

SIMON SCHAMA is devoting a trilogy to the 3000-year-long 'Story of the Jews'. His attention, however, is not evenly distributed. The first volume, *The Story of the Jews: Finding the Words*, spent 473 pages on the 2500 years between 1000 BC and 1492 AD. The second, enigmatically entitled *Belonging*, requires 790 pages to cover the 400 years between 1492 and 1900, and two characters who presumably attracted Schama because they both preached a Jewish return to Zion. Chapter 1, 'Could It Be Now?', begins with the appearance of David the Reubenite in Venice some time around Hanukkah in 1523. Calling himself 'son of Solomon and brother to King Joseph', ruler of the lost tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh that dwelt in the far east of myth, beyond the Sambatyon ('a river so Jewish it observed the Sabbath'), David sought (and even more surprisingly received) audiences with Pope Clement VII and Emperor Charles V, offering them the assistance of his (imaginary) Jewish armies to wrest the Holy Land from Suleyman the Magnificent's grip. Chapter 16, 'Should It Be Now?', concludes outside Jerusalem's Damascus Gate on 2 November 1898, with Theodor Herzl, the great impresario of Zionism, meeting Wilhelm II, the last German emperor, on the Street of the Prophets. Herzl urged the non-committal kaiser, grey-booted and riding crop in hand, to assist the Jewish people's 'return to Zion. Volume III will, I assume, bring readers more or less to our own day. Perhaps we will even meet Emperor Wilhelm again, after the First World War, blaming his defeat and abdication on the Jews, and urging Germany to exterminate 'the tribe of Judah' from its soil.

What lessons will Schama's trilogy offer? The attentive reader of this volume, reflecting on its title – *Belonging* – and noticing a similarity between the titles of the first and last chapters, may well conclude that the book's argument runs something like this: wherever in the world the Jews have lived, they have yearned to belong to that place as Jews. But in many of these places, non-Jewish society brutally rejected the possibility of Jewish belonging. (Schama exempts a handful of cultures from this brutality: Ming China, Kerala in India, and 17th-century Amsterdam, described as 'a triangle of toleration where Jews could make a home without the cycle of terror that dogged them in Christian Europe'.)

Schama rarely gives explicit guidance on the way readers should think about the material he presents. He doesn't spend much time on theses, arguments, explanations or musings about cause and effect. His stress is on 'story', not 'history': fascinating vignettes and felicitous formulations are his trademarks, and his gift is engagement through detail. 'So much could go wrong if you wanted to shoot someone in Amsterdam in 1640, even if you were sound of mind, which Uriel da Costa was not,' begins his treatment of one Portuguese converso, who trained in canon law at Coimbra before fleeing the country with his mother in 1614. Once away from Portugal and its Inquisition, Uriel (heretofore named Gabriel) had himself circumcised and 'returned' to Judaism, but found the going rough. His previous life of Catholic learn-

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BELONGING: THE STORY OF THE JEWS 1492-1900
by Simon Schama.

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ing had coloured his religious sensibilities, and 'instead of lofty ethics and spiritual realisation, all he could see' in the Judaism of his neighbours 'were trivial mechanical rituals, mindless hair-splitting and irrational injunctions', and he did not hesitate to make his views plain. The result was a herem, a ban or excommunication, which did not prevent Uriel from writing another attack on the 'Pharisees' and their 'superstitions' in 1623. In 1639, Schama writes, Uriel 'is recorded living in the Vloomburgsteeg, a stone's throw from the newly unified synagogue on the Houtgracht, and transferring his worldly goods to his common-law wife Digna, the act witnessed by a gentile tobacconist and a Jewish maker of automata with swivelling eyes, necks and heads, designed for the amusement of fair-ground crowds'. And so on until 1640, when Uriel's attempt to murder an inimical relative misfired. He fled to his study, where a second pistol and the manuscript of an autobiography would shortly be found beside his lifeless body.

A genius at painting portraits of individuals like Uriel, Schama tells their stories with a drama often lacking in the primary sources. His story proceeds person by person, prose portrait by prose portrait, curious detail by curious detail. In a single chapter on England you will visit boxing rings and mansions, spend a day working in the London rag trade, debate the meaning of fossils with the learned men of the Royal Society, and much more. Follow the Jews of Spain in their diaspora to Ottoman Constantinople and you'll tour the sultan's kitchens, taste his favourite confections, watch a Jewish cosmetics saleswoman gain influence through her customers in his harem, and witness her gruesome murder in a spasm of anti-Jewish violence. You will learn about the Jewish musicians, actors and impresarios of 16th-century Italy, about Mendelssohn and Meyerbeer, about Wagner's love and loathing for the latter, about Meyerbeer discussing medical and musical matters with his friend Rossini when 'the two composers were both in their early seventies and mortality was no longer just a melody for the cello section.'

What work do all these details do for Schama? What complex whole does each of his portraits help to build up? Consider once more Uriel's example: 'Uriel da Costa was not a profound man, but the moment he embodied in the Jewish story was: the painful birth and premature demise of the secular, obsessively polemical, rationally driven Jew who for all his scepticism wished to remain a Jew. Even his relationship with his mother spoke of this pathetic ambivalence.' The example isn't quite typical in that Schama rarely tells us so bluntly what we are meant to learn from his vignettes. But it is typical in this: each finished portrait is a stereotype, in this case that of the

modern, argumentative, mother-obsessed Jew, yearning to be secular and yet inescapably still Jewish.

The use of stereotypes is an important part of Schama's storytelling style. At times he deploys them to engage the reader with humour, as when he nods towards modern clichés about Jews (such as those about no two Jews ever agreeing), adopts Yiddish jargon (sometimes jarringly, as when he describes the great mystical messiah from Ottoman lands, Shabbetai Zevi, as 'a bit of a nebbish'), or imitates what English speakers have learned to imagine as the rhythm and diction of (Ashkenazi) Jewish speech. At other times, as in Uriel's case, stereotypes are vehicles for historical interpretation and meaning. Doña Gracia Nasi, an intrepid widow who showered philanthropy on countless Iberians, is the first 'modern Jewish matriarch', the 16th-century playwright Leone de Sommi 'is the first unapologetically Jewish showman we know anything about', an early expression of 'the Jewish urge to perform', an instinct Schama sees stretching to vaudeville, Hollywood, and the present day. Spinoza was the first 'thinking Jew' 'to uncouple himself

from the literal prescriptions of religious literature or a literal reading of the Bible', creating an 'oasis of understanding' from which other Jews like Einstein would eventually drink. And so on and so forth, across the centuries.

Reductions to type help place a potentially dizzying panoply of figures unfamiliar to many readers into a recognisable frame. This is a venerable form of historical pedagogy, even if it is not likely to result in new ways of grasping the complexity of the past. But he also makes use of less pleasant stereotypes. Consider the recurring theme (dare I say 'meme'?) of Jewish money. From the beginning of the book: 'As it had been for centuries through Christian Europe, those who most despised the Jews acknowledged they were good for some things – money for the hard-up especially. (Shakespeare was not wrong about that.)' And from the last page, Emperor Wilhelm's reply to Herzl's observation that it would be very expensive to develop Palestine: 'the kaiser . . . slapped his thigh with the riding crop and chuckled: "Well, money is what you have plenty of . . . more money than any of us."'

Throughout *Belonging*, the economic and political role of the Jews is repeatedly highlighted (and to my mind greatly exaggerated). In the 16th century, for example, Joseph Nasi – Doña Gracia's successor as the wealthy protector of Iberian exiles and other Jews in Ottoman lands – emerges in Schama's telling as the vengeful driver of an escalating conflict between the Ottoman Empire and Catholic Europe. The result

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was the great naval battle of Lepanto (1571), in which the galleys of Christendom (mostly Spain and its allies) confronted those of Islam, with disastrous consequences for the Ottoman sultan whom Nasi served. A wandering Jew engineering war between Christian and Muslim: ideas like these were a stock part of Christian and Muslim thinking about the Jews by the Middle Ages. In both early modern Europe and the Ottoman Empire some were certainly happy to use these stereotypes to explain current events or attack a powerful Jewish rival, and the sources they produced are fascinating. But those sources cannot be read uncritically as descriptions of reality.

The Ottomans are a new subject for Schama, but he seems to exaggerate Jewish

economic and political power even more in the European world. Over and over he tells us that the Jews were tolerated because their money kept monarchs and aristocrats bejewelled, built them castles and railroads, and financed all their wars. Here he is imagining the musings of Louis XIV in early 18th-century France: 'Where would his army be without Liefmann Calmer, the dependable supplier of animals, fodder and munitions?' Calmer (an immigrant to France from Germany via Holland) was one of a vanishingly small number of Jews in France at that time; an even smaller number had any connection with the vast forces of the Sun King, whose armies certainly did not rise or fall on the actions of Calmer or any other Jews.

At much the same time, 'court Jews' began to appear in some German principalities. These were Jews who competed to carry out all sorts of commission for their noble patrons: obtaining gemstones and other luxury goods, provisioning commodities such as cattle and grain, running a mint or even taking charge of collecting revenues and making payments for the prince. Their appearance has been much studied, both because it represents a significant and conflictual moment in state formation and the emergence of modern forms of governance, and because although many 'court Jews' and their descendants ended up in obscurity, a handful of Jewish families with long financial futures (most famously the Rothschilds) began their rise to prominence from such positions. Schama's summary of the phenomenon is briskly focused on success: 'for every Jew Süß Oppenheimer, hanged to general public rejoicing in Württemberg when his ducal patron died . . . there were many success stories of bankers and mint masters who survived the perils to become stupendously rich.' The half-line dismissal of Süß Oppenheimer's career is particularly striking, because his rapid rise and spectacular fall is so revealing of the dynamics within Christian society that created both the opportunities available to court Jews and the perils they navigated. Agents in an ongoing struggle between princes and landed aristocracies over who should control the extractive powers of emerging states; living emblems of a Judaism against which both Catholic and Protestant Germans so often defined themselves: small wonder that the 'Jew Süß' became a point of projection for the key political dramas of the age. In fact his figure – like Shylock's in England – became tremendously influential for the future of thinking about Judaism in Germany: he even became the main character in one of the most successful films of the Nazi era.*

The Baron d'Aguilar, Schama claims, financed the Habsburg empress Maria Teresa's new palace at Schönbrunn. That she nevertheless decided to expel all Jews from many of her lands in 1744 Schama explains by claiming that the Jews of Prague did business with her enemy, trading with Prussian troops when they occupied the city. Not to worry: 'As the War of the Austrian Succession ended others followed, and gradually, as was their wont, the Jews found a way to repair their fortunes, their culture and their lives.' In 18th-century Poland (where Jews were more numerous) Schama tells us that they 'were the enablers of magnate grandeur'. From passages like these we might think that – far from being demographically and economically insignificant in most of pre-modern Western Europe, as they in fact were – Jews were the primary operators of the monarchical and aristocratic order of the Ancien Régime. And all this before we've even reached the demographic, economic and political transformations of the 19th century, an 'age of capitalism' whose opportunities lured so many Eastern European Jews to the west.

* Yair Mintzker's *The Many Deaths of Jew Süß: The Notorious Trial and Execution of an 18th-Century Court Jew* (Princeton, 344 pp., £27.95, June 2017, 978 0 691 17232 3).

Schama's types are not always very different from the stereotypes that so many of the non-Jewish actors who people his pages believed in. I'm sure Schama sees his project as among 'the noble attempts to overcome anti-Semitism with reason and true history' that he celebrates in his book, attempts like that of the Dutchman Menasseh ben Israel (whose *Vindiciae Judaeorum* was published in 1656) or the German Moses Mendelssohn (whose *Jerusalem* appeared in 1783), but why does his attempt depend so heavily on such an ambivalent explanatory apparatus?

PEDAGOGICAL simplification is part of the answer. A more complex account might have made clearer his subjects' relative importance in the economies and societies in which they lived, but the book would have been harder to read. After all, historians have dedicated entire monographs – even entire bookshelves – to the topic of virtually every sentence in *Belonging*. Schama understands the simplifications necessary for narrative. Still, if he'd written about different figures he might have been able to interrogate the stereotypes themselves. Why, in that sense, spend so much time on Jewish capital, on the handful of financiers, and so little on the sea of Jewish labour, the poor, the scrap collectors, the tailors and textile workers, the 1848 revolutionaries, the anarchists, communists and labour organisers? Kaiser Wilhelm, for example, was just as convinced of the nefarious role played by Jews in revolutionary social movements as he was of their vast wealth. Two stereotypes, contradictory perhaps but both held with conviction, both historically consequential and deserving of attention, since ignoring one only serves to reinforce the other.

But the simplification that is more problematic for Schama's project is the most basic one of all: his decision to offer a 'story of the Jews' as if it were independent of the 'stories about the Jews' that were generated in the Christian, Muslim and even secular societies he is writing about. The question that stands at the centre of *Belonging* – why, time after time, despite all of the efforts by the parade of Jewish figures Schama puts before us, did so many Christian, Muslim and secular societies reject the possibility that Jews could belong to them as Jews, or even as converts? – cannot be answered by focusing only on the experiences of Jews, no matter how interesting the individual subjects, or how accurately they are painted. Even if one is interested only in the historical experience of the Jews, one must still ask how habits of thought about Judaism in a given society shaped (and were shaped by) the possibilities of existence for Jews.

One way to demonstrate the importance of this relationship is to focus on the stories told about Judaism in places where there could be no 'story of the Jews', because there were virtually no Jewish residents. Though you might not know it from reading *Belonging*, throughout most of the period it covers Western Europe was such a place, with the vast majority of the Jews living in Eastern Europe or under Islam (areas that receive much less of Schama's

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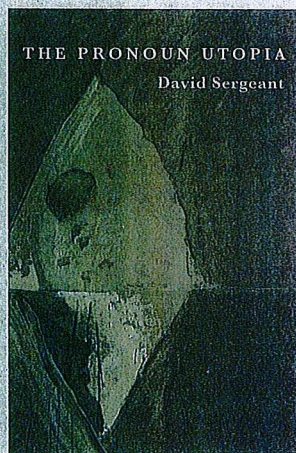
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attention than this fact might suggest). In the West before 1800 converted descendants of Iberian exiles lived here and there, and there were exceptional cities (Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Livorno, Venice, London) and even regions (Alsace) with notable (though still small) Jewish populations. Schama lavishes attention on these. But it's still the case that, from a statistical point of view, it is not much of an exaggeration to say that before 1800 the number of Jews inhabiting the vast region from Galway to Gibraltar and through the German-speaking lands, expressed as a percentage of the population, was close to zero. And yet throughout those regions, Christians thought constantly about Jews and Judaism.

Recall Schama's dictum: 'As it had been for centuries through Christian Europe, those who most despised the Jews acknowledged they were good for some things – money for the hard-up especially. (Shakespeare was not wrong about that.)' But, as Schama certainly knows, the hard-up seeking a loan in 16th-century Stratford or London would have turned not to Jewish men like Shylock but to Christians like Shakespeare's father, John (who was accused of illegal usury at least twice). The small population of Jews in medieval England had been expelled in 1290 and would not be readmitted until 1656, nearly half a century after Shakespeare's death. This didn't stop the English of Shakespeare's day from perceiving moneylending and other types of commerce as Jewish, and arguing that (Christian) moneylenders should wear Jews' hats, 'orange-tawny bon-

nets, because they do "Judaize". (The words are Francis Bacon's.)

Shakespeare and his contemporaries, virtually none of whom had ever seen a Jew, were heirs to a rich Christian tradition of thinking about money, materialism, legalism, literalism, greed, enmity and many other aspects of their society in terms of Judaism. Shakespeare used Shylock to represent the controversies and crises posed by rapid economic and cultural transformation – among them, the legalisation of lending at interest in 1571, the rise of mercantilism, changes in the laws of bond and contract, even the introduction of commercial theatre. How does a Christian society, taught for hundreds of years that moneylending is 'Judaising', and that 'a merchant can rarely or never please God, and therefore no Christian should be a merchant,' make sense of a world in which interest is legal, and a merchant can proudly claim to 'act for the commodity of his country'? These questions had nothing to do with real Jews or Judaism, but Shylock provided Shakespeare and his contemporaries with a foil against which to determine, as Portia puts the problem in the courtroom scene, 'which is the merchant here, and which the Jew?'

What Shylock should teach us is not that Jews are moneylenders, but that there is a distinction between the figural and the real, and that it isn't fixed or clear. Shylock, a figure of Judaism formed from Christian thought in order to make sense of changes taking place in a society without any Jews, became representative of supposedly Jew-

ish attitudes to money. Shakespeare's fiction became a reality capable of affecting the lives of Jews in Britain long after his death. Shylock was invoked, for example, as evidence of Jewish character in debates over the 'Jew Bill' of 1753, by those opposed to granting naturalisation rights to Jews in England (they were successful). Figures like Shylock also helped to shape the way future Europeans thought not only about the Jews they would encounter, but also about money, commerce and other activities they had learned to associate with Judaism.

Marx provides a revealing 19th-century example. I'm not thinking of his occasional allusions to Shakespeare's plays (although, like many of his contemporaries, Marx sometimes drew on them to interpret the economic transformations of his era), but of his early essay 'On the Jewish Question' (1844), where he suggested that so long as Christian society upheld money and private property, it would continue to 'produce Judaism out of its own entrails'. Schama rightly criticises that essay for presenting Jews as incorrigible moneylenders, conquerors of the modern age. But he could have profited from Marx's insight that money and property produce the 'Jewishness' of all those who use them in Christian culture because in Christian culture they were thought of as 'Jewish'. At the very least, this suggests that historians who want to evaluate the economic functions of 'real' Jews in a society must also attend to the functions of Judaism in that society's thinking.

To put it bluntly: the question at the heart of *Belonging* cannot be answered by a book that leaves unexamined the ideas, habits of thought and prejudices with which Christians, Muslims and (later) nationalists, Marxists and others thought about Jews and Judaism as they sought to make sense of their worlds, whether those worlds had many Jews living in them, or any at all. The same is true of any history that aspires to explain the place of Muslims and Islam in Europe, as Edward Said pointed out, or of Christians and Christianity, or Jews and Judaism, in Islam.

In this sense, and despite Schama's exquisite awareness of the media sensibilities of our age, *Belonging* feels out of date. Reading it I was reminded of the histories produced by Heinrich Graetz and other giants of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the great 19th-century movement of Jewish historical writing, and of the frustrations with that kind of history felt by Jewish intellectuals living through the crises of the early 20th century. In the essay on 'Anti-Semitism' Hannah Arendt brutally dismissed the idea that the old historiography provided an adequate explanation for the convulsions that had driven her into exile: 'Jewish History, which for two millennia has been made not by Jews but by those people that surround them, appears at first glance to be a monotonous chronicle of persecution and misfortune, of the brilliant rise and fall of a few individuals, atoned for by pogroms and expulsion of the masses.' Schama's history is anything but monotonous. But it isn't the kind of critical history we need. □

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