

# Foreword

*By Deborah E. Lipstadt*

An oft-quoted response to the question “Why study history?” is George Santayana’s aphorism, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” But rather than there being a consensus, some argue that, to the contrary, forgetfulness is a blessing, not a curse, a prerequisite for anchoring oneself in the present and planning for the future.

Both arguments are wrong.

If remembering the past ensured that we would not repeat it, then the Cambodian killing fields, the gassing of the Kurds, and the Srebrenica massacres would have been impossible. Yet not only did those genocides occur, but they took place at a time when the Holocaust was being broadly studied, analyzed, and commemorated. Indeed, in each case, a well-tutored world silently stood by, permitting evil to freely run its course.

But if memory does not serve as an insurance policy, neither does forgetfulness. For rather than being the most content people in the world, those who are deprived of their personal or national history often feel unmoored; without a sense of how they came to be or who they are or what they aspired to become, they are set adrift.

Ultimately, it is not the answer but the question itself—“Why study history?”—that is misguided.

Jewish tradition teaches that everything in the world is neutral. Nothing is inherently good or evil. Rather, it is our use of an object or opportunity that determines whether it becomes a curse or a blessing. A knife in the hands of a criminal may lead to murder. Alternatively, in the hands of a surgeon that same tool can help sustain life. Furthermore, some aspects of life whose face value might appear to be bad in fact hold great potential for goodness. Rashi, the great medieval Bible commentator, argued that everything in the world, even our evil inclinations, is necessary for survival. While our unselfish inclinations prompt us to give charity, help those in need, and welcome strangers, our so-called evil or selfish inclinations, Rashi asserted, also serve constructive purposes: They prompt us to build homes for shelter, support our families, and take care of ourselves.

Without these inclinations we not only would leave ourselves unprotected and vulnerable but also might be less able to act responsibly.

We can apply this insight to the study of history. History and the remembrance of things past—even terrible things—are neither inherently good nor inherently bad. They neither cause tragedies nor prevent them. Rather, it is what we choose to *do* with what we learn that creates a constructive or destructive outcome.

We can remember past wrongs and mortgage not just our energies but also those of our children, to avenge those wrongs. Conversely, we can look at the past and determine that never again will we let such evil attach itself to our identity. With historical perspective and knowledge, the choice becomes ours. We can use the history of genocide to justify retaliation or to remind ourselves that unless we name and excise evil as soon as it arises, it may morph into a thing of nightmarish proportions.

The question is not “Why study history?” but rather “What will we do with the history we study?” And, if that is a question we pose regarding world history, how much more so should we ask it about Jewish history. For the existence of the Jewish people is an anomaly. By all rights Jews should be consigned to the pages of history rather than play a vital role in contemporary events. There are so many junctures at which it would have made historical sense for the saga of the Jewish people to have ended: the Babylonian exile, the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, and, of course, the Holocaust.

The study of Jewish history can offer us insight into how the Jewish people have managed to survive. In the opening pages of *Jewish History—The Big Picture*, the author points out that different groups answer that question in different ways. Some look back and see the hand of a loyal God while others see the hand of a determined individual. Some attribute the Jews’ survival to the power of a belief system while others attribute it to a cultural heritage.

But there is a danger in using history to justify a particular position. There will be those who selectively read events—relying on intellectual blinders—so that they see only those events that validate their bias. For example, some will stitch together a version of history that focuses on the negative, resulting in what the great historian Salo Baron called a lachrymose theory of Jewish history.

This was the history to which the protagonist, Yudke, in Hayim Hazaz's short story, "Had'rashah" ("The Sermon") subscribed. At a meeting of his kibbutz, Yudke rises and proclaims, "I object to Jewish history. . . . I don't accept it . . . all the edicts, vilifications, persecutions, and martyrdoms, and yet again, edicts, vilifications . . . we have been a people with no history." Yudke, with his uniquely Zionist perspective, took a very particular—and quite distorted—view of Jewish history, which he used to justify his political worldview.

Yudke's rendition of Jewish history was as skewed as those who would ignore those edicts and vilifications in order to produce a more celebratory version of history. Each student of Jewish history may draw a different lesson from it. For that lesson to be valid, however, it must be based on a complete—not a selective—reading of Jewish history. That is why *Jewish History—The Big Picture* is so important. It offers readers an unvarnished, comprehensive, and deeply nuanced rendition of Jewish history. It is a rendition that is of value to all readers, including those who simply want to know how it is that the Jews continue to make history.

Without an accurate knowledge of history, it is impossible to know from whence one has come. And those who do not know from whence they have come often have a hard time knowing where they are or should be going.

Thus it is that the award-winning Czech writer Milan Kundera observed in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* that "The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was. The world around it will forget even faster." In the same vein and long before Kundera, the founder of Hasidism, the Ba'al Shem Tov, proclaimed: "Forgetfulness prolongs the exile; remembrance is the secret of redemption."

The pages that follow offer the raw material that will help you to deduce how the Jewish people has survived. It is up to each reader to decide what to *do*—if anything at all—with that information.