

Collapse – How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive by Jared Diamond.  
Allen Lane 2005.

It has been said that the only lesson that can be learned from history is that no one ever learns any lessons from history. If this is indeed true, and Jared Diamond's latest book Collapse certainly supports the theory, then humanity is doomed.

Jared Diamond is that rare breed of polymath who is able to present the most complex of subjects in a way that is not only clear and comprehensible but highly engaging. Collapse shows him to be at the top of his form.

Collapse is divided into four parts: Modern Montana, Past Societies, Modern Societies and Practical Lessons. In the first he uses Montana as a microcosm of the story that he is going to tell, before moving to consider the collapse of past civilisations and societies – such as those on Easter Island, the Anasazi tribe of the south western United States, the Maya, and Norse Greenland. In Modern Societies he looks at Rwanda, Haiti and the Dominican Republic, China and Australia. In Practical Lessons he considers why some human societies make disastrous decisions, how big business and industry can harm or help, and finally the implications of it all for us today.

The historical material and the contemporary analyses are fascinating but it is the final section which I found the most gripping, challenging, and depressing; Diamond sets out clearly the ways in which we could avoid falling into the pitfalls that have eradicated previous societies, while at the same time giving little ground for optimism that human beings will ever be able to be far-sighted enough, and sufficiently self-sacrificing, to take them up.

In the end, however, he sets out his reasons for hope, and explains why he remains a cautious optimist. One finishes this superb book desperately wishing to emulate his attitude but finding it very hard to do so.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh