwoods". I think his true *davening* is at his writing desk.