

Introduction

Jacob Neusner is one of the most important scholars in the history of Judaism. He was instrumental in transforming the study of Judaism from an insular project conducted by, and primarily of interest to, religious believers into a dynamic field of study at home in the secular setting of the modern university. He was also a public intellectual who became increasingly critical of what he considered to be the watering down of academic standards in American higher education, and he frequently and vociferously critiqued the system he believed to be responsible for its diminution. He became a household name in the 1970s and 1980s, when Ronald Reagan appointed him to the National Council on the Arts as a conservative voice in an era of debate around the public funding of controversial artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano. To this day, he is the only scholar to have served on both the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. On top of all this, he is one of the most published figures in history. He is the author of over a thousand books, and probably ten times as many book chapters, articles, and op-eds. Later years saw him become a proponent of ecumenical dialogue, and it is in this capacity that he developed a friendship with Pope Benedict XVI, who awarded him a papal medal in 2010. He received over ten academic medals, in addition to nine honorary degrees from institutions such as the University of Chicago and the University of Bologna. Yet in his relations with others he was often cantankerous and controversial, and he garnered a great deal of animosity over his long career.

Unlike other great American Jewish thinkers, such as Abraham Joshua Heschel, Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and Mordecai Kaplan, Jacob Neusner was born in the United States, and his Judaism was informed

from a very young age by an American ethos. He wrote profusely on this topic, both academically and for a more general reading audience. For him, Judaism was to be open, informed by, and informing the world. Judaism should have an American inflection, enabling American Jews—the freest in history—to be fully American and fully Jewish.

Jacob Neusner was immensely influential both in shaping the study of Judaism, and in shaping American Jewish life. Yet, although Neusner was the author of so many publications, his legacy risks being lost, or at least muted, by the sheer multitude of his published works. Who was Jacob Neusner? What motivated him not only to write, but to write so much? What did he accomplish? What is his lasting legacy? Which book does one examine when wanting to know what he said about a particular topic? This intellectual biography provides answers to these and related questions for the reader who possesses neither the time nor the energy to read even a fraction of Neusner's diverse corpus. Furthermore, it offers an assessment of Neusner's contributions to the fields in which he wrote. What did the study of Judaism look like before he arrived? And, perhaps just as important, what does it look like now, after Neusner? What did he change? Between these two bookends resides an intellectual life, one full of creativity, rapacious energy, and contention. Each, not surprisingly, fed the others.

Neusner's vision was motivated by the desire to make the study of Judaism respectable and inclusive. It was not to be an insider's club, as it was in the traditional Jewish seminary, but an academic and intellectual endeavor that simultaneously informed and was informed by rigorous theoretical and methodological frameworks that were external to the tradition. Many, both Jews and non-Jews, objected to such an approach. Many Jews believed that the study of the timeless and sacred texts of Judaism belonged in the yeshiva, where they would be scrutinized in the same manner that they had been for centuries, with little or no engagement with critical historical questions, let alone a methodology that had the potential to deprive these texts of their intrinsic sacrality. At issue was history. If the traditional approach to rabbinic texts involved a deep

philological and historical appreciation, Neusner contended that this approach possessed an uncritical way of construing history.

Others in the secular academy also objected, but for different reasons. Many had very little interest in Judaism after the time of Jesus, and the study of rabbinic texts was largely unheard of because such texts were thought to be either too technical or too irrelevant. By the 1960s, however, both the Jewish and the non-Jewish academic status quos were on the precipice of being undermined. Divinity schools were giving way to departments of religious studies, and now other religious traditions—Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam—were slowly entering the academy to be studied alongside Christianity. Although Protestantism still largely inspired the categories used to study religion, change was inevitable. Neusner benefitted from this change as he simultaneously helped to facilitate it.

Prior to Neusner, traditional, postbiblical Jewish texts were studied and taught in a variety of places and institutional contexts. There were traditional yeshivas or seminaries in Eastern Europe before World War II, with those that survived relocating to Israel and America after the war. There was also the more technical approach found in academic settings, particularly in Israel, such as the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. There were, in addition, the seminaries associated with the various Jewish denominations in the United States, such as the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS; associated with the Conservative movement), Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion (Reform), and the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary associated with Yeshiva University (Orthodox). There also existed several private non-denominational institutions, for example, Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning, which was founded in Philadelphia in 1907, the Baltimore Hebrew College and Teachers Training School (1919), and the College of Jewish Studies in Chicago (1924). In addition, a small handful of European-born scholars were already embedded within universities, such as Harry Austryn Wolfson at Harvard and Salo Wittmayer Baron at Columbia, who were scholars of Jewish philosophy and history, respectively.¹

Into this milieu came the American-born Neusner. Neusner grew up in a Reform house, had very little formal Jewish education, had probably never even heard of a yeshiva, and could barely read a line of Hebrew. Paradoxically, if not surprisingly, only such an individual could transform the study of Judaism. Not bound by traditional canons of rabbinic study, and unwilling to defer to “Old World” ways of doing things, Neusner was perfectly poised to open the study of rabbinic texts to all—male and female, Jew and gentile—using new methodologies. As the chapters that follow show in detail, it would be neither a straightforward nor a simple task, to be sure.

“The holy books of Judaism (or any other books) are important not in themselves,” Neusner wrote in 1984, “but because of what they tell us about what is important: they answer urgent questions of humanity.”² With such a bold and potentially heretical statement, Neusner signaled his approach. Judaism and Jewish texts are not unique. They differ little from Buddhist texts, Hindu texts, or Muslim texts. Just like the texts from other religions, the sacred texts of Judaism represent localized reflections on timeless and universal human questions. As such, they must be studied using well-established disciplinary methods in order to speak beyond a particular ethnos. Neusner did not want to join the narrow conversation of the yeshiva, wherein men become holy by studying holy books taught to them by holy masters. Indeed, he spent his entire life fighting to open up the study of Judaism, specifically rabbinic texts, to a larger intellectual audience. Today we may well take this for granted. One can now go to college and take a course on Jewish texts taught by someone with a PhD in religion and with a specialization in Judaism, as opposed to being taught by the local rabbi. However, this required real intellectual battles. Neusner was the instigator of many of these conflicts, and he was in the thick of many others. In this way, he created an intellectual space for the scholar of Judaism:

So although we spend our lives studying Jewish holy books and there is no more particularly Jewish activity than what we do, yet it is accurate

to describe us as standing outside of the community of Judaism. Among the available categories, rabbi or “professional” or lay leader, there is no place for us. True, there *is* room for learned Jews. But they are perceived as eccentrics or turned into Hebrew teachers. There is no room in Jewry for a learned Jew who makes a living by teaching what he or she knows, on the one side, but who is paid for doing so by secular, neutral institutions, on the other.³

Since Neusner did not have the authority of the yeshiva world behind him, he had to create his own. This he did by establishing a space for the study of Judaism in the American humanities, by translating the entire rabbinic corpus into English, and by helping to establish a press, Scholars Press, to disseminate this translative activity to a potentially large reading public. In so doing, he sought to create a curriculum that would transmit Judaism to a generation of Jews like him—Jews who were American, were Reform, and did not grow up in the yeshiva world.

Neusner divided his lifework in rabbinic literature into four distinct phases, each occupying roughly a decade—history, literature, religion, and theology—with each successive stage building upon the previous. Historically, Neusner asked us to be aware of the specific times and places in which rabbinic texts were created, as opposed to assuming that they exist in a timeless vacuum. Following this approach, he examined the literary character of these texts, such as genre, arguing that how something is said is as important as what is said. In his third phase, focused on religious study, Neusner demonstrated the religious nature of rabbinic texts and how they were received by subsequent generations of religious followers. The final phase, the theological, saw Neusner discern the inner structures of the ideas that have been received as religious, and outline their coherence as they formed the details of religious belief and expression.⁴ These four phases loosely structure the intellectual biography that follows. They provide the points around which I have constructed Neusner’s life and shown the intellectual contributions he made to the academic study of both Judaism and religion.

Yet personal narratives, when framed properly, open up onto much larger social and intellectual landscapes. Neusner's biography is not simply reducible to that of an academic life mired in technical discussions that have little or no relevance. Neusner's story is the story of what happened as Jews migrated to the suburbs, creating new lives for themselves as they successfully integrated into American society. It is the story of how American Jews tried to make sense of the world in the aftermath of the extermination of European Jewry. It is the story of the transmission of Judaism to a postwar generation, and of trying to define what it meant to be an American Jew in light of the tragedy of the Holocaust and the subsequent creation of the State of Israel in 1948. And, finally, it is the story of trying to find new ways and institutional frameworks to study Judaism. These much larger stories form the context of Neusner's life and career. The story of Jewish studies in America, framed slightly differently, mirrors the story of American Jews. Both of these can be told through the prism of Jacob Neusner's life and career.

Neusner made the academic study of Judaism possible in this country through his refusal to ghettoize Judaism. His was not solely an academic enterprise, however. He also imagined a new Judaism, one beyond the ethnic pride of the nonreligious and the parochialism of an observant tradition that masqueraded as authentic. It is here that Neusner the American Jewish thinker meets Neusner the academician. Judaism, as both a religion and an object of study, offered much to illumine eternal human questions. The problem was, however, that too often these questions were not entertained in either the secular university or the yeshiva. Neusner forced Judaism to enter much larger conversations. This is his lasting legacy.

To define Neusner solely as a scholar of early Judaism and rabbinic texts, however, would be too limiting. In addition to his work on rabbinic Judaism, Neusner published on a host of other academic topics, from the Ancient Near East to Zionism. He was also much more than a scholar. He was a journalist, a post-Holocaust theologian, and a commentator who was never afraid to take an unpopular position on

any given issue. Before Neusner could read a line of Talmud, he was writing regularly for the *Jewish Ledger*, a weekly newspaper that his father had founded in West Hartford in 1929. By his early teens, he was reviewing for the *Ledger* every book published on Jewish topics in the English language, in addition to writing opinion pieces on the state of American Jewry that were syndicated throughout the country and beyond. Neusner's analyses, more often than not, put him at odds with Jewish leaders, many of whom he accused of being out of touch with reality.

At the height of his career, Neusner was never far from the headlines. He wrote about current affairs as much as about rabbinics. What should Jewish education look like? Who should be charged to carry it out? Where did Jewish studies—or, as he preferred to call it, Judaic studies—fit in the university curriculum? All of these questions he raised and attempted to answer, not only in academic books for his colleagues, but also in newspapers, magazines, and other popular venues. The paradox, however, is that although Neusner saw himself as transmitting Judaism to a postwar American Jewish audience, he was very far removed politically from that audience.

Despite this paradox, one of many in Neusner's narrative, the story that follows is, among other things, an attempt to make the case for Neusner's inclusion in the pantheon of great American Jewish thinkers.