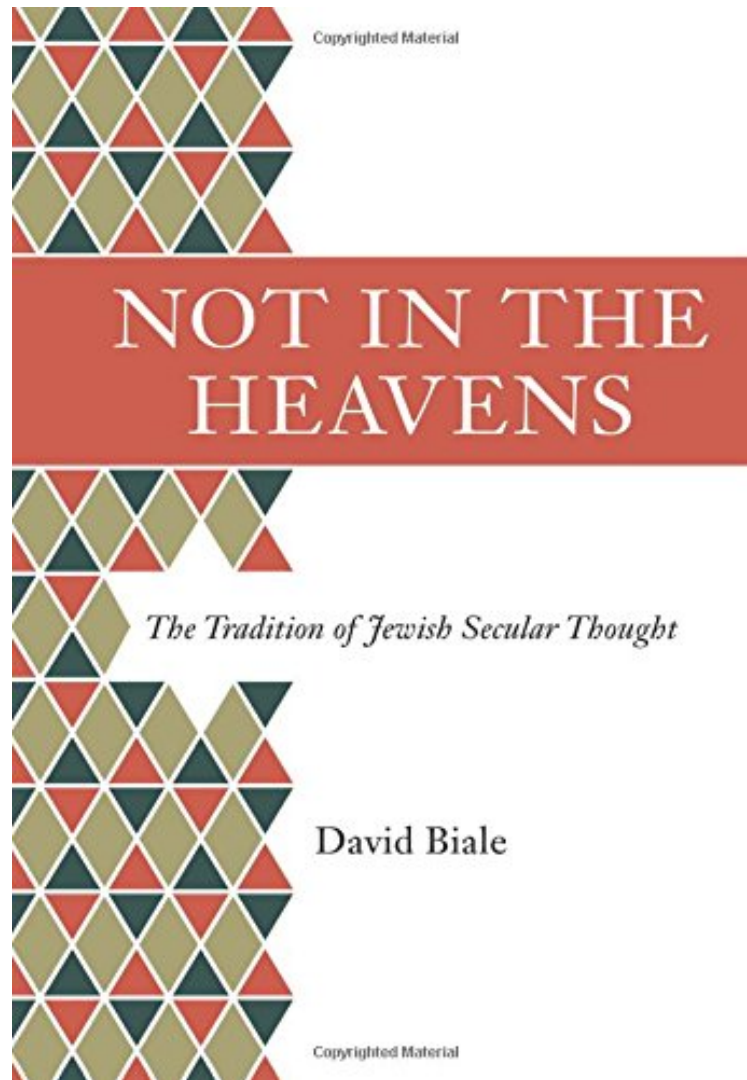


(Mobile book) Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought

Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought

David Biale

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David Biale : Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought:

1 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Why no mention of Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine, 1928--2007, the founder of Humanistic Judaism in this book about modern secular Judaism? By Kindle Customerthis is a very thorough and fascinating book about modern secular Jews. Yet, sadly there is no mention or discussion of Rabbi Sherwin Wine. Very disappointing to those of us who knew Wine personally and belonged to his Birmingham Temple in suburban

Detroit, Michigan. 1 of 4 people found the following review helpful. A thought provoking book By Ernest Hammer This book traces the the history of secularism in Judaism through the ages. It presents the thoughts and writings of the Jewish philosophers leading up to the present day. 5 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Jewish Secularism from Antiquity to the Present; Reciprocity of Christian-Jewish Prejudices By Jan Peczkis The author cites the "non-Jewish Jew", Polish Jew Isaac Deutscher, and his heroes: Spinoza, Heine, Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Trotsky, and Freud. Like Deutscher, Biale sees these Jews as connected to the tradition they had rejected--a sort of alternative Jewish identity. (p. 1). To Biale, the descendant of Polish Jews, secularism does not necessarily mean atheism. Belief in God can be retained while stripping God of his Biblical personality and authority. (p. 15). According to Biale, Judaism emphasizes orthopraxy (correct practice) over orthodoxy (correct belief), and the Jewish concept of God, unlike its Christian counterpart, is not heavily endowed with dogma. This, according to the author, makes it easier to imagine a world without Him. (p. 15; see also p. 103). Maimonides and Spinoza are credited with anticipating the later rationalistic and allegorical view of the Bible, especially when it conflicted with science. Instead of abandoned as outdated and mythological, the Bible eventually became transformed into a Jewish cultural icon. Spinoza is reckoned a pantheist, although he seemed to believe that God, although in no sense like the God of the Bible, was something more than just a personification of the universe. (p. 43). Albert Einstein's view was similar, which made him neither a theist (in the traditional sense), nor a crude materialist. (p. 43). The author devotes much attention to Zionism, and its creation and reinforcement of a secular Jewish identity. Many Zionist personages and their philosophies are elaborated. On another subject, Joseph Hayim Brenner was a militantly secular Jew who lived in Palestine before being murdered by the Arabs in 1921. Unlike those who consider anti-Semitism necessarily irrational, Brenner did not. Biale comments: "Brenner goes so far as to express understanding for anti-Semites who accuse the Jews of using blood for ritual purposes... Brenner argues that the accusation is not the cause of anti-Semitism but its result. Hatred of the Jews is a response to their foreignness and to their negative qualities, particularly their economic behavior." (p. 160). Chaim Zhitlovsky (1865-1943) was a very interesting Russian Jew. The author identified him as "one of the leading ideologues of the secular Yiddishist movement." (p. 163). Zhitlovsky supported the premise that Christian-Jewish antagonisms went both ways. Biale thus characterizes Zhitlovsky: "Since Enlightenment universalism was the secular product of Western Christian culture, Jews must overcome their instinctive hatred of Christianity if they wish to join the modern world. The paradoxical path to Jewish secularization led through the Christian religion, not by conversion but by renouncing the Jewish religion's teaching of contempt. Yet, by reclaiming Jesus as one of their own, the Jews might argue that their culture was a key source for Western civilization." (p. 163). Unlike contemporary Judaism and the State of Israel, which deny Jews for Jesus and other Jesus-believing Jews as valid Jews, Zhitlovsky did not. His Sukkot big-tent concept of Judaism envisioned an inclusion of Orthodox Jews, atheist Jews, Spinoza-style pantheistic Jews, Islamic Jews, and Christian Jews. (p. 167, 192). The author focuses on eminent Jews, and spends little time on secularism amidst everyday Jews. However, he remarks, "That Jews throughout the world today are disproportionately more secular than their Gentile neighbors in all of the ways articulated in this book is one piece of evidence of the ongoing nature of this legacy." (p. 181). In addition: "The majority of Jews in the world today are, in some sense, secular. They either doubt the existence of God or consider the question superfluous." (p. 192). [Were he alive today, would Polish Cardinal August Hlond feel vindicated for his much-maligned 1936 "Jews are freethinkers" statement?] Biale agrees with those who suggest that the Holocaust has become a kind of secular religion among American Jews. (p. 189).

Not in the Heavens traces the rise of Jewish secularism through the visionary writers and thinkers who led its development. Spanning the rich history of Judaism from the Bible to today, David Biale shows how the secular tradition these visionaries created is a uniquely Jewish one, and how the emergence of Jewish secularism was not merely a response to modernity but arose from forces long at play within Judaism itself. Biale explores how ancient Hebrew books like Job, Song of Songs, and Esther downplay or even exclude God altogether, and how Spinoza, inspired by medieval Jewish philosophy, recast the biblical God in the role of nature and stripped the Torah of its revelatory status to instead read scripture as a historical and cultural text. Biale examines the influential Jewish thinkers who followed in Spinoza's secularizing footsteps, such as Salomon Maimon, Heinrich Heine, Sigmund Freud, and Albert Einstein. He tells the stories of those who also took their cues from medieval Jewish mysticism in their revolts against tradition, including Hayim Nahman Bialik, Gershom Scholem, and Franz Kafka. And he looks at Zionists like David Ben-Gurion and other secular political thinkers who recast Israel and the Bible in modern terms of race, nationalism, and the state. Not in the Heavens demonstrates how these many Jewish paths to secularism were dependent, in complex and paradoxical ways, on the very religious traditions they were rejecting, and examines the legacy and meaning of Jewish secularism today.

"Lucid and winsome."--John Wilson, Books Culture "There are not many contemporary Jewish scholars who could offer such succinct and at the same time penetrating analysis of such a variety of secular Jewish thinkers, writers, and artists. . . . David Biale's Not in the Heavens is a useful and fascinating account of the development of modern, secular

alternatives. In demonstrating the variety and depth of modern secular thought, Biale has no doubt advanced our appreciation of this formidable tradition. As an introduction to modern Jewish thought in general, and Jewish secularism in particular, his book is likely to be required reading for the foreseeable future."--Steven Frankel, H-Net s"While readers may have been exposed to many of the ideas presented here, they may not be aware of their origins. For that reason, the book is a significant contribution to Jewish scholarship in many disciplines, most notably history and philosophy. While the text is serious, it is not ponderous, and the author takes time to explain the concepts. It should be purchased by academic libraries. The book should also be of interest to serious lay readers, and is recommended for larger synagogue libraries. Includes notes and index."--Fred Isaac, AJL Newsletter"Biale covers a wide range of figures and the diverse approaches to secularism that stand behind modern modes of Jewish identification. This is a well-researched, cogently argued, and clearly presented volume."--Choice"In this stimulating and original book. . . . Biale's genealogical investigation uncovers a wealth of connections between ideas espoused by a varied group of Jewish scholars, thinkers, and artists."--Robert M. Seltzer, *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*From the Back Cover"Not in the Heavens offers a lucid and superbly informed overview of the major currents of secularization in modern Jewish thought. Its particular originality is in its persuasive demonstration of the roots of these trends in aspects of Jewish religious philosophy that go back to the medieval period and the Enlightenment."--Robert Alter, University of California, Berkeley"Although religious Jews have always anticipated spending 'next year in Jerusalem,' others have preferred to tarry, as it were, 'this year in Tel Aviv,' the symbolic capital of secular Jewry. This is their story, told by a master Jewish historian with erudition, sympathy, and full awareness of the ironies that tie both destinations--and the destinies of religious and secular Jews--inextricably together."--Martin Jay, University of California, Berkeley"A rich and engaging work on the tradition of secular Jewish thought. Weaving together historical narrative and textual analysis, theology and philosophy, scripture and interpretation, and political theory and cultural criticism, Biale offers a provocative rethinking of Judaism's relation to the secular. Not in the Heavens is the most exhaustive and sustained discussion of Jewish secularism that I have read."--Jerome E. Copulsky, Goucher College"This is an excellent book. Biale provides an entirely new synthesis of a largely untouched subject. No one has previously attempted to discuss secular thinking as a separate phenomenon in modern Jewish life. This book, while accessible and aimed at a general audience, is also a major contribution to Jewish studies."--David Sorkin, author of *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna*About the AuthorDavid Biale is the Emanuel Ringelblum Professor of Jewish History at the University of California, Davis. His books include *Blood and Belief: The Circulation of a Symbol between Jews and Christians* and *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America*.