

Reckless Rites – Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence
by Elliott Horowitz. Princeton University Press 2006.

For many readers the subtitle of this book will leap at them from the cover and furrow their brows before they are aware of the response. Jewish violence? *Jewish* violence?? So conditioned are we by our pre-State of Israel history to see ourselves as passive victims, as the endurers of violence and hatred, that the idea that we may have exhibited the very traits we habitually associate with our enemies is likely to catapult us into the deepest denial.

Yet those Jews capable of rationally assessing themselves will readily, albeit, perhaps, reluctantly, accept that as human beings like everyone else it is unsurprising that we exhibit the negative as well as the positive traits of our human DNA.

Reckless Rites, by the American-Israeli historian Elliott Horowitz, is a beautifully researched, pithily written and carefully argued analysis of the festival of Purim, and particularly the way in which the occurrence of Purim in long-past history, as well as the much more recent past, has been a touch-paper and invitation to Jews to perpetrate violence against their enemies.

The book is essentially divided into two parts: the first an analysis of different themes in the book of Esther, most particularly the way the divinely ordained enmity against the Amalekites (epitomised in the Megillah by Haman and his sons) was redefined and re-applied in different times and countries. The second part, possibly the more disturbing of the two, considers especially one of the most aggressive and unpleasant examples of Jewish passive-aggression, the desecration of crosses and other Christian images, and the way Purim was used, quintessentially between the 5th and 7th centuries, as a legitimisation of Jewish violence against Christians. Shot through the book are images from medieval and modern megillot, and examples of the most despicable kind of modern Jewish aggression in Israel, underpinned by pseudo-religious belief, directed against Christians and Muslims.

Horowitz also considers local Purims, in such places as Crete, Narbonne, Granada and Verona and the possible relationship between Purim and European pre-Lent Carnival festivities, usually marked by unrestrained indulgence in food, drink and violence.

Reckless Rites is an excellent read, and for a book on such a serious subject not devoid of humour, but its most important purpose, apart from informing us of an aspect of our past, is to throw a very large bucket of cold water over the misconceptions and the wilful misreading of history in which we all too easily indulge. Comfortable it certainly isn't, but in these days of ever greater 'religious' extremism a necessary reminder, and a warning from history, of the depths to which we, too, can sink.

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