On Campus

Salo Wittmayer Baron: Demystifying Jewish History

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Baron speaking at the Jewish Theological Seminary in the 1940s. Behind him is Mordecai Kaplan, dean of the JTS Teachers Institute. (Ratner Center for the Study of Conservative Judaism, JTS)

For nearly 60 years, Professor Salo Baron could be seen daily in the stacks of Butler Library, researching his epoch-making *Social and Religious History of the Jews* . When he was in his late 80s, and the *History* was in its 16th or 17th volume but had

reached only the early modern period, Baron was often asked if he would get to the twentieth century. He always responded that he had a deal with the Creator: he would not be taken from this world before his life’s work was completed.

Rooted in Tradition

Salo Wittmayer Baron was the most important Jewish historian of his generation, and a compelling presence at Columbia for much of the twentieth century. He came to Morningside Heights in 1930 to hold the Miller Chair in Jewish History, the first such professorship at a secular Western university. His voluminous scholarship, based on a novel conception of the nature of Jewish history and how to study it professionally — remade his field in the United States and worldwide.

Baron was born in 1895 to a wealthy and educated traditional Jewish family in the city of Tarnow, then in Austrian Galicia, the part of former Poland absorbed into the Hab-sburg Empire in the late eighteenth century. In line with the cultural, linguistic, and political mores of the Jewish upper middle classes of this region, the Baron family spoke German, not the Yiddish of the impoverished Jewish masses of Eastern Europe, though the young Baron imbibed that language from his elders. He learned Polish as well, and received a thorough Hebraic and traditional Jewish education. Baron continued both his secular and Jewish studies in Vienna starting in 1914, and ultimately — and amazingly — earned three doctorates from the University of Vienna, in philosophy (1917), political science (1922), and law (1923). During this period he also received his rabbinic ordination from Vienna’s modern Israelitisch-Theologischen Lehranstalt rabbinical seminary.

It was likely that Baron aspired to become a university professor of Jewish history, but this was unrealistic in interwar Austria. So for seven years he taught history at the city’s Jewish Teacher’s College. At the same time, in New York, the charismatic Reform rabbi Stephen S. Wise 1901GSAS was establishing the Jewish Institute for Religion (JIR), an innovative rabbinic seminary with a distinguished faculty that aimed to overcome the already fractious denominational differences among Jews and to produce Judaic scholarship at the highest levels. (Tellingly, after Wise’s death in 1949 this ecumenical goal was no longer feasible, and the Jewish Institute for Religion merged with the Hebrew Union College, the Reform seminary in Cincinnati where Wise himself was trained.) Wise was well connected with the Viennese

community, and on one of his frequent trips to Europe to recruit faculty, he learned about the young historian with the remarkable breadth of knowledge. In 1925, Wise invited Baron to come teach in New York. In his short time at the JIR, Baron taught a series of innovative and demanding courses — and outside the classroom he began to produce works of scholarship that revolutionized the study, and the conception, of Jewish history for decades to come.

Woe, Begone

Most important was his June 1928 article in the influential publication *Menorah Journal* entitled “Ghetto and Emancipation: Shall We Revise the Traditional View?” The essay challenged head-on some of the cardinal premises of his predecessors by arguing that the history of the Jews was not, as Heinrich Graetz, the greatest Jewish historian of the nineteenth century, had memorably put it, a *Leidens-und-gelehrtengeschichte* — a history of suffering and scholarship. In fact, Baron insisted, the notion that the Jews were persecuted more than any other group throughout history was simply wrong. During the Middle Ages, for example, the Jews were far better off than the peasants who made up the bulk of the population, he argued. The periodic pogroms and persecutions that did indeed afflict the Jews were horrific, but not constitutive of Jewish history or Jewish self-consciousness. On the other hand, the emancipation that began after the French Revolution was won at a price — the loss of the millennia-long autonomy of the Jewish communities.

The determinant forces in Jewish history, Baron claimed, were rather the Jews’ idiosyncratic and hence often misunderstood amalgam of nationality and religion; their pervasive if perplexing — but ultimately self-perpetuating — ability to survive and flourish without a state or a territory, and seemingly removed as well from nature; and an intense yearning for normalization through redemption. In order to understand the history of the Jews in any age or place, it was essential first to study what the Jews were doing between attacks. What were they thinking, writing, creating, selling, buying? “Surely,” he wrote, “it is time to break with the lachrymose theory of pre-Revolutionary woe, and to adopt a view more in accord with historic truth.” That sentence, with which he famously concluded his *Menorah*article, was a charge to the new generation of Jewish historians. He was arguing for a conception of Jewish history that took into account a complex mix of social, cultural, religious,

and economic history. Moreover, any period of Jewish history, he insisted, always had to be studied both horizontally and vertically — that is, as part of the long experience of the Jews and in the context of the specific non-Jewish society in which they were living. This anti-lachrymose and “integrationist” approach heralded a rethinking of Jewish history, and was regarded with great suspicion by many traditional historians, both within and outside the academy.

Musical Chairs

Coincidentally, only a month before Baron’s article was published, Linda Miller, a widow with strong ties to New York City’s Reform Temple Emanuel, approached Columbia University offering to fund a chair in Jewish history. (Richard Gottheil, who had gradu-ated from Columbia College in 1881 and was the son of the late rabbi of Temple Emanuel, had been serving as instructor and professor of Semitic languages at Columbia since 1889.) Letters in Columbia’s archives reveal an intriguing dance between Mrs. Miller and President Nicholas Murray Butler. Miller wanted a majority vote in the appointment while Butler explained, tactfully and more than once, that the University welcomed her suggestions but that they could be no more than suggestions. Baron’s name was raised after other candidates were rejected or declined the post. Miller was leery about the 34-year-old and unknown — and Eastern European! — scholar. Butler respectfully held his ground, and in 1930, Baron came to Columbia to serve on the Nathan J. Miller Endowment, in memory of Mrs. Miller’s late husband.

This was the first chair in Jewish history at any secular Western university. Its location within the Columbia Department of History, rather than a department of Semitics or a separate Judaica department, suited Baron’s idea of Jewish history as a crucial piece of world history, to be studied neutrally with the professional tools that the historian of any civilization would use. At the time of Baron’s appointment and for decades thereafter, the only other chair in Jewish studies at a major secular American university was the Littauer Chair at Harvard, held by the eminent philosopher Harry Austryn Wolfson. Together, Baron and Wolfson essentially founded the academic field of Jewish studies in the American academy.

Baron’s influence on the field of Jewish history was enormous, both through his numerous publications and through his teaching at Columbia, where he trained most

of the significant Jewish historians of the next generation, including his first successor in the Miller Chair, Gerson D. Cohen, who later became the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Thanks to his exceptionally careful and far-reaching scholarship, and through his teaching and mentoring of students, Baron slowly but eventually won acceptance for his conception of Jewish history. His interpretation became the reigning approach within the field throughout the United States, and had major influence in European and Israeli academic circles as well. In time, any serious professional Jewish historian would be intimately acquainted with Baron's writings, and most would accept his critique of the previous conception of Jewish history.

This is all the more remarkable given that the anti-lachrymose philosophy predated the most lachrymose chapter in all of Jewish experience — the Holocaust, in which Baron's own parents were murdered. Baron continued to insist that Jewish history was not primarily a history of persecution but of creative intellectual, spiritual, and economic responses to the challenges — and at times the horrors — the Jews faced as a people. It's a testament to the solidity and depth of Baron's scholarship, and his commitment to it, that this new conception could survive a period that a third of the world's Jews did not.

Married to the Muse

Baron always claimed that he had only one research assistant, his wife, Jeannette Meisel Baron, whom he met when she was a graduate student in economics at Columbia, and married in 1934. Baron dictated his work to her and she collaborated so meticulously in the writing, typing, and proofreading of his manuscripts that the published volumes were renowned for their lack of errors. For decades the couple was a fixture on Claremont Avenue, Baron taking his daily walk in Riverside Park, Jeannette serving as the hostess of a European-flavored salon in their home. Their circle of intimate friends included Hannah Arendt, and the Barons were in her apartment when she died in 1975.

After World War II, Baron organized and headed the Commission for Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, which tried to salvage the remains of Jewish cultural artifacts in Europe after the Holocaust. In 1961 the Israeli government prosecutor called on Baron to testify at the trial of Adolf Eichmann about the nature of Jewish history and

the Jewish community before World War II.

Within the academy, Baron's influence was extended through his creation of the journal *Jewish Social Studies*, which attempted to use the methods of the social sciences to examine Jewish society through the ages. In 1950 Baron established the Center for Israel and Jewish Studies at Columbia, which he directed until his retirement, and later the University Seminar in Israel and Jewish Studies, which he led and then participated in until his death.

But it was Baron's scholarship that was most important to him, and particularly his *Social and Religious History of the Jews*, which was his bold attempt to emulate his nineteenth- and early twentieth-century predecessors Heinrich Graetz and Simon Dubnow and write an up-to-date, methodologically sophisticated world history of the Jewish people. He differed from these historians chiefly in studying Jewish history in its larger political, religious, and social context with the understanding that the Jews existed within other societies in spite of their own particularities. Beyond its remarkable range, from the biblical to the early modern periods, and its eloquent prose, Baron's Social and Religious History was remarkable for the rigor of its scholarly apparatus. Baron seemed to have read everything, and in every language, having remotely to do with Jewish history.

Alas, Baron's presumptive deal with the Creator did not hold, and his capacity for writing was severely diminished in his last years, especially after his beloved and younger wife, Jeannette, died in 1985, leaving him without the fastidious hand that had transcribed and recorded his thoughts. Beyond the 18 volumes of the *Social and Religious History* that were published, Baron wrote and edited some two dozen other books, including the crucial two-volume *The Jewish Community*, histories of the Jewish communities of Russia and of the United States, and more theoretical works both on the nature of history writing in general and on the relationship between modern nationalism and religion.

In 1979, a group of friends of the Barons established a chair at Columbia in his honor, and one of his star students, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, then at Harvard, moved back to Columbia to become the first Salo Wittmayer Baron Professor of Jewish History and the director of the Center for Israel and Jewish Studies. Soon thereafter, an anonymous donor gave $4.3 million to Columbia to establish an endowment for the Center for Israel and Jewish Studies, and new chairs in modern Hebrew literature and American Jewish history, both lifelong passions of Baron.

These professorships solidified Columbia as a world- class center of Jewish studies in all the disciplines, an eminence that Baron himself had more quietly established in the 1940s and 1950s. Before their deaths, the Barons themselves endowed the Salo and Jeannette Baron Prize in Jewish Studies, which is given every five years to the author of the best disser-tation in Jewish studies throughout the University.

Sadly, Baron's attempt to write an all-encompassing history of the Jews from antiquity to the present was not realized, and it is unlikely, given the scope of knowledge and linguistic skills such a task entails, that another historian will attempt it again — particularly in our age of hyperspecialization. So Baron's lifework will doubtless remain not only the best global history of the Jews, but also the last.

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