

The Jewish People

A History

Volume One: Ancient Israel



Henry Abramson

THE TABACINIC FAMILY EDITION

THE
JEWISH
PEOPLE
A HISTORY

VOLUME ONE: ANCIENT ISRAEL

Maggid Books

Henry Abramson
The Jewish People: A History
Volume One: Ancient Israel

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The Tabacinic Family Edition

THE JEWISH PEOPLE A HISTORY

VOLUME ONE: ANCIENT ISRAEL

pays tribute to the memory of

Mr. Manuel Tabacinic z"l

מנחם מנדל בן אברהם שמואל ז"ל

Mrs. Sonia Tabacinic (née Lustgarten) z"l

שיינדל בת צבי הירש ז"ל

Mr. Sami Rohr z"l

שמואל בן יהושע אליהו ז"ל

Mrs. Charlotte Rohr (née Kastner) z"l

שרה בת יקותיאל יהודה ז"ל

Together they merited to see all their children build lives
enriched by faithful commitment
to the spreading of Torah and *ahavat Yisrael*.

Dedicated with love by their children

Moshe and Lillian Tabacinic

Miami, Florida 2026

Imagine that, while browsing in the library, you come across one book unlike the rest, which catches your eye because on its spine is written the name of your family. Intrigued, you open it and see many pages written by different hands in many languages. You start reading it, and gradually you begin to understand what it is. It is the story each generation of your ancestors has told for the sake of the next, so that everyone born into this family can learn where they came from, what happened to them, what they lived for, and why. As you turn the pages, you reach the last, which carries no entry but a heading. It bears your name.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll*

*For our parents and grandparents, who brought us here.
And for our children and grandchildren, who will bring us there.*

וְהָשִׁיב לֵב אֲבוֹת עַל בְּנֵים וְלֵב בְּנֵים עַל אֲבוֹתָם

Malachi 3:24

VOLUME ONE Ancient Israel	1750 BCE	THE JEWISH PEOPLE	WORLD HISTORY
		The Era of the Patriarchs The Exodus from Egypt The Period of the Judges The United Kingdom The Divided Kingdom The Assyrian Exile The Babylonian Exile The Persian Period The Arrival of Hellenism The Maccabean Revolt	Egyptian Middle Kingdom Shang Dynasty in China Rise of Phoenician City-States Zhou Dynasty in China The Neo-Assyrian Empire Rise of the Greek City-States The Neo-Babylonian Empire Emergence of Buddhism The Persian Empire Conquests of Alexander Han Dynasty in China Rise of the Roman Empire
VOLUME TWO Medieval Jewish History	200 CE	The Roman-Jewish War The Bar Kochba Rebellion	Birth of Christianity The Sasanian Empire
		The Development of the Talmud Visigothic Persecution in Spain Islamic Invasion of Land of Israel Conversion of the Khazar Empire Birth of Ashkenaz Golden Age of Spanish Jewry The Crusades	The Byzantine Empire Fall of the Roman Empire Decline of Gupta Empire in India Rise of Islam Europe under Charlemagne Rise of Vikings Peak of Ghana Empire Toltec Empire Mongol Empire The Black Death
VOLUME THREE Modern Jewish History	1500	Expulsion from Spain	Ming Dynasty Age of Exploration
		The Safed Center The Rise of Hasidism The Rise of the Haskalah	The Protestant Reformation The American Revolution The French Revolution The Industrial Revolution
VOLUME FOUR Modern Israel	1945	The Holocaust	World War I World War II
		The State of Israel The American Jewish Center	Collapse of the Soviet Union Development of the Internet
VOLUME FIVE Present Day	Present Day		

Volume One: Ancient Israel

1750 BCE–200 CE

Contents

Introduction xiii

CHAPTER ONE

The Biblical Narrative 1

CHAPTER TWO

The Archaeological Record 33

CHAPTER THREE

Daily Life in Biblical Israel 57

CHAPTER FOUR

Exile and Return 73

CHAPTER FIVE

From the Maccabees to the Romans 91

CHAPTER SIX

Judea under Roman Rule 109

CHAPTER SEVEN

The World of the Sages 129

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Birth of Christianity 147

CHAPTER NINE

The Roman-Jewish Wars 165

CHAPTER TEN

The Jewish People Survive Antiquity 195

Acknowledgments 211

For Further Reading 215

Notes 219

Introduction



Hannah Szenes (1921–1944)

Leaping into the open sky with a heavy parachute strapped to her back, young Hannah Szenes (pronounced SEH-nesh) hurtled downward into Nazi-occupied Europe, determined to dislodge the German invaders from her native Hungary. Though she had already secured her own personal safety by immigrating to the Land of Israel in 1939, she could not resist the call to help her endangered people. Hannah joined thirty-one brave volunteers to undertake the dangerous clandestine mission operating behind enemy lines. She was twenty-three years old.

She was captured shortly after infiltrating Hungarian territory. Tortured and beaten, teeth knocked from her jaw, she stubbornly refused to reveal the radio transmitter codes, heroically protecting her comrades. After months of brutal

interrogation, her frustrated and cowardly captors finally executed her by firing squad on November 7, 1944. She refused to wear a blindfold.¹

Hannah Szenes is remembered not only for her fearless sacrifice, but also for the quiet power of her poetry. Her haunting poem “Blessed is the Match,” written during her fateful mission, has become a beloved youth anthem in modern Israel, while her spare, luminous “There Are Stars” evokes a celestial perspective:

יֵשׁ כּוֹכָבִים שְׂאוֹרִם מְגִיעַ אֶרֶץ,
רַק כְּאֶשֶׁר הֵם עֲצָמָם אֶבְדּוּ וְאֵינָם.
יֵשׁ אַנְשִׁים שְׁוִיו זְכָרָם מְאִיר
כְּאֶשֶׁר הֵם עֲצָמָם אֵינָם עוֹד בְּתוֹכָנוּ.
אוֹרוֹת אֱלֹהֵי הַמְּבֹהֲלִים בְּחֹשֶׁכֶת הַלַּיִל -
הֵם הֵם שֶׁמְרָאִים לְאָדָם אֶת הַדֶּרֶךְ.

There are stars whose light reaches Earth
only when they themselves are gone and no more.
There are people whose radiant memories shine
when they themselves are gone and no longer among us.
These lights, brilliant in the dark of night –
they are the ones that illuminate one’s path.²

Her metaphor is both cosmic and historical. Just as there are stars in the night sky whose radiance expresses the brilliance they exuded many light-years ago, only reaching and illuminating the earth eons later, so too are there people who lived centuries ago, yet their influence is still felt as immediately as one perceives the stars in the night sky. The goal of *The Jewish People* is to offer a constellation map of Jewish history, encompassing both the velvet darkness that forms its backdrop and the broad swath of stars that continue to illuminate and inspire the Jewish people even today.

This book is introductory in tone and the scope is broad, from the distant origins of this unusual people to the present generation. I have attempted to be as succinct as possible to maintain a coherent narrative arc and render this book inviting to readers less familiar with Jewish history. In my mind’s eye I have imagined my ideal reader as a young person in his or her late teens or early twenties, perhaps taking this book off the shelf for the first time after receiving it as a bar or bat mitzva gift, although I identify strongly with sentiments expressed by the renowned Austrian-English Jewish art historian E.H. Gombrich in his magisterial *The Story of Art* (1950): “I never believed that books for young people should

differ from books for adults except for the fact that [books for young people] must reckon with the most exacting class of critics, critics who are quick to detect and resent any trace of pretentious jargon or bogus sentiment. I know from experience that these are the vices which may render people suspicious of all writing on art for the rest of their lives.”³

Depth and complexity are unfortunately sacrificed in a compressed work of this nature. The task is truly gargantuan, describing a history that covers some four thousand years and touches every place of human habitation on the planet. Even the pioneering historian Isaak Markus Jost (1793–1860) admitted that, after working for decades on his ten-volume *History of the Israelites*, he “could not manage to read half of what he knew was written on a subject.”⁴ The scholarly literature on Jewish history has expanded exponentially since Jost made his attempt two hundred years ago.⁵

The Jewish People: A History also seeks to balance presentation of the ancestral heritage that the Jewish people have revered for millennia with a recognition of persuasive arguments raised against elements of the traditional narrative by archaeological and historical research of the last two hundred years. For some, this book will be insufficiently divorced from rabbinic teachings; for others, it will be overly secular. I do not expect my historiographic approach to satisfy all readers. Still, I hope this brief survey will serve as an invitation to deeper engagement with the extraordinary historical journey of the Jewish people.

ON COVENANTAL HISTORY

Cecil Roth (1899–1970) was perhaps the most well-known Jewish historian of the twentieth century. He was the author of an impressive list of monographs, professor to generations of students at Oxford University, and Editor-in-Chief of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, perhaps the greatest work of collective Jewish scholarship since the completion of the Babylonian Talmud. The early years of his career were stunted by antisemitic prejudice, as he was forced to eke out a living writing for non-specialists (if he were born a century later, his YouTube channel would be *awesome*). Catering to general readers gave him an eye for the quirky and unusual characters in Jewish history, whose biographical sketches he described enthusiastically and with great literary exuberance. Only later in life was his scholarship appreciated appropriately, driven not by the elites of the academy but by the thousands of lay readers who were inspired by his vision of the majestic trajectory of Jewish history. Roth left no autobiography, but we are blessed with a perspective on his life from his wife Irene, whose insight into his internal motivation as a historian is something only a relationship of over forty years’ marriage can provide. She wrote:

The Jewish People: A History

“A man can call himself a Jewish historian only if he loves his people and if, in the light of that love, he presents the events in their history,” Cecil would say.⁶

Presuming Mrs. Roth is citing her husband accurately – I have not found this passage in Cecil Roth’s published works – what are we to make of such an argument? Doesn’t this love of one’s subject achieve precisely the opposite result, distorting the historian’s appreciation of the past by viewing it through a hagiographic lens? The Sages teach us that “love ruins the boundary” (Genesis Rabba 55:8). Wouldn’t a historian, in love with his or her subject, selectively treat the historical records to present the Jewish people in the most positive light, consciously or otherwise? Wouldn’t the resulting work be spoiled, rendered useless, by unfiltered bias? I would hope not, because then I would be out of a job. Like Cecil Roth, I am hopelessly, deeply, madly in love with the Jewish people, and the book you are reading is an expression of that love. In fact, I would like to propose the contrary: I believe the *only way to compose a meaningful work of history is to write from within a relationship of love*.



Cecil Roth in his Oxford study

If postmodernist thought has demonstrated anything, it is that our trust in the “objectivity” of historians is nothing but a naïve illusion. Even the most well-intentioned historian is inextricably enmeshed in a web of personal considerations,

dictating the myriad calculations that drive research in one direction and not another, to take one source seriously and not another, to validate one narrative and not another. Not to say that our dedicated historians are hack propagandists, as many biases operate wholly under the surface of consciousness. The discipline of history is protected by a wide variety of standard criteria to measure the quality of professional historians: familiarity with the sources and the secondary literature, training in historiography and methodology, language skills and so on. Beyond these common denominators, however, the thing that promises to make the key difference in the quality of a work of historical research is the *covenantal* relationship formed between the author and the reader. The historian tries, in good faith, to meditate on his or her intellectual prejudices, and the reader accepts that the historian is striving to provide as accurate an account as possible, titrated for the intended readership. This is the covenant, formed in mutual respect and animated by love.

I believe this covenant between a historian and a reader is not dissimilar to the covenant between a caring physician and a patient. The patient understands that the doctor does not possess the superhuman ability to diagnose and treat every possible malady, and one wouldn't expect that of him or her. What the patient is entitled to demand, however, is that the physician demonstrate respect for his or her patients by diligently completing medical school, representing his or her credentials faithfully, and maintaining an appropriate regimen of ongoing study to stay abreast of scientific developments related to his or her patients. More importantly, the patient is correct to demand that the physician respect the patient's intelligence and autonomy, offering the data needed to make reasonably informed decisions about the course of treatment, clearly explained in accessible terminology. The patient may also expect that the doctor will place the overall well-being of the patient above other considerations, especially personal hubris: if the doctor doesn't know something, he or she will demonstrate professionalism by humbly admitting "I don't know," and suggest a consultation with a specialist for a second opinion. The foundation of this relationship is professional, but on a more profound level, it is based on mutual respect and even – as Cecil Roth might put it – a type of love. It is a covenant.

HISTORY AND MEMORY

We will have occasion to return to aspects of this covenantal relationship between historian and reader in subsequent volumes of this work. For now, I would like to briefly look at one of the most challenging aspects of presenting this massive history to a popular audience: the complex interrelationship of *history* and *memory*. Please indulge me for a moment as I tell you a story I heard from my father of blessed memory about his parents, Alex and Pavke Abramson.



Alex and Pavke Abramson, Montreal 1913

My grandparents came to Canada at the beginning of the last century from Lithuania, which was then part of the Russian Empire. Alex fled in 1904 to avoid conscription into the antisemitic Russian army, then enmeshed in an absurd and pointless war with the Japanese. Pavke came a few years later, married Alex almost immediately, and the young couple made their way to a milling town called Ansonville (later renamed Iroquois Falls), secluded in the middle of the massive boreal pine forest of remote northern Ontario. Alex and Pavke earned their livelihood from a small clothing store. All their material wealth was concentrated in their stock of flannel shirts, heavy-duty work pants and steel-toed boots that clothed the lumberjacks who felled the massive pines that fed the newly established paper mill.

By the summer of 1916, their oldest son Milton was two years old and Pavke was pregnant with his brother. Very little rain fell that year, and in July an uncontrollable forest fire broke out, threatening the small towns that dotted the region. As the fast-moving conflagration made its way north, Alex feverishly dug a deep

hole in their back yard, wrapped their clothing stock in burlap, and buried it all, finishing just as the flames were on the horizon. Then Alex and Pavke ran, carrying baby Milton, and jumped into the sluggish waters of the Abitibi River as the Great Matheson fire ravaged the town. By the time it passed, over two hundred people were killed, and the nearby Cree village Nuskha was destroyed completely. Alex, Pavke, and Milton were unharmed, as was my grandparents' stock, which was purchased by the survivors of the fire on a handshake with Alex, paying my grandparents when they were able to reestablish themselves months later. The Abramsons and their family business survived.⁷

The story of my grandparents serves as a good illustration of the relationship between *history* and *memory*. History refers to things we know because we have someone outside the family confirming what we know. The Great Matheson Fire of 1916 is well documented, and in fact it spurred the Canadian government to implement a host of early-warning systems for future forest fires.⁸ On the other hand, if we pore through the available literature, we won't find a single word about Alex and Pavke's dramatic rescue, simply because it seems no record of their experience was preserved other than in *memory*. My grandparents told my father, who told me, and now I'm telling you. We may not have photographs of them standing in the Abitibi River with the flames in the background, or a century-old newspaper article talking about how they survived, but we know it happened because my grandfather loved my father and told him the true story, and my father loved me and told me the true story, and, in a sense, I love you and am telling you the true story.

This chain of memory is thus a representation of a covenantal relationship, now four generations old. In Hebrew, we might call this a *mesora*, and although it may not meet the technical specifications of the thing we call *history*, it's actually far more important. From the *mesora* my father gave me, I learned the value of resilience, ingenuity, and courage. I understood how my grandparents endured challenges and refused to surrender to fate, determining their own destiny through foresight and diligence. I learned how they supported themselves through these values, as well as supporting the community around them by providing their neighbors, suddenly impoverished by the fire, with clothing for the coming Canadian winter (not a joke in northern Ontario, where temperatures regularly dip lower than forty degrees below zero) until they could earn enough to pay their debts.

History and memory are like fraternal twin sisters, occasionally diverging but typically in agreement. The *history* of the Great Matheson Fire is hugely significant, and the lessons learned from that conflagration saved countless lives over the succeeding century. The *memory* I have of that fire, preserved in our family *mesora*, is also deeply important, at least to me and my family. The same and more

may be said of the larger Jewish *mesora*, a chain of covenantal love that stretches back thousands of years to the very origins of the Jewish people. In this work I hope to present my covenantal understanding of the story of the Jewish people, in both history and memory. Fundamentally, it is an expression of love.

This work does not claim to present innovative approaches to Jewish history, nor does it seek to offer original research to any significant degree. My goal is simply to present a brief narrative overview of Jewish history, and the cursory endnotes are intended primarily to provide a link to standard multi-volume reference works and their bibliographies, such as Salo Baron's *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, and especially the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Translations are generally my own unless otherwise indicated, often using Koren publications such as the Magerman Edition of *The Koren Tanakh* and the Noé Edition of *The Koren Talmud Bavli* as references. Dates are provided in the standard Gregorian calendar, using BCE (Before Common Era) and CE (Common Era). The names of geographic locations, a source of perennial dispute, are generally provided using terms familiar to contemporary readers, even if anachronistic: Jerusalem rather than Aelia Capitolina or Al-Quds, for example. The ancestral home of the Jewish people is rendered as the Land of Israel, distinguished from the post-1948 State of Israel, or simply Israel. This book follows a transliteration system of Hebrew and Aramaic familiar to readers of Koren publications; transliterations from other languages will follow a simplified Library of Congress system without diacritical marks. Some exceptions are made for well-known places or individuals with an accepted English spelling.⁹

With humility I express gratitude to the Source of all blessing, who has provided me with the opportunity to spend my life studying Torah, and its expression in the millennial history of the Jewish people. I am deeply grateful to Lillian and Moshe Tabacinic for their generous support of this series. Their selfless dedication to education in Florida, New York and beyond has contributed significantly to Jewish learning, and I personally cherish the memory of the stimulating, intellectually challenging conversations we shared on the Seine. Their commitment to the dissemination of scholarship reminds me of Samuel Usque's praise of Doña Gracia Nasi, who made possible the publication of his influential *Consolations for the Tribulations of Israel* in 1553: the Tabacinics are leaders who feel the pain of our people's sufferings more poignantly than others, and through their devotion to Jewish learning, their name and the memory of their generosity will forever be a part of our history.

Introduction

I will thank many other people who guided me along this journey in the Acknowledgments section at the conclusion of this book, but here I must single out my most precious ally and steadfast partner in everything, my beloved wife Ilana.

יָפָה אַתְּ רַעֲיָתִי כְּתִרְצָה נְאוּה כִּירוּשָׁלַיִם אֵימָה כְּנִדְגָלוֹת.
הִסְבֵּי עֵינֶיךָ מִנִּגְדֵּי שָׁהֶם הִרְהִיבֵנִי

You are beautiful, my love, as Tirzah, enchanting as Jerusalem,
terrifying as a bannered army.
Turn your eyes from me, for they overwhelm me.
(Song of Songs 6:4–5)

HMA
Fair Lawn, NJ
December 2025/Tevet 5786

Eighteenth
century BCE

THE JEWISH PEOPLE

WORLD HISTORY

Biblical account of
Abraham and Sarah
entering the Land of
Israel

- Old Babylonian Empire goes into decline
- Western semites (Hyksos) migrate to Nile Delta
- Harappan civilization in India goes into decline
- Minoan civilization in Crete at its peak
- Rise of the Assyrian Empire

Biblical account of
Egyptian Servitude

- Origins of the Shang Dynasty in China
- Development of the Olmec civilization in Mesoamerica
- Early Vedic Period in India

Biblical account of the
Exodus, Revelation at
Mount Sinai

- Massive construction in Egypt under Ramesses II

Thirteenth
century BCE

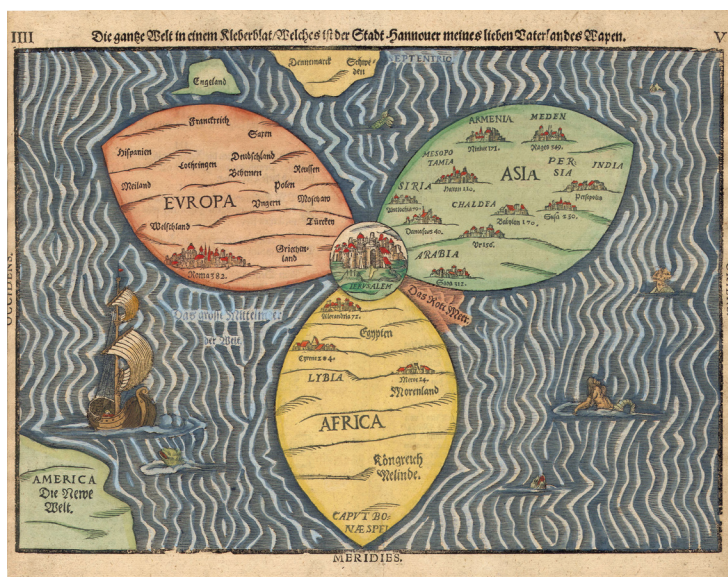
Archaeological evidence
of Increased Settlements
in the Land of Israel

- Transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age

Chapter One

The Biblical Narrative

1750–1250 BCE



Heinrich Bünting, *The World in a Cloverleaf*, 1581

Jerusalem is at the heart of Heinrich Bünting's conceptual map, which he titled *The World in a Cloverleaf*. Europe, Asia, and Africa converge on the Holy Land, incongruously adorned with sixteenth-century European architecture. Trained as a theologian, Bünting had ambitions to serve as a Protestant churchman, but his

The Jewish People: A History

outspoken humanism interfered with his ability to secure a permanent posting. His other love was cartography, and he created a series of fanciful maps, including some historical maps of the biblical period. Bünting's fecund imagination captured the way in which Jews perceived the world: with Jerusalem and the Holy Land at the center.¹

Bünting's geographic exaggerations, however, are not far out of line with the importance of the Land of Israel in the ancient world. This tiny strip of global real estate, bounded on the west by the Mediterranean Sea and on the east by the Arabian Desert, served as the main land route connecting the growing continental economies of Africa, Asia, and Europe.

The Land of Israel is located more or less halfway along the so-called Fertile Crescent, a band of agricultural wealth with major centers at either end. To the southwest, in Egypt, irrigation canals extending from the annual overflows of the Nile River generated agricultural surplus and subsequent material wealth, creating a regional superpower of the ancient world. To the northeast, the headwaters of the mighty Euphrates and Tigris rivers brought their silt-enriched bounty to the Persian Gulf. The territory that profited from these two rivers (known as Mesopotamia, or "between the rivers") provided the steady growth of agriculture



that created the fearsome empires of Sumer, Assyria, and Babylonia. Forbidding deserts east of the Land of Israel in what is now Jordan and Syria meant that the easiest access between Egypt and Mesopotamia was via a circuitous journey north, traveling through Lebanon and taking a sharp right turn somewhere past Damascus. The Land of Israel lay directly on that ancient thoroughfare like a small town hugging the highway.²

Two routes passed through Israel: the *Via Maris*, or “Way of the Sea,” a coastal road that followed the Mediterranean shoreline from the lower Nile to Jaffa, then curving inland until Megiddo in the north, where it made its way to Damascus and southeast to Mesopotamia. The other major route, perhaps less scenic but more direct, was the inland *Derekh HaMelekh*, the “Royal Road” or “King’s Highway.” These roads, both of which ran up and down the Land of Israel, constituted the main overland connections between the mighty civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Bünting’s Cloverleaf map depicted the Land of Israel as the spiritual axis upon which the globe turned, but it also hinted to an economic reality that was especially true of the ancient world: the Land of Israel was an important conduit for land transport between three continents. This tiny sliver of arable land was a land-based Bosphorus of trade, a chokepoint that linked the wealth of Africa, the exotic goods of

