

## The Historian's Craft

### I. 2017: A time of anniversaries

- a. 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Princess Diana
- b. 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of death of JonBenét Ramsey
- c. 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the introduction of "Monica Lewinsky" into common political parlance
- d. 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the siege of the Branch Davidians and David Koresh in Waco, TX
- e. 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of LA riots
- f. 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of R Reagan's Westminster speech to Parliament on the meaning and virtue of democracy
- g. 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Haight/Ashbury Summer of Love [birth and death of the "hippie" culture] and the release of The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*
- h. 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of U.S. entry into World War I
- i. 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of JFK, martyred 35<sup>th</sup> US President
- j. 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of Harvard's Peabody Museum and the invention of American anthropology
- k. 200<sup>th</sup> birthday of Henry David Thoreau
- l. 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Pocahontas
- m. 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of William Shakespeare
- n. 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the British liberation of Jerusalem from the Ottoman Turks
- o. 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Six Day War, the "discovery" of Soviet Jewry, and the dramatic expansion of Jewish youth camping, Camp Ramah and UAHC/URJ camps
- p. 2500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Herodotus, the father of history

### II. Three disparate figures

#### A. Herodotus

1. Chronicler of Persian expansionism
2. Presents descriptions of each conquered nation (relating foreign mores to Greek habits), trying to make sense of foreign cultures while often lampooning (by repeating tall tales) existing national and tribal self-image – we know that he is trading in nonsense
  - a. Bearded Egyptian princess
  - b. The wife of the Persian King (Darius) talking him into conquering Athens
  - c. Giant ants of India – bigger than foxes -- who tunnel deep underground to harvest gold
  - d. Steppe-dwelling Scythians who wear coats made of human scalps
  - e. The sheep of Arabian desert, whose tails are so long they drag them on little carts
  - f. Egyptian women pee standing up while men pee squatting
  - g. Mounds and mounds of dinosaur bones in (what is now) Afghanistan and Egypt, many of them used to make giant bonfires

3. His legacy: “History” is what we choose to remember and how we choose to portray ourselves or others – it is creative and poetic; not merely an empirical or a scientific enterprise. History is not the dispassionate presentation of a smorgasbord of facts. It is the application of judgment as to the weight, importance or significance of each of those facts. What was significant, and what was trivial? (ex: Battle of Gettysburg)

**B. Walt W. Rostow**

1. LBJ’s NSA / Johnson Library
2. Yale Ph.D dissertation (1940, at age 23) on historiography of French revolution
  - a. 13 histories written in 19<sup>th</sup> century, all differentiated by the **present political outlook** of each historian
  - b. Other examples: election of 2016, 2012, 2008

**C. William Faulkner**

1. Great American man of letters / novelist / Nobel laureate
2. 1957 lectures at UVA – tapes just found in 2015, transcribed
3. Why are your sentences so long? Because the human condition is such that in human consciousness, there is no past – only a continuously reconciled present.

III. The Connection to Judaism

- A. (Dov Berkowitz) Have we abdicated the challenge of effecting the Jewish present by spiritually engaging our own pasts?

1. Bertrand Russell (US, 20<sup>th</sup> cent) spoke of the immutable past – an “Awful God, though he gives Life almost the whole of its haunting beauty.” The past was seen by him as a prison, a confinement, a tragic restraint. RABBINIC Judaism sees Russell’s thought as enlightened agnosticism; the near-deification of an immutable, imprisoning past. This indeed is a relic of paganism.

2. Contrast with Resh Lakish In *Yoma* 86a-b

- a. Great is *teshuvah*, because it **transforms intentional sins into unintentional sins** – this refers to *teshuvah* motivated by **fear** (*teshuvah me’yirah*)

**\*Fear repentance / teshuvah me’yirah** seeks to avoid or minimize punishment;

**to erase the record**, cf., Hosea 14:2 : כִּי כָשַׁלְתָּ בְּעֹנֶיךָ

*For you have stumbled into your iniquity.*

- b. Great is *teshuvah* because it [can also] **transform intentional sins into meritorious deeds** – this refers to *teshuvah* motivated by **love** (*teshuvah me’ahavah*) of God or **love** of Torah

- i. **Love repentance / teshuvah me’ahavah** seeks to retrieve, confront, **resurrect and transform** sin, and takes as its text Ezekiel 33:19

ii. וּבְשׁוּבַת רָשָׁע מִרְשָׁעוֹ וְעָשָׂה מִשְׁפָּט וּצְדָקָה עָלֵיהֶם

תִּנּוּא יִחְיֶה :

*And when the wicked turns from his wickedness and ON ACCOUNT [or FOR THE SAKE] OF WHICH does what is just and righteous, he will thereby live.*

- c. Past, present and future are not discrete, autonomous domains. Human consciousness and speech are active agents in the fashioning and refashioning of the past and the building of a future.
  - i. Work of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi on Jewish “historiography” and Gershom Scholem on Torah commentary confirm **the fluidity of the past in order to reshape the present**
  - ii. True not only for Jewish national self-imagery, but also **for us as individuals: as our own spiritual historians, engaging and mining the past in order to redeem and justify our newly resolved present: this is the meaning, the opportunity, the call, the privilege of Jewish identity**

IV. **Rosh Hodesh Elul** is this coming Tuesday, meaning Rosh Hashanah is a mere month away

A. In the 1960s and 70s, Christian TV preachers all gave the same sermon

1. [They would all say] **“I want you to be ready”** (to meet God)

2. In those days, I would have said that we would **never** hear a rabbi speak like that

B. But today I stand on the strong shoulders and millennial ladder of the great rabbinic tradition when I bring attention to Elul, and to the spiritual privilege of Judaism. *Rosh Hodesh Elul* is this coming Tuesday, and Elul is the last month before Rosh Hashanah and the *Yamin Noraim*, the Days of Awe. Beginning Tuesday, **I invite you to become your own spiritual historian**, because -- I want you to be ready.

וכן יהי רצון  
שבת שלום