

Cover Story

How Dovid Katz Thirst For Jewish History

Rabbi Dovid Katz's unique perspectives bend minds and preconceived notions.

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☞Rabbi Dovid Katz: "By definition, history is a subjective discipline."

(PHOTO Justin Tsucalas)

"Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it." — George Santayana "What experience and history teach is this — that people and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles." — Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

On a cold and misty Saturday evening, the small sanctuary at Beth Abraham Congregation in Northwest Baltimore is packed to overflowing. Men and women, young and old, Orthodox and Conservative, Reform and non-affiliated, have all come to hear about modern Jewish history.

The speaker is Dovid Katz, the rabbi of Beth Abraham (known widely as "Hertzberg's Shul"), who also happens to hold a Ph.D. in Jewish history and is attracting large audiences to his current 12-part lecture series — most of whom find his talks entertaining, interesting and informative. That's one

reason why the program is underwritten by the Associated: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore, and co-sponsored by a number of local businesses and individuals.

The current series covers what he calls “by common consent the three worst decades in Jewish history, 1914 to 1934, during which more Jews were killed — in excess of 100,000 in the pogroms of Eastern Europe between 1919 and 1921 alone — than in any other previous era.” Twelve lectures can barely cover that time, he says.

To his mind it remains the great irony of the 20th century, when even before the Holocaust the world was unable to fulfill the promise of a more enlightened way toward resolving differences.

Contrary to popular belief, the Jewish history in Europe is not one continuous record of blood-spilling. The slaughters to the degree noted above never took place in the 18th or 19th centuries, but by the 20th it was hoped that, with the advances of science and all the other technological innovations and hopefully the increases in political liberalism, the world would move on to a more progressive approach. Yet it was specifically during the most technologically advanced century that the most horrific acts against Jews and against other human beings were committed.

A cadre of volunteers scurries around to transform the Beth Abraham sanctuary into a lecture room, removing the *mechitzah*, setting up audio-visual equipment for slides and videos, and wiring the *bimah* into a podium from which the talk can be projected to a monitor in the social hall in the rear of the building.

Why is it that so many modern Jews want to know about Jewish history?



©Rabbi Dovid Katz with his daughter, Ayala Schnitzer, and granddaughter Chani.

Photo Justin Tsucalas

Judaism is a historical phenomenon, Rabbi Katz tells an interviewer, a historical religion part of whose definition is a certain interpretation of history. “To be an Orthodox Jew means to subscribe to a particular version of the Jewish past. To be a non-Orthodox Jew means to have a different take on the past.”

In short, people want to know where they come from. But not all modern Jews feel Judaism is a historical narrative. Could there be some other attraction to this history?

“I don’t know for sure, but I imagine that one fissure among Jews today is precisely between those who are interested in the past and those who aren’t. We live in a time when Jews are fragmented. Many aren’t interested in anything Jewish whatsoever, but there are plenty of others — Orthodox, secular, Reform, whatever — who are interested very strongly in trying to get ahold of their Judaism. You can look at it as a philosophy, you can look at it as a religion, or you can look at how we got to where we are today.”

If history is in the eyes of the beholder, Professor Katz is asked, what makes his take any more valid than that of other historians?

“By definition history is a subjective discipline,” he says. “All you get is my take. You cannot talk about history as you can science because then it is not possible to gather all that data. For example, it’s impossible to state all the facts that happened in World War II, or even in one year of Israel, or every single factoid that’s out there. What historians do is to make selections from the facts. I always say history is the *cholent* that you compose out of the facts. There lies in the selection process your bias, so there is no such thing as an objective historical presentation. Reading history in a book does not make it objective. So I can’t say that my take is superior to that of another historian. All I can say is that I have done the research.”

For historians, there's no such thing as a comprehensive approach to the facts.

“If you read two good historians on the Civil War, one who is a Northerner and the other one a Southerner, you will probably end up with different accounts. They may not disagree on the facts — they both know that the Confederates won the battle of Fredericksburg and the Union won the battle of Gettysburg — and yet you will read both accounts and you will see two different cholents.”

Does he feel the need to temper his own biases in the service of making these lectures palatable to different groups?



□ Rabbi Dovid Katz: “We live in times of such rapid developments”
Photo Justin Tsucalas

“One cannot temper one’s own bias,” Rabbi Katz says. “The sum total of my experiences will inevitably affect any presentation that I deliver. If people from different groups in the community like what I have to say [and I am very happy about that], it doesn’t change the fact that what I am presenting is going to be with a bias. However, although I am presenting my interpretation of the facts, I hope that my insistence on facticity will moderate any sort of excessive bias.”

People are standing on chairs outside the window of Beth Abraham, because the hall is not big enough to accommodate them. Tonight there are well over 300 inside. (For the next lecture a week later, more than 500 would fill the Mintzes Auditorium at Beth Tfiloh to overflowing. Similar crowds came to the Rambam campus in the ensuing weeks.) One reason for the great interest in Dovid Katz’s lectures, of course — why they come out in droves on a chilly Saturday night, from all segments of the community, to hear him — is the scholar himself.

Born in Baltimore, he graduated from the Talmudical Academy, received *semicha* [ordination] from Ner Israel Rabbinical College, a master’s degree from Johns Hopkins University, and his doctorate from the University of Maryland. His dissertation was on early modern Jewish history (the period between 1492 and 1790). He has been a contributing editor and translator of the ArtScroll edition of the Babylonian Talmud, and has appeared in a diverse variety

of scholarly publications, from the *Journal of Halachah and Contemporary Society and Yeshurun* (a 75-page biography of Rabbi Yaakov Ruderman) to the *Catholic Historical Review* (“The Medici State and the Ghetto of Florence”).

In 1983 he married the former Karen Hettleman of Baltimore; they have seven children and two grandchildren.

Rabbi Katz came to Hertzberg’s in 1998, and has attracted a following not only there (where, besides weekly sermons, he gives three classes a week, including a very popular weekday seminar for women), but in the Baltimore Jewish community and beyond. He also teaches at T.A., lectures at Hopkins (“Introduction to the History of Rabbinic Literature”) and Maryland (a survey course in Jewish history), and appears as a scholar-in-residence at various venues around the country. In the past few years he has been to Houston, St. Louis, New Haven, Conn., Teaneck, N.J., Lancaster, Pa., and elsewhere. He is currently working on several projects about Judaism in the early modern era.

One dimension he brings that a lot of other historians may not is a substantial — some would say encyclopedic — knowledge of rabbinic culture. Rabbi Leonard Oberstein, the secretary of the Rabbinical Council of Greater Baltimore, is an unabashed admirer. “Rabbi Katz’s ability to convey the

context of events is unique,” Rabbi Oberstein says. “He humanizes historical figures. He does not impose preconceived ideas onto history, but allows his breadth of knowledge to convey events as they really happened, and to make them understood in the context of present conditions. He is a pleasure to listen to.”

Ari Elbaum, a staff lawyer at the Attorney General’s Office and a former student, appreciates how people are attracted to Rabbi Katz’s personality and scholarship. “He can relate to anyone, from any background. He’s extremely down to earth.” Mr. Elbaum recalls a conversation he had with one of his other high school teachers, who told him to “save my notes from Rabbi Katz’s classes, because they’ll be worth something someday.”



Gary Kasper, who just received a doctorate in chemistry from Hopkins and has attended most of Rabbi Katz’s lectures in this series, finds him to be “very sincere and truthful” about many aspects of Judaism. “It’s easier to understand why we’re doing what we’re doing if you can understand the history of how things came to be.”

“Rabbi Dovid Katz: ‘The Torah itself has an especially meta-historical quality.’”

Photo Justin Tsucalas

In his college courses and current writing, does Rabbi Dr. Katz have any difficulty separating the rabbi from the historian?

“I’ve looked up ‘Review Your Professor’ and the best compliment I could get is, ‘Even though he’s Jewish, he taught it straight down the line.’ So as a professor of history, I strive for objectivity, recognizing at the same time [as I always tell my students] that there is really no such thing as an objective history.”

Why does a *yeshiva*-trained Orthodox rabbi venture into the secular study of history?

“Cecil Roth [the famous British Jewish historian] was once asked the same question, and he answered, ‘For the fun of it! Jews of a certain type have fun learning about their past.’”

But Rabbi Katz says that his prime motivation is communitarian: “I like to think people come for the fun of it. This is one of the few ways that we can bring the different and discreet segments of our community together — Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and the non-affiliated.”

There’s no doubt that Dovid Katz is tapping into the current communal interest in Jewish history as well. This is the second group of lectures to be offered by Rabbi Katz under the auspices of the Associated, and the fifth overall. Their purpose is to respond to a perceived interest in the Jewish community about ethnic history. The first dealt with the crisis of traditionalism and the emergence of Orthodoxy in the 19th century. Others have treated the Roman-Jewish War from 66-73 C.E.; the Jews of Spain; and those in early America and Palestine.

The themes are broad in scope but filled with pithy anecdotes, tales of colorful personalities and articulate historical insights. Archival photographs and videos call attention to demographic shifts and illustrate human conceits and frailties.

Tonight’s lecture deals with the birth of Zionism and the convoluted genesis of the Balfour Declaration. Along the way, besides narrating his own perceptions of sweeping cultural conflicts, selective persecutions and global trends — Rabbi Katz weaves in an eclectic collection of factoids:

- The only American representative to the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897 was Rabbi Shepsel Shaffer of Baltimore’s own Shearith Israel Congregation;

- Few of the early European dictators were well educated, but they ruled over large swaths of land as operatic caricatures, if not simpletons or buffoons;
- Had the Balfour Declaration been implemented in its original form, today's Israel would be substantially larger, without a West Bank or Gaza Strip;
- Jordan was created out of whole cloth by backroom politicians over whiskey and soda.

(The following week at Beth Tfiloh, Rabbi Katz would deliver an engrossing narrative on the evolution of a largely self-appointed but highly influential American Jewish establishment, spiced with similar tales about the close personal relationships among charismatic rabbis, wealthy lay leaders and Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft.)

"I think in general that these kinds of lectures raise the issue of Jewish culture. Is there such a thing nowadays?" Rabbi Katz asks. "Take, for example, the fact that the Baltimore Hebrew College went down the tubes. At the time it had only 18 Ph.D. students, and even they were subsidized, so obviously that model wasn't working. Currently, those who are interested in Jewish history can pursue it only at a secular university. That's not bad, or good — it is what it is. But it's interesting that people take of their time for an intellectual kind of event like this, and they just eat it up. So I think there is this kind of interest out there which is not being sufficiently cultivated."

To be sure, the audiences at this series have been mostly Jewish — Baltimore has one of the larger urban collections of Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Jews — but the numbers all over the country reflect their predominance in American culture.

"I'm reminded of the story of a woman in Kentucky," Rabbi Katz tells the group tonight in one of his characteristic interjections. "She's asked how many Jews are in the United States. She answers, 'I suppose about 50 million.' When she's told that, no, the actual number is more like 5 million, she exclaims, 'Well, they must all live in Louisville!' The audience erupts.

Is there anything that American Jews should be looking at in terms of historical trends that is disturbing?

"Whether the long-term trends show that it will be safer to be in Israel than in America is hard to say," Rabbi Katz says. "As we know from the years 1914 to 1934 — the countries that were thought to be at the height of civilization, that is the German Empire, turned into something quite different. And communities that had been secure in the Diaspora for many centuries, such as in Eastern Europe, all of a sudden became the reverse of that. So it's very hard to predict. We live in times of such rapid developments. Do we know what's going to emerge out of the current Afghanistan conflict? Or what trends there will be in the United States or elsewhere, say, 10 years from now? There's plenty out there to make us think that not all the changes will be of a benevolent nature. For example, nuclear proliferation."

Many Jews would say that Israel was always promised to the Jewish people, and at least some Orthodox Jews would say that we have it now. But, as Professor Katz points out tonight, the creation of Israel itself was almost a historical accident.

"An Orthodox Jew would say that 'historical accidents' are precisely the examples of the finger of G-d. In other words, the odds of them happening are so little that to attribute it strictly to human causality may not be a satisfying answer. But, of course, a non-Orthodox Jew would say there are causes and effects and the story happened as it happened. That is exactly what makes history so interesting. History is all about the study of man, and the fascination with history derives from the fact that observation of the past shows us the whole range of human possibilities. Man can do the greatest things, and unfortunately he can do the reverse."

The lecture this evening winds down after about an hour, at the end of which Rabbi Professor Katz offers to take a few questions. A dozen hands shoot up instantly.

Someone asks whether the apparently conflicting thoughts of Santayana and Hegel can be reconciled. Do we learn from history, or do we not? Rabbi Katz laughs, and takes a brief moment to gather some thoughts. Now he is fully engaged.

“Hegel was a philosopher of history, and he is somewhat discredited today. No two epics are identical. For example, to make a decision about the Iraq war in the year 2003 based on the experience of Gen. MacArthur in governing Japan in 1945 would not prove to be too helpful. To decide whether to go into Afghanistan on the basis of decisions made in the 1950s and '60s about Vietnam, may or may not be useful. We have to be able to know what to appropriate from the past and what not to, taking into account obviously all the different factors that define the present.”

But don't rabbis preach that everything is pre-ordained, or at least what we see nowadays has been foreshadowed in our biblical past? Mustn't we learn from that?

“The Torah itself has an especially meta-historical quality — which means that it offers stories which feature themes that cyclically reappear, certainly throughout Jewish history. Meta-history is interested in how G-d runs the world. That's a basic teaching of Torah from the very beginning of Genesis — the story of how G-d is manifesting His plans. But a historian cannot talk in these terms. Historians are interested in humanism.”

Thus, he says, the Torah, which has been around a long time, has to be approached in every generation with its own unique insights. And so we are now living in all this tension between Jews and Arabs — between Isaac and Ishmael — so we cannot help but see that these stories speak to us in contemporaneous terms. A hundred years ago, when Isaac and Ishmael weren't particularly at odds, these aspects of the story would probably not have jumped out at us.

“What about the Holocaust?” asks an elderly man sitting in the back. “Wasn't that the worst part of the 20th century?”

The answer is just as short and earnest as the question:

“I can assure you,” he says with a wry and knowing smile, “that that's a whole other lecture series.” •

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