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Rise and Decline of Civilizations: Lessons for the Jewish People has a simple George Santayana-esque goal: to learn the lessons of history so the Jewish people will not repeat the mistakes of past civilizations. Shalom Wald largely succeeds, as his historical perspective is broad and erudition considerable. But even more than that, Rise and Decline succeeds because it benefits from the fact that both the past and the future are truly unknowable. And as someone who has also scrutinized Jewish history (and made predictions about its trajectory) as well as consumed a fair share of political analyses and punditry, it is evident that being right or wrong about the past, present or future is less important than how well-argued, intriguing or compelling your assertions are.

So with these caveats in mind, I delved into Wald’s work, eager for insight gleaned from history’s greatest observers to stave off what might truly be the End of the Jews. And Wald does not disappoint. From the outset, Rise and Fall is provocative. Employing the terms “rise” and “decline”, or “civilization” for that matter, Wald acknowledges, is an ideological move. After all, my rise might be your decline. These sharp-edged, value-laden terms, however, can be somewhat smoothed by objective, measured discourse – which Wald deploys.

However, in Wald’s handling of contentiousness – which this topic inevitably evokes – he exposes a fundamental weakness in his argument. In other words, Wald often tries to have it both ways. For example, Wald manages to navigate the controversy around terms mentioned above, but one that cannot so easily be resolved appears on page 3. It is “Jewish”. Though Wald nods to the eternal controversy about defining who is a “Jew,” and states that he will not wade into that morass, he nonetheless stakes a position. He presents an “expert opinion,” that, with a thick patina of academic objectivity, defines what a Jew is. He then proceeds to state how many Jews there are, using this definition and a 2011 data set.

This is not the last time that Wald will do this. There are at least eight other moments during the unfolding of his polemic that Wald will make a bold assertion, and then, just as deftly, backpedal from it with a dollop of disinterestedness.

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In Part II, Wald introduces the historians he will review and interrogate. In total, it is a stimulating collection of thinkers. Ranging from Thucydides to the Chinese historian Sima Qian and Muslim historian ibn Khaldun to Gibbon, Weber, Toynbee and a strong cross-section of American and British historians (with a handful of other European historians), Wald introduces each with a brief chapter about their work and their connections to the Jews.

But, then, oddly, he seems to back away from them. Are they the right ones? he wonders aloud. Was a better choice possible? One wonders if he should be held responsible for the list he constructed. But then, he concludes, “[a] different selection of authors might change the relative weight of the main factors, or add one or two more, but the overall picture would likely remain the same.”

Parts III and IV effectively lay out Wald’s lessons from history, specifically external conditions for a civilization’s rise and decline (Part III) as well as the “drivers” of that rise and decline (Part IV). In many instances, Wald’s chapter headings pose a simple question in the form of an “either/or” statement. So, for example, in Part I, Chapter 1 wonders: Are the Jews a “civilization” or a “culture”? (Wald’s conclusion: Both.) Chapter 7 of Part III posits whether there will be an “End of Civilization” or “Decline of the West”. (Wald’s conclusion: Either would be bad.)

Many of the macro-historical conditions Wald enumerates in Part III prove to be good for the Jews. Toynbee’s notion of a “challenge and response” fits well into a Jewish schema as does Hodgson’s notion of a “window of opportunity” and Gibbon’s nuanced appreciation of multiple causes for decline. However, a “golden age” myth depicting a thriving peak (from which a civilization inevitably descends) does not fit so well, nor does the correlation between cultural creativity and civilizational health or how the Jews will fare when civilization, be it humanity’s or the West’s, finally comes crashing down.

Part IV enumerates a checkered collection of “drivers”, some of which prove to be good for the Jews. However, others raise some disturbing questions about the nature of Jewishness in the present and near future. Religious practice provides a strong bond between Jews, as does the social capital that accompanies high levels of education and economic success. But others, like a common language or galvanizing leaders, do not. And more controversially, neither does genetics. Here is where Wald tries most to stake a claim and flee from it simultaneously and disturbingly.

Under the rubric of “extra rational bonds”, Wald introduces evolutionary psychology and biology as well as epigenetics and transgenerational inheritance to explain the ineffable bond between Jews.
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He quotes a BBC science program on epigenetics that trumpets how “genes have a ‘memory’” while simultaneously (and unsuccessfully) attempting to mute the claim’s triumphal overtones.

Wald, like any post-Shoah Jew, should be circumspect about espousing a “scientific explanation for Jewish group feeling” as it is a mere euphemism for a racialized notion of Jewishness. (And for folks who assert the latter, Wald’s response is quasi-dismissive: they just don’t understand the science.) However, as he unpacks the recent research, he comes uncomfortably close to embracing a nucleic-acid based “magical consensus” all the while claiming that he is agnostic about it. He concludes that “[h]istoriography and the social sciences must be open to new findings from evolutionary science, genetics, epigenetics, and genomic research.” How open social scientists should be remains unsaid.

Despite Wald’s waffling, what ultimately makes Rise and Fall valuable are his sensible and well-grounded recommendations based on the premise that Jewish decline is inevitable. (This assertion is one from which he does not ultimately back away.) Wald’s to-do list is short – four items in all – and, more important, actionable. Even more important, one would be hard-pressed to find a responsible member of the Jewish establishment who would disagree with anything on Wald’s list… except perhaps the second item which calls for the development a wholly new cadre of Jewish leaders who are “morally and intellectually unassailable, ready to rally a large part of the public behind vital goals, and able to implement long term policies.”

Wald’s appendix for policy-makers is also invaluable, capably summarizing the key terminology and twelve “drivers” (in various combinations) that will (probably) determine whether the future will be good or bad for the Jews.

However, one driver that appears in the appendix is curiously missing from the body of the work: the status of women. Wald alludes to women’s rights and the status of women eleven times in Rise and Decline. (He alludes to Protokin almost twice as much.) As useful as Wald’s mission of offering sound recommendations will prove to be (or not), it is somewhat diminished by the lip service he pays to more than half of the Jewish people. In the list of 66 “JPPI Brainstorming Participants” who gathered with Wald to consider the Jewish future, only eight1 were women. Of the 18 JPPI Staff Participants, only three were women. Consider also that, in 2013, of the 74 largest Jewish non-for-profit organizations, only ten had women leaders – and they earned 66 cents for every dollar earned by the

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1 Or, perhaps, nine. I could not determine if Leslie Cardin was a man or a woman.
men at the same level. Perhaps it is unfair to expect Wald to speak from both sides of the mechitzah. However, one cannot claim to speak for everyone without acknowledging how little attention you are giving to the folks on the other side of the curtain. One cannot have it both ways.

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2 See http://forward.com/articles/189200/women-leaders-of-jewish-non-profits-remain-scarce/?p=all#ixzz30KeBi4ho for the complete salary survey.