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## RECENT BOOKS

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*The Fate of the Jews: A People Torn Between Israeli Power and Jewish Ethics*, Roberta Strauss Feuerlicht. New York: Times Books, 1983. 288 pages. Notes to p. 324. \$18.65.

Reviewed by Mark A. Bruzonsky

In one important sense, Roberta Strauss Feuerlicht has done the nearly impossible. She has published a fierce anti-Zionist polemic grafted onto a compassionate understanding of traditional Jewish values and ethics; and she has done so with no less than *Times Books*, a division of The New York Times Book Company.

Yet in another crucial sense, Feuerlicht may have somewhat overshot her target—for her audience should have been the Jewish community itself from which she has emerged. But by cooperating in her own ostracization, by allowing herself to become another crucified victim of the Jewish communities' "excommunication" process—one she properly assaults in her writing—Feuerlicht's important effort seems to be attracting mostly Arab and ideologically committed advocates.

On sheer literary grounds, Feuerlicht's effort is an impressive, at times breathless, polemical treatise—a compendium of Jewish myths, self-deceits, abuses, and betrayals. The book is filled with insightful twists on historical, political and cultural facts as well as incisive analysis of both past and current developments in the

American and Israeli Jewish communities. Yet, it is so sketchy at times, so selective in choice of anecdotes, and so unfailingly scathing of the American Jewish experience and Israel's predicament that one has to accept it as more of a personal cathartic release than a comprehensive, sociological commentary, subject to rigorous academic standards.

With all these caveats, *The Fate of the Jews* is still a contemporary *tour de force* which is imperative reading—especially for Jews who will best be able to put it in perspective, feel the pain of its lashes, and hopefully rethink some of the crucial issues involved.

Nor should it be overlooked by others seriously concerned with appreciating the linkages between Jewish history and contemporary Israel as well as the bonds that have come to fatefully intertwine American Jewry and Zionism. But non-Jews should be cautioned that they will be reading a corrective essay meant to illuminate the darkest side of Jewish and Zionist character and history; a book not designed to be balanced or even fair; one purposefully attempting to wash the Jewish dirty laundry in public—and all at the same time.

*The Fate of the Jews* is the anguished outpouring of a pained Jewish/socialist soul who has significant other literary accomplishments to her credit—including *Justice Crucified: The Story of Sacco and Vanzetti* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1977),

which attracted considerable positive commentary just a few years ago. That last book was enthusiastically reviewed on the front page of the *Washington Post Book Review Section*, while the *New York Times* reviewer concluded that it was [an] "excellent, solidly researched work." However, the treatment of her latest book ("death by silence" to use Feuerlicht's own phrase), lends credence to the thesis of some form of "conspiracy" to keep such views from reaching their intended audience.

Yet *Fate* is also excellent, sometimes brilliant, rightfully aspiring to be a literary crusade for truth and justice. "Let us stop pretending about the Jewish past and let us stop making fools of ourselves about the Jewish future" (p. vii), is her frontispiece quote, from a turn-of-the-century New York Jewish Congressman Meyer London, who "never wavered from his youthful concept of social morality and ethical standards" (p. 116). Among London's great credits, Feuerlicht stresses, was his refusal to introduce in Congress a resolution endorsing the Balfour Declaration—a step which contributed to his defeat in the next election.

Unfortunately, Feuerlicht's research is neither complete nor solid. Having cut herself off from the Jewish organizational world, and being largely isolated from Jewish and Israeli intellectual circles, there was a price to pay. And that price is mainly in her omissions and in the uneven, sometimes superficial, documentation on which too many of Feuerlicht's conclusions are based.

For instance, in speaking about Camp David she misses the crucial Jewish role in "convincing" Carter to retreat on the issue of the settlements freeze; after which Camp David was sure to degenerate into a separate peace. And when lashing out at Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, she

ails to appreciate the significance of (or even to mention) The Paris Declaration signed by three of the world's senior Jewish statesmen—Goldmann, Klutznick and Mendes-France. And these are the contemporary equivalents of Martin Buber, Mordechai Kaplan and Ahad Ha'am—Jewish giants from the past she so rightly applauds—and their unique statement aimed precisely at the historical, ethical issues with which Feuerlicht is preoccupied.

Feuerlicht is more activist than academic, ethicist than politician, rugged individualist than compromising organizational-type. Her latest book is surely a labor of both love and disgust, and she states explicitly in the first few pages what she has set out to do:

"The reality of the Jewish past and present is so distorted by myth and legend, and the rabbis and other leaders of the Jewish community are so silent in the face of evil, that perhaps a historical, moral, and political overview of the Jewish people will make them aware that they are worshipping the wrong gods. . . .

The heritage of the Jews is not power but ethics. Whether Jews are a religion, a people, a civilization, an historical process or an anomaly, whether they are Hasidim or heretics, what binds all Jews from antiquity to the present is not statehood but the burden they placed upon themselves and posterity when they internalized morality and gave the world the ethical imperative" (pp. 4-5).

The dispossessed Palestinians have had *The Disinherited* by Fawaz Turki (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), and the oppressed Palestinians still living in their homeland have had Fouzi El-Asmar's *To Be an Arab in Israel* (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1978); now the disenfranchised and alienated Jews have *The Fate of the Jews*. In that sense alone, Roberta Strauss Feuerlicht's effort is a significant, possibly historic, accomplishment.

Originally begun in 1979 as an historical effort to trace the American Jewish experience from immigrants who quickly moved away from the early tendencies toward socialist, liberal, sometimes radical perspectives, *The Fate of the Jews* evolved into a full-blown assault on Jewish conversion to American middle class hypocrisies and the corrosive effects of adopting Zionism as a false messiah.

The initial chapters set a tone through which the modern Jewish experience is put in squarely historical and ethical terms. Though the ancient Israelites were as corrupt and militant as everyone else, Jewish prophets did evolve what Feuerlicht terms "the ethical imperative" which Jewish conscience and humanism spread throughout the Diaspora: "Justice, justice,

shalt thou pursue" [Deuteronomy 16:20] (p. 9).

Jews "evolved moral and spiritual values which half of mankind have incorporated into their consciousness and made part of their conscience," Feuerlicht quotes from her favorite Rabbi, Mordechai Kaplan (p. 10). Paraphrasing this in her own terms, she concludes that this ancient ethical imperative "does not make Jews a chosen people, but a people one expects to act righteously because it is their heritage. Just as we expect Quakers to support peace, we expect Jews to be good" (p. 285). "My mother would shake her head and say 'A Jew doesn't do this'," Feuerlicht explains, viewing Jews in terms of their behavior rather than a birthright. "What [my mother] really meant was, 'A good Jew doesn't do this,' but she dropped the 'good' as redundant" (p. 4).

Now, such an ethical approach to Jewish history may seem hypocritical, laughable or perhaps, more appropriately, inscrutable to non-Jews. But for many Jews, including this reviewer, who share the pain and anguish which Feuerlicht so bitingly articulates, she hits home, bringing back many memories of one's "Jewish" upbringing.

Most of *The Fate of the Jews* traces the American Jewish experience from the early few already in the New World during the 19th century, through the mass immigration early this century, to the replacement of God, religion and heritage in the aftermath of the Holocaust with Zionism. In doing so, Feuerlicht brings out many forgotten facts, considerable thoughtful analysis, but too often a disparaging oversimplification:

"Jews in search of a new ideology turned to Zionism. Six million Jews were dead, and a Jewish state was struggling to survive. Communism was a delusion, and anyone vaguely Left was under assault. Zionism was not on the attorney-general's list; no one was hounded for supporting Israel" (p. 149-50).

This is hardly a fitting summary of the multifaceted, highly complex mass conversion to Zionism. Fortunately, the rest of her discussion bears that out.

On other matters, especially when occasionally touching on geostrategic questions, Feuerlicht is simply out of her league, relying on the logic of her analysis rather than the historical facts. "The warnings of the State Department that America's support for Israel would cost it the Arab Middle East proved to be correct" (p. 150), Feuerlicht wrongly asserts. For whatever reasons, American influence in the Arab world has been immense, and even today, after American complicity in Israel's brutal invasion of Lebanon, many Arab governments retain extremely close relations with the United States, whatever the occasional rhetoric.

After the historical backdrop chapters,

Feuerlicht traces the political activities and outlooks of major segments of the American Jewish community. She reveals how wrong it is to think of American Jews as either liberal or democratic. "The wide assumption that Jews as a whole are congenitally liberal or radical is based on the activities of a few generations of Russian Jewish Bundists in Europe and their successors in America" (p. 67). She goes through the Black-Jewish experience in the US, looks at the years "From Roosevelt to Reagan," but saves her final blasts for a numbing chapter on "Jews and Israel."

But even with her anti-Zionist convictions, though never really articulated in straight-forward terms, Feuerlicht is sufficiently aware of *Realpolitik* to be in the moderate, mutual recognition, two-state camp (though she might disdain the label "moderate"). "Zionists executed the psychological coup of the century by taking Palestine from the Arabs and then pretending Jews were Arab victims," Feuerlicht concludes in the final pages of her book. "Yet this wrong cannot be righted by another. Israel exists and must continue to exist; the alternative would mean another holocaust" (p. 284).

With that finale, Feuerlicht is sure to disappoint many of those who might have reasonably expected that this Jew was pure and honest and sure to support a secular state for all those who claim Palestine as their home. Yet the author, aware of Israel's predicament, offers very little in terms of specifying how to correct Israel's moral or political course. "Israelis should not be preparing to receive American Jews and American Jews should be preparing to receive Israelis" she warns. "American Jews who care about Israel are concerned that it has made a covenant with death. . . . Not since the fall of the Second Temple have Jews been such an engine of death and destruction" (p. 287).

*The Fate of the Jews* is a devastating, provocative, powerful critique of the prevailing contemporary wisdom among Jews, and about Jews and Israel. It is flawed, but still solid. It deserves careful, ongoing consideration.