

Writing His Way into History

Adam Kirsch

A few years ago, when I first began to think about writing a book about Benjamin Disraeli, I knew only the outlines of his life — that he was the only Jewish prime minister of England, and that he was a novelist as well as a professional politician. The combination of novelist and politician was already intriguing to me: as a poet and literary critic, I was interested to see how Disraeli combined the very different personality types of the man of letters and the man of action. It was not until I plunged into his own books, however, that I came to realize that the bridge between those two identities was nothing other than Disraeli's Jewishness. Being a Jew, being a writer, and being a leader were, for Disraeli, three ways of responding to his deepest passion — to impress his personality on history.

The best place to see this connection at work is in his most personal novel, *Contarini Fleming*, which he wrote in 1832 when he was 27 years old. In many ways, it is a fairly conventional example of the *Bildungsroman*, the novel of education that was a favorite genre among the Romantics. Like so many young writers before and since, Disraeli modeled his hero on himself, and told the story of his dawning recognition that he possessed extraordinary powers. The reader follows Contarini as he falls precociously in love, feels the rapture of inspiration, and travels to exotic cities.

But one feature of Disraeli's novel is unique and helps to explain why I found Disraeli so fascinating to write and think about. Unlike almost any other young poet in fiction, Contarini Fleming is constantly being seduced away from poetry by political ambition. In an earlier era of British history, it was not uncommon for the same man to seek fame in literature and in politics: think of Milton, who threw himself into the English Civil War before writing *Paradise Lost*, or Joseph Addison, an accomplished essayist and adept Parliamentarian. But in the 1830s, when Disraeli was starting his career, the Romantic era in English literature was in full swing, and nothing could be more foreign to the Romantic spirit than the idea of combining sublime poetry with workaday politics. Byron, who was the young Disraeli's idol, might enlist in the Greek War of Independence, but you could hardly

imagine him going every day to the House of Lords, shepherding bills through committee, and intriguing for party leadership.

Yet Disraeli takes care to provide his hero with a professional politician for a father, thus allowing Contarini to experience practical politics at an early age. The key scene in the novel comes when the elder Fleming lectures Contarini on the inferiority of poetry to power:

“What were all those great poets of whom we now talk so much, what were they in their lifetime? The most miserable of their species. Depressed, doubtful, obscure, or involved in petty quarrels and petty persecutions; often unappreciated, utterly uninfluential, beggars, flatterers of men unworthy even of their recognition; what a train of disgusting incidents, what a record of degrading circumstances, is the life of a great poet! A man of great energies aspires that they should be felt in his lifetime, that his existence should be rendered more intensely vital by the constant consciousness of his multiplied and multiplying power. Is posthumous fame a substitute for all this?... Would you rather have been Homer or Julius Caesar, Shakespeare or Napoleon? No one doubts.”

Why does Disraeli betray the Romantic script in this way, placing the world above the soul, achievement above imagination? The reason is suggested by the other unique element in *Contarini Fleming*: Contarini's veiled but still identifiable Jewishness. Disraeli does not come right out and say that his alter ego is Jewish; as his first name suggests, he is meant to be half Italian. But we are obviously listening to Disraeli's own experience growing up as a Jew in England when the young Contarini, who lives in Scandinavia, complains about his Nordic half-brothers: “They were called my brothers, but Nature gave the lie to the reiterated assertion. There was no similitude between us. Their blue eyes, their flaxen hair, and their white visages claimed no kindred with my Venetian countenance. Wherever I moved I looked around me, and beheld a race different from myself.”

Here is another standard trope of Romantic literature, the myth of the ugly duckling. (Disraeli and Hans Christian Andersen were, in fact, almost exact contemporaries.)

Adam Kirsch, a frequent contributor to *The New Yorker* and *The New Republic*, is the author of two books of poetry and the recently published *Benjamin Disraeli (Nextbook/Schocken)*.

December 2008


Tevet 5769

To subscribe: 877-568-SHMA

www.shma.com

But as the novel progresses, Contarini's "Venetian" heritage intersects with his political ambitions in a remarkable way. He happens to read a history of Venice in which he learns that the Contarinis, his mother's family, were a race of great noblemen, and he travels to the city to see its ancient grandeur. At the time Disraeli wrote, Venice was under Austrian occupation, but Contarini dreams of devoting his life to restoring its independence, thus vindicating his ancestry and turning his lifelong difference into a source of pride.

It is an allegory of Zionism, with Venice standing in for Palestine, and it offers a glimpse of Disraeli's own youthful dreams of becoming

a Jewish national leader. In the end, Disraeli sacrificed that ambition, choosing the more practical path of becoming an English statesman. But the link between Disraeli's writerly imagination and his Jewish consciousness, so clear in *Contarini Fleming*, was never broken. Perhaps if Disraeli had not been born a Jew, he would have been content to be a writer. But his intense pride for himself and his people led him to see public glory as the highest achievement in life — all the more so because, for centuries, Jews had been barred from it. The chief irony of Disraeli's life, among many, is that the Jewishness that made his rise to power so difficult was also what fueled his ascent. 

Choosing an Ending to the Torah: Moses' Death, or Entrance into the Land of Israel

Norman Cohen

The sojourn from Egypt to the Promised Land is both the main trope of Jewish life and the metaphor for our individual lives. The promise of the land of Israel to the Jewish people is the hallmark of God's covenant throughout the Bible. So why, then, does the Torah end with the death of Moses rather than the culmination of the Israelites' journey out of slavery and into the land? Furthermore, why leave the people at the end of Deuteronomy bereft of their leader Moses, fragile and lacking confidence as they prepare to enter Canaan to do battle with "giants"? (In Numbers 13:33, the spies described the inhabitants of Canaan as *anakim*, giants, and the Israelites were like grasshoppers in comparison).

With Moses' death, they could feel that God was no longer in their midst, since they had come to identify the Divine presence with Moses. (Deut. 31:17) In addition, the note upon which Deuteronomy ends — in contrast to the uplifting end of the Israelites' journey into their Promised Land — is the recalling of the plagues wrought upon the Pharaoh and Egypt, and Moses' power and might. (Deut. 34:11-12)

Some biblical scholars think that the death of Moses originally belonged to the end of the Book of Numbers. We read in Numbers 27:12ff (which is similar to the end of Deuteronomy) that the Israelites are camped in the plains of Moab, opposite Jericho, and Moses is told to ascend and view the land given to the people of Israel that he will not enter because of his im-

pending death. This passage probably concluded the "Tetrateuch" (the four books, Genesis through Numbers), which was formed from the literary strands designated as J, E, and P. In contrast, Deuteronomy, the product of a different literary source (D), is much closer in style and doctrine to the so-called Early Prophets (the books of Joshua through Kings). Moses' death notice, appended to Deuteronomy 34, enabled Deuteronomy to function as the conclusion to Moses' biography and the entire Torah.

Had the compilers of the Torah focused primarily on the people of Israel instead of the life and contribution of Moses, they might have included the Book of Joshua, which describes the conquering of the Canaanite tribes and the settling of the Land. Some early scholars suggested that a "Hexateuch" — a six-part collection — would have ended with Joshua 24. Such an ending would have recounted the journey of the people from Abraham through the exodus from Egypt, the 40 years in the desert, crossing the Jordan River, and ending with the burial of Joseph's bones, which the Israelites brought with them from Egypt. (Joshua 24:32) This ending would have symbolized the completion of the journey from Egypt and slavery into the freedom of their own land, giving us a better understanding of the essence of freedom that Erich Fromm captures in his work, *Escape from Freedom*. Once people are free from all constraint, they can join in a covenant with God, live on their land,

Dr. Norman Cohen is Provost of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, where he is also Professor of Midrash. His books include, Self, Struggle & Change: Family Conflict Stories in Genesis and their Healing Insights for our Lives; Voices from Genesis: Guiding Us through the Stages of Life; The Way Into Torah; Hineini in our Lives; and Moses and the Journey to Leadership: Timeless Lessons of Effective Management from the Bible and Today's Leadership, all published by Jewish Lights.

December 2008
Tevet 5769
To subscribe: 877-568-SHMA
www.shma.com