

Peter Temin. JEL 2013

Maristella Botticini and Zvi Eckstein, *The Chosen Few: How Education Shaped Jewish History, 70-1492*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.

Have you ever wondered why Jews are so prominent in the West? Accounting for only two percent of Americans, they are 20 percent of the richest and also of the richest under 40. They are prominent in politics and universities as well. If you know any Jewish history at all, you probably know that the Romans destroyed the Second Hebrew Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, and the Spanish expelled all Jews from Spain in 1492. How did all this bad news—over such a long time span—turn out so well for Jews today?

Maristella Botticini and Zvi Eckstein propose a simple answer to this question in their new interpretation of Jewish history between these two events. They argue that Jews emphasized the education of their children between these two tragedies, which gave Jews a comparative advantage in urban and financial activities. They back up this assertion with a simple economic model and prodigious historical research.

Botticini and Eckstein begin their narrative with a question. Jews were about ten percent of the population of the early Roman Empire, but they declined absolutely and proportionally so far in the six centuries between Jesus and Mohammad that they could well have been on the way to extinction. What had caused this calamity and how did Jews and Judaism manage to carry on?

Botticini and Eckstein preface their answer with a chapter refuting the idea that Jewish history is an account of things other people did to the Jews. They argue strenuously that the various hypotheses that Jews were forced into certain places and occupations do not fit the facts.

This by itself is a welcome change in Jewish history. But if this population collapse was not caused by others, what did the Jews do to themselves?

The first thing they did was revolt against Rome. Based on what we know now, it was a foolish idea for a small group of people in Roman Judea to think they could defeat the Roman Empire in its prime. But it may not have seemed so bad at the time. The rebellion lasted for four years, and might even have been longer except for conditions in Rome. The Jews revolted in 66 CE, and Vespasian was the general in charge of subduing the locals. He was however involved in the growing chaos at the top of the Roman Empire leading to the “Year of Four Emperors” in 69. He emerged victorious in this power struggle and sent his son Titus to finish the job of quelling the rebellion. Titus, needing a quick victory, abandoned the normal Roman practice of starving out a recalcitrant city and attacked Jerusalem head-on. Whether by design or accident, the Jewish temple in Jerusalem burned down in the resulting urban conflagration.

Having come so close to success, or so it may have seemed, the Jews revolted twice more against Rome in 117 and 135. They were then banished from Jerusalem, which was renamed Aelia Capitolina and developed as a Roman colony. Botticini and Eckstein attribute almost half the decline in the Jewish population after the destruction of the temple to the casualties in these revolts. The change was most dramatic in the land of Israel, followed by a massive decline of the large Jewish population in Egypt.

The second thing the Jews did was to institute compulsory education for their children. Just before the first Jewish revolt, the high priest in Jerusalem, Joshua ben Gamla, issued a religious ordinance requiring Jewish fathers to send their sons to school at age six or seven. To

understand how education leads to population decline, we need to examine the economic model that underlies the historical narrative in this book.

Botticini and Eckstein present their model in Chapters 4 and 6 with verbal and algebraic versions. They might have used a decision tree to make their argument more simply. Think of three decisions. The first decision is to have education or not. This is decided by parents, and we learn from the history in this book that most Jews educated their children. The second decision is to remain Jewish or not. Botticini and Eckstein discuss this decision in terms of conversion, but it makes the decision tree clearer to look at the obverse. The third decision is to prosper by seeking an urban job. If a Jew was educated, then he most likely remained Jewish and, if he lived under the Moslem caliphates, prospered by becoming urban and engaging in urban pursuits. Remaining a Jew and being prosperous, he educated his sons, starting the decision tree over again.

If a Jew was not educated, then he most likely would not remain Jewish as he would be subject to disparagement for being uneducated, that is, *am ha'aretz*, in the term of the time. Without literacy, he would not be able to succeed in urban pursuits, and he had little incentive to move to town. Before the Muslim conquest, this was a prominent decision path. Education offered few benefits in an agricultural economy; only when there was the possibility of prospering economically from education was the inducement enough to induce most Jews to educate their children. Those who converted to other religions—or simply ignored religion—vanish from Jewish history. This attrition, Botticini and Eckstein argue, was the major reason for the Jewish population collapse between the first and seventh century.

Jews were saved from total extinction by Muhammad and the Muslim caliphates that followed. They conquered the Mediterranean region and established a flourishing urban culture. Education was a great advantage in that setting, and Jewish educational policy turned from a barrier to the maintenance of Jews into an advantage for the community. Jews left their farms and moved to cities all around the Mediterranean. Educated Jews not only had the benefits of a general education, they also had a common language and writing. That gave them an advantage in trading that provided enough income to reverse the trend of the Jewish population. Benjamin of Tudela traveled from his home in Spain to Baghdad and Cairo in the twelfth century, stopping at and recording Jewish communities along the way. He found many Jewish communities in the areas formerly ruled by Rome with prospering Jewish communities.

Botticini and Eckstein maintain their insistence that Jews were the masters, not the victims of their fates as they describe this expansion: “Like the migrations of the Jews within the Muslim caliphates during the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries, the [spread of the] Jewish Diaspora to and within Europe from 850 to 1250 was mainly a voluntary process set in motion by highly literate and skilled individuals in search of business opportunities (p. 194).” Jews changed decisively and permanently from rural farmers to urban traders and craftsmen in this period.

Being urban, Jews made another occupational transition after 1000. While still involved with many urban activities, Jews increasingly specialized in money lending during the first half of the second millennium. Botticini and Eckstein argue that they had a comparative advantage in money lending because they were literate, had liquid capital (since they were no longer farmers), and strong ties among Jews spread over Medieval Europe. Botticini and Eckstein argue forcefully that this was a voluntary occupational choice—not the result of anti-Jewish restrictions

or regulations—and provide ample detail of Jewish lending in Italy, about which Botticini wrote earlier.

This prosperity led to a golden age of Jewish thought in and around the twelfth century. Solomon ben Isaac, known as Rashi, was a great scholar in what is now southern Germany who lived and wrote in the late eleventh century. His commentaries on the Talmud—the principal subject of Jewish education in the previous period of decline—are still studied today. Moses ben Maimon, known as Maimonides, was an even greater scholar who lived and wrote a century later in Cairo. He wrote a major commentary on the Mishnah (a basic part of the Talmud) and a *Guide for the Perplexed* which attempted to square Judaism with the findings of Aristotelian science. As the saying goes, from Moses to Moses, there was no one like Moses.

The Jewish golden age was brought to an end by another exogenous event: the Mongol invasion of the thirteenth century. The Mongols conquered Persia and Mesopotamia and threatened Europe. They destroyed the urban culture that had flourished under the Muslim caliphates, and they taxed residents heavily. Conditions for Jews changed dramatically, and the incentives to educate your sons and remain Jewish diminished, as it had done in the centuries after the destruction of the Temple. Jewish population shrank in Persia and Mesopotamia under the Mongols as it had in the late Roman Empire, and Europe became the center of Jewish population and culture.

Two questions remain at the end of this fascinating book. First, what happened after 1492? After all, that is long enough ago that Columbus was just discovering America for the Europeans. Did Jewish education carry Jews for the next half-millennium, through the Industrial Revolution, the Holocaust and the State of Israel? Botticini and Eckstein suggest a positive

answer in their final chapter and say that will be the topic of their next book. I look forward to reading it.

The second question emerges from the beginning of this book. Botticini and Eckstein say that Jews represented about ten percent of the population of the early Roman Empire, spread throughout the Mediterranean area as they were again a millennium later. This is before the Jewish law on educating children on which Botticini and Eckstein base their model and narrative. It also is before the growth of the other monotheistic religions, Christianity and Islam. The model implies that Jews must have increased and spread out from conversions at this time from the collection of religions we call paganism to whatever Judaism was at the time. We know even less about this period than about the subsequent periods Botticini and Eckstein are illuminating for us. Perhaps they or someone else will be stimulated to write a book on this topic as well.