



Ruth Wisse on
GEORGE ELIOT'S
DANIEL DERONDA

A STUDY GUIDE

Sponsored by The Tikvah Fund

קרן תקווה
TIKVAH

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INTRODUCTION

This reading guide is designed to enhance Ruth Wisse's lecture series on George Eliot's great novel, *Daniel Deronda*. The series was originally recorded in the summer of 2016 at an educational program for American undergraduates. The lectures were followed by smaller discussion groups guided by senior instructors with the kinds of questions that are offered here. Although the conditions of the original program can obviously not be replicated, this reading guide suggests how people may prolong their enjoyment of the book on their own, in pairs or in groups. *Deronda* is among other things a novel of ideas by an exceptionally thoughtful and learned author who hoped not only to entertain—by all means to entertain!—but also to inspire and instruct and broaden our vision of life. Discussion and analysis can help that happen.

Reception of this novel varied with its readers. Jews responded with immediate enthusiasm, and Jewish readers continue to voice their gratitude for what we call a “novel of Jewish nationalism.” The distinguished historian Gertrude Himmelfarb has marveled that “the most remarkable English novel about Jews, taking Judaism seriously as a faith and anticipating the idea of a Jewish state, should have been written by a non-Jew – a Victorian woman, moreover, who was generally regarded by her contemporaries, as well as by some later critics, as the greatest English novelist of her time.” The novel's central character, Himmelfarb goes on to say, was inspired to ascend to the land of Israel for positive reasons, moved by a “proud and unique heritage” rather than by the pogroms of the Continent or the social anti-Semitism of Britain. Today's readers who take the State of Israel for granted may be inspired by how Eliot, two decades before Theodor Herzl founded the Zionist movement, appreciated the need for it and showed how it could come about.

There is simply no better book to begin thinking through the imperatives for a national Jewish home than *Daniel Deronda*. But it would be a mistake to imply that the book is simply an argument for a Jewish state in the form of a novel. It is at least as much about the nature of England and the outlook for its future. Some English readers subordinated the importance of the *Deronda* sections of the novel to the story of English-born Gwendolen Harleth and the issues surrounding her maturation. In fact, Eliot interwove the two lines of plot to demonstrate the interrelated fate of the Jews and the English as it affected the national prospects of both peoples. She believed that English attitudes toward the Jews reflected and determined the kind of nation England was to be.

From her personal experience as a lapsed Christian George Eliot recognized that modern forces were destabilizing society without necessarily showing citizens how to manage the transformation. If a superior novel can serve as guide to the perplexed, here we have a whole education in a single volume, exploring strengths and vulnerabilities of English liberalism, blessings and burdens of love, marriage, and family life, influences of memory and identity, manners and mores of a decaying aristocratic culture, and spiritual qualities needed for cultural renewal. It is a rare pleasure to be in the hands of an author with so much appreciation for the variety of human experience and such a gift for bringing it together in a single book.

No one is better suited to guide our study than Professor Ruth Wisse. By the time she retired from Harvard University in 2014, Professor Wisse had been teaching literature to university students for decades, and as she demonstrates in the lectures that this study guide is designed to accompany, the novel of ideas is a powerful way to explore the abiding truths of the human condition. *Daniel Deronda* promises to stimulate the moral imagination.

ABOUT RUTH WISSE

Ruth Wisse recently retired from her position as Martin Peretz Professor of Yiddish Literature and Professor of Comparative Literature at Harvard, and is currently the Distinguished Senior Fellow at the Tikvah Fund.

Her books on literary subjects include an edition of Jacob Glatstein's two-volume fictional memoir, *The Glatstein Chronicles*, *The Modern Jewish Canon: A Journey through Literature and Culture*, and *A Little Love in Big Manhattan*. She is also the author of two political studies, *If I Am Not for Myself: The Liberal Betrayal of the Jews and Jews and Power*. Her most recent book, *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor*, a volume in the Tikvah Fund's Library of Jewish Ideas, was recently published by Princeton University Press.



ABOUT GEORGE ELIOT & *DANIEL DERONDA*

George Eliot, born Mary Anne Evans in Warwickshire England in 1819, adopted her pen name when she began writing fiction at age 37. She had by then proved herself an independent thinker, a reliable reviewer and editor, translator of German scholarly texts, and bold in her private life—she lived as the unmarried wife of George Henry Lewes, who could not obtain a divorce. Her adopted male pseudonym did not long conceal her identity as the female author of popular novels including *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866), and *Middlemarch* (1871–72); nor did what some considered her scandalous private life prevent her from becoming an authority for readers who trusted the moral compass of her fiction. Like most novels of the time, hers were published serially so that readers had to wait for the outcome as people do in their own lives, and Eliot rarely left them in doubt as to which path of behavior was ultimately the more judicious. She unpacked complexities in her characters, revealed the uncertainty of events, and voiced the full range of philosophic doubts even as she conveyed the need for solid personal and civic virtues. In a time of waning religious faith, hers included, she was considered a beacon of wisdom.

George Eliot's writings—which also include poetry, drama, and essays—trace her evolution from rebellious freethinker to freethinking conservative. Perhaps because Queen Victoria, her contemporary, was an early admirer, Eliot's biographer Kathryn Hughes calls her the “last Victorian”:

[She]...understood her culture's fragility, as well as its enduring strengths. Nonetheless, she believed in the Victorian project, that it was possible for mankind to move forward toward a place or time that was in some way better. This would only happen by a slow process of development during which men and women embraced their doubts, accepted that there would be loss as well as gain, and took their enlarged vision and diminished expectations back into the everyday struggle.

The main characters of Eliot's fiction develop in this painstaking way, and though not always to a traditional happy ending, they invite us to take her guidance back into our own everyday struggles.

Daniel Deronda (1876) was Eliot's last and most ambitious novel. Daniel is a young man of uncertain birth who is being raised as an English gentleman, but feels he needs to discover his heritage before he can determine the course of his life. His female counterpart (some thought the novel should have been named for her) is Gwendolen Harleth, a splendidly endowed but fatherless young woman of suddenly reduced circumstances. When they meet, both of these exceptional individuals are trying to situate themselves and to find their happiness in an English society that is still conspicuously stratified according to class, nationality, and family lineage but is also gradually yielding to democratic impulses. The two principals are torn in different ways between ambition and conscience, personal desire and family or social responsibility, reflecting some of alternatives brought on by modern ideas and conditions.

Writing to Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose best-selling *Uncle Tom's Cabin* aroused sympathy and understand for the plight of black slaves in the American South, Eliot explained why she had done

something similar by making Daniel a Jew:

There is nothing I should care more to do, if it were possible, than to rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow-men who most differ from them in customs and beliefs. But towards the Hebrews we western people who have been reared in Christianity, have a peculiar debt...

What might have been a simple love story expands into the dramatic study of two peoples, the Jews and the English, who are locked in a consequential relationship. Whereas the American author needed to prove the common humanity of those being held as slaves, Eliot had the intellectually harder task of imagining how people could maintain their “separation with communication.” Just as Jews were claiming their equal rights as a people, so, too, women and men were testing new freedoms against the needs of family, society, and nation. Their individual aspirations were sometimes aligned and often at variance, in the novel and in historical actuality.

The term *omniscient narrator* usually refers to the voice that seems to speak for the author with complete knowledge of everything that happens in the tale. Eliot’s omniscience goes beyond this to remind us (duly recognizing the difference) of what Rabbi Ben Bag-Bag said about Torah study: “Turn it and turn it, for everything is in it.” She takes us into every corner of society. This novel is richly peopled by men, women, and even children, none of whom can really be called minor; it moves freely between England and the continent, drawing room and pawnshop, archery contest and art studio. Through carefully chosen epigraphs at the head of each chapter, it brings great works of the past to bear on the unfolding present. This is the only one of Eliot’s novels that is situated close to her lifetime, and it still pulsates with a sense of expectancy because, though women have gained civic rights and the state of Israel now flourishes, the tensions in this story remain in some sense unresolved.

The summaries, quotations, and questions below are based on Professor Wisse’s recorded lectures, but readers are invited to provide their own comments, earmark the passages they find memorable, and raise their own questions. After this, her fifth in-depth reading of the novel, Professor Wisse finds it inexhaustible. When next she reads it again, she will no doubt find additional themes to highlight and discuss.

EPISODE 01:

THE THEME OF BEAUTY AND GOODNESS

Meet two extraordinary women: George Eliot, the author of *Daniel Deronda*, and her character Gwendolen Harleth. In this first episode, Professor Wisse calls our attention to the main aesthetic and moral themes that will run through the entire novel. Though the book concerns England, it opens abroad in Germany, so that the characters are not in their usual orbit. This immediately draws attention to the mobility of their society and disquiet of their lives.

PASSAGES:

“Was she beautiful or not beautiful? and what was the secret of form or expression which gave the dynamic quality to her glance? Was the good or the evil genius dominant in those beams? Probably the evil; else why was the effect that of unrest rather than of undisturbed charm? Why was the wish to look again felt as coercion and not as a longing in which the whole being consents?”

CHAPTER 1

“Those who were taking their pleasure at a higher strength, and were absorbed in play, showed very distant varieties of European type: Livonian and Spanish, Graeco-Italian and miscellaneous German, English aristocratic and English plebeian. Here certainly was a striking admission of human equality.”

CHAPTER 1

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Daniel Deronda* opens with the scene at a gambling table. What do we learn about the cosmopolitan society here presented? Is it an advantage for people of different ages and backgrounds to be associating so freely? How much do we learn about these people who are likewise trying to find out about one another?
2. A number of intellectual traditions associate beauty and goodness, but George Eliot begins by contrasting the two. How, in her view, does beauty relate to goodness? Do we accept the judgment of the man who takes a critical view of the lovely gambler, or find him a prig?
3. The question of nationalism is introduced early in this novel. What are the positive aspects of nationalism? Its liabilities? What is the connection between nationalism and pluralism; in other words, is it possible for a person to be a nationalist and also supportive of other nationalisms? Is there room for minorities in a society organized or guided by nationalism? This last question is one you may want to trace throughout.
4. “Some Enchanted Evening,” the hit song from the 1949 Rodgers & Hammerstein musical *South Pacific*, registers the instantaneous attraction of two people from dissimilar backgrounds “across a crowded room.” How would you describe the magnetism in the opening chapters of this novel?
5. What sense do you get of the narrator of this book? How does she gain your trust, stir your interest, direct your attention, or guide your feelings? Do such things constitute a “moral imagination?”

NOTES

EPISODE 02:

THE CHARACTER AND EDUCATION OF GWENDOLEN HARLETH

Who is this alluring, modern woman, Gwendolen Harleth? Her virtues and shortcomings are on display throughout *Daniel Deronda*, and her trials suggest what is happening in the country that is the novel's setting. Professor Wisse outlines the education that Gwendolen received from her mother and her society, and asks whether it has equipped her to succeed in love and marriage, in providing for her wellbeing, or in confronting the inescapable moral choices that all young people must face as they mature into adult men and women.

PASSAGES:

There is very little dramatic Stoff [material] to be picked up by watching or listening. The saddest thing to be witnessed is the play of a young lady, who is only twenty-six years old, and is completely in the grasp of this mean, money-making demon. It made me cry to see her young fresh face among the hags and brutally stupid men around her.

LETTER FROM GEORGE ELIOT TO JOHN BLACKWOOD, OCTOBER 4, 1872

“Why did you marry again, mamma? It would have been nicer if you had not.” Mrs. Davilow colored deeply, a slight convulsive movement passed over her face, and straightway shutting up the memorials she said, with a violence quite unusual in her—“You have no feeling, child!”

Gwendolen, who was fond of her mamma, felt hurt and ashamed, and had never since dared to ask a question about her father.

BOOK 1 CHAPTER 3

Pity that Offendene was not the home of Miss Harleth's childhood, or endeared to her by family memories! A human life, I think, should be well rooted in some spot of a native land, where it may get the love of tender kinship for the face of earth, for the labors men go forth to, for the sounds and accents that haunt it, for whatever will give that early home a familiar unmistakable difference amid the future widening of knowledge: a spot where the definiteness of early memories may be inwrought with affection, and—kindly acquaintance with all neighbors, even to the dogs and donkeys, may spread not by sentimental effort and reflection, but as a sweet habit of the blood. At five years old, mortals are not prepared to be citizens of the world, to be stimulated by abstract nouns, to soar above preference into impartiality; and that prejudice in favor of milk with which we blindly begin, is a type of the way body and soul must get nourished at least for a time. The best introduction to astronomy is to think of the nightly heavens as a little lot of stars belonging to one's own homestead.

But this blessed persistence in which affection can take root had been wanting in Gwendolen's life.

BOOK 1 CHAPTER 3

She had a world-aversion upon her, and saw no reason all through her life why she should wish to live. No religious view of trouble helped her: her troubles had in her opinion all been caused by other people's disagreeable or wicked conduct; and there was really nothing pleasant to be counted on in the world: that was her feeling; everything else she had heard said about trouble was mere phrase-making not attractive enough for her to have caught it up and repeated it. As to the sweetness of labor and fulfilled claims; the interest of inward and outward activity; the impersonal delights of life as a perpetual discovery; the dues of courage, fortitude, industry, which it is mere baseness not to pay toward the common burden; the supreme worth of the teacher's vocation;—these, even if they had been eloquently preached to her, could have been no more than faintly apprehended doctrines: the fact which wrought upon her was her invariable observation that for a lady to become a governess—to “take a situation”—was to descend in life and to be treated at best with a compassionate patronage.

BOOK 3 CHAPTER 24

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways is Gwendolen a “spoiled child,” as George Eliot titles Book I of the novel, and in what ways is she “the new woman,” as Professor Wisse describes?
2. What are the consequences of Gwendolen’s lack of deep roots in a place, in a community, in her wider family? Does Gwendolen’s focus on her own freedom contribute to or undermine her happiness?
3. What is the relation between Gwendolen’s standing in society and the education she receives? Would you ascribe the sources of her behavior and ideas to her character, upbringing, education, sex, to the way she is formed by society, or to something else?
4. How would you describe Gwendolen’s relationship to her mother? Can aspects of her relationship with her mother shed light on how she relates to other figures in the novel?
5. Why does Gwendolen marry Grandcourt, and what does that decision teach us about her character and outlook? How would you weigh her impulses of selfishness and magnanimity, of self-awareness and self-delusion, independence and social conformism at this point in the novel?

NOTES

EPISODE 03:

“ALIEN INVADERS”: JEWISH FIGURES IN DERONDA’S BRITAIN

Daniel Deronda introduces the Jewish characters Herr Klesmer and Mirah Lapidoth in ways that reflect the dilemmas of modern Jewry. Some in the novel regard Judaism as a social disadvantage to overcome; others see it as a precious inheritance that endows its carriers with inner strength and moral conviction. The same character may experience each of these feelings at different times. The Jews also provoke ambivalence in the English society they enter. One learns about the people in the novel from their reactions to the “foreigners” in their midst.

PASSAGES:

Gwendolen’s dominant regret was that after all she had only nine louis to add to the four in her purse: these Jew dealers were so unscrupulous in taking advantage of Christians unfortunate at play!

BOOK 1 CHAPTER 2

“No man has too much talent to be a musician. Most men have too little. A creative artist is no more a mere musician than a great statesman is a mere politician. We are not ingenious puppets, sir, who live in a box and look out on the world only when it is gaping for amusement. We help to rule the nations and make the age as much as any other public men. We count ourselves on level benches with legislators. And a man who speaks effectively through music is compelled to something more difficult than parliamentary eloquence.”

BOOK 3 CHAPTER 22

His English had little foreignness except its fluency; and his alarming cleverness was made less formidable just then by a certain softening air of silliness which will sometimes befall even Genius in the desire of being agreeable to Beauty.

BOOK 1 CHAPTER 5

“Oh, please not to say that,” said Mirah, the tears gathering. “It is the first unkind thing you ever said. I will not begin that. I will never separate myself from my mother’s people. I was forced to fly from my father; but if he came back in age and weakness and want, and needed me, should I say, ‘This is not my father’? If he had shame, I must share it. It was he who was given to me for my father, and not another. And so it is with my people. I will always be a Jewess. I will love Christians when they are good, like you. But I will always cling to my people. I will always worship with them.”

BOOK 4 CHAPTER 32

. . . [S]he seemed to Deronda a personification of that spirit which impelled men after a long inheritance of professed Catholicism to leave wealth and high place and risk their lives in flight, that they might join their own people and say, “I am a Jew.”

BOOK 4 CHAPTER 32

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the difference between a Jew like Klesmer, who makes his impact through excellence, and a Jew like Mirah, who aspires to something different? Do you agree that they are, as Professor Wisse puts it, “polar opposites”?
2. Both Klesmer and Deronda appreciate Gwendolen’s beauty, but both are troubled by Gwendolen –Klesmer because of her lack of talent, Deronda by her deficient sympathies. Might these two outlooks be related, as two aspects of a Jewish spirit that George Eliot is portraying? Are others similarly affected by her beauty?
3. How does Klesmer’s focus on spiritual and artistic excellence relate to the aristocratic culture of his benefactors? Do you see him as admirable or flawed? In what ways and to what degree?
4. Why does George Eliot make such an effort to emphasize Mirah’s vulnerability, her frailty, her small stature, her need to be cared for? How do these features relate to her strengths?
5. Are we to learn larger lessons about Judaism and England, or liberalism generally, by comparing Mirah and Gwendolen’s relative interest in the past, their inheritance, and their surroundings?
6. What does the relationship between Gwendolen and Daniel have to show about British, American, and Christian support for Zionism?

NOTES

EPISODE 04:

THE THEME OF EVIL

Early in the novel Gwendolen is badly frightened by a specter of death, but she does not recognize evil when it enters the novel through the figure of Henleigh Mallinger Grandcourt. He is not the novel's only villain. By attending to the manipulative malice of Grandcourt, the paternal neglect and petty theft of Mirah's father, and indeed, the rising spirit of anti-Semitism, Professor Wisse focuses on moments of cruelty, power, and exploitation in the novel, and in so doing, gives us a tour of the moral landscape of *Daniel Deronda*.

PASSAGES:

[I]n the end of the following June, a rumor was spread in the neighborhood which to many persons was matter of exciting interest. It had no reference to the results of the American [civil] war, but it was one which touched all classes within a certain circuit round Wanchester: the corn-factors, the brewers, the horse-dealers, and saddlers, all held it a laudable thing, and one which was to be rejoiced in on abstract grounds, as showing the value of an aristocracy in a free country like England; the blacksmith in the hamlet of Diplow felt that a good time had come round; the wives of laboring men hoped their nimble boys of ten or twelve would be taken into employ by the gentlemen in livery; and the farmers about Diplow admitted, with a tincture of bitterness and reserve, that a man might now again perhaps have an easier market or exchange for a rick of old hay or a wagon-load of straw. If such were the hopes of low persons not in society, it may be easily inferred that their betters had better reasons for satisfaction, probably connected with the pleasures of life rather than its business. Marriage, however, must be considered as coming under both heads; and just as when a visit of majesty is announced, the dream of knighthood or a baronetcy is to be found under various municipal nightcaps, so the news in question raised a floating indeterminate vision of marriage in several well-bred imaginations.

BOOK 1 CHAPTER 9

He knew the force of his own words. If this white-handed man with the perpendicular profile had been sent to govern a difficult colony, he might have won reputation among his contemporaries. He had certainly ability, would have understood that it was safer to exterminate than to cajole superseded proprietors, and would not have flinched from making things safe in that way.

BOOK 6 CHAPTER 48

“The Jews,” it is felt, have a dangerous tendency to get the uppermost places not only in commerce but in political life. Their monetary hold on governments is tending to perpetuate in leading Jews a spirit of universal alienism (euphemistically called cosmopolitanism), even where the West has given them a full share in civil and political rights. A people with oriental sunlight in their blood, yet capable of being everywhere acclimatized, they have a force and toughness which enables them to carry off the best prizes; and their wealth is likely to put half the seats in Parliament at their disposal.

GEORGE ELIOT, “THE MODERN HEP! HEP! HEP!”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Evil appears in subtle ways in *Daniel Deronda*, in small actions with great consequences. Is evil of this kind less or more dangerous than overt, dramatic displays of evil, like those that occur in crimes or on the field of battle?
2. How does evil figure in Gwendolen's story? In Mirah's? In Deronda's? If villainy is not clearly identified, as it is in melodrama, are we justified in calling it evil?
3. What distinguishes the anti-Jewish prejudices found in nineteenth-century British society from the developing "anti-Semitism" in Germany at the time and later?
4. What do we learn about Grandcourt's character from the way he treats his dogs? Mr. Lush? Mrs. Glasher? Is his character meant to represent the British aristocracy of his time?
5. We see different manifestations of and motivations for evil in the book. How do they differ and to what are they attributable? How do they differ from lesser human failings like snobbery, indifference, or selfishness?

NOTES

EPISODE 05:

THE CHARACTER AND EDUCATION OF DANIEL DERONDA

Brought up as an English gentleman with the paths of scholarship and government open before him, by the end of the novel Daniel Deronda chooses to embrace Judaism and to dedicate himself to Jewish national renewal. Professor Wisse analyzes the emerging qualities of his character, Mordecai's role in calling him to a grand national mission, and the way in which the overall themes of the novel are expressed in Daniel's British and Jewish identities.

PASSAGES:

He found some of the fault in his birth and the way he had been brought up, which had laid no special demands on him and had given him no fixed relationship except one of a doubtful kind; but he did not attempt to hide from himself that he had fallen into a meditative numbness, and was gliding farther and farther from that life of practically energetic sentiment which he would have proclaimed (if he had been inclined to proclaim anything) to be the best of all life, and for himself the only way worth living.

BOOK 4 CHAPTER 32

“It is a besotting kind of taste, likely to turn into a disease. And, besides, there is something revolting to me in raking a heap of money together, and internally chuckling over it, when others are feeling the loss of it. I should even call it base, if it were more than an exceptional lapse. There are enough inevitable turns of fortune which force us to see that our gain is another's loss:—that is one of the ugly aspects of life. One would like to reduce it as much as one could, not get amusement out of exaggerating it.”

BOOK 4 CHAPTER 29

This state of feeling was kept up by the mental balance in Deronda, who was moved by an affectionateness such as we are apt to call feminine, disposing him to yield in ordinary details, while he had a certain inflexibility of judgment, and independence of opinion, held to be rightfully masculine.

BOOK 4 CHAPTER 28

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Daniel's virtues include his desire to serve others, and his sense of duty and responsibility. He says that he harbors a desire to lead in the tradition of Pericles and George Washington. Does he have failings as well, and if so, what are they?
2. What do you make of Daniel's identification as an "Englishman"? How does Jewishness relate to Englishness?
3. How does Daniel's behavior contrast with that of Grandcourt? With that of Mordecai?
4. The courtship of Gwendolen and Grandcourt, on the one hand, and the courtship of Mirah and Daniel on the other, is a study in contrast. Other marriages are portrayed in the novel as well. Does the novel offer insight into which qualities are likelier to make for a successful union—and for family life beyond that union?
5. How much of Daniel's devotion to Jewish nationalism is the result of his encounter with Mordecai, and how much arises out of his character—his desire to care for something, to serve something, to lead?

NOTES

EPISODE 06:

JEWISH NATIONALISM

Decades before Theodor Herzl wrote *The Jewish State*, George Eliot saw the necessity for the Jewish people to recover their national independence in their ancestral homeland. *Daniel Deronda* interweaves Jewish historical consciousness, Jewish political thought, and the socio-political conditions of Europe to point its hero in that direction.

PASSAGES:

But instead of the ordinary tradesman, he saw, on the dark background of books in the long narrow shop, a figure that was somewhat startling in its unusualness. A man in threadbare clothing, whose age was difficult to guess—from the dead yellowish flatness of the flesh, something like an old ivory carving—was seated on a stool against some bookshelves that projected beyond the short counter, doing nothing more remarkable than reading yesterday's *Times*; but when he let the paper rest on his lap and looked at the incoming customer, the thought glanced through Deronda that precisely such a physiognomy as that might possibly have been seen in a prophet of the Exile, or in some New Hebrew poet of the mediæval time. It was a fine typical Jewish face, wrought into intensity of expression apparently by a strenuous eager experience in which all the satisfaction had been indirect and far off, and perhaps by some bodily suffering also, which involved that absence of ease in the present. The features were clear-cut, not large; the brow not high but broad, and fully defined by the crisp black hair. It might never have been a particularly handsome face, but it must always have been forcible; and now with its dark, far-off gaze, and yellow pallor in relief on the gloom of the backward shop, one might have imagined one's self coming upon it in some past prison of the Inquisition, which a mob had suddenly burst upon; while the look fixed on an incidental customer seemed eager and questioning enough to have been turned on one who might have been a messenger either of delivery or of death. The figure was probably familiar and unexciting enough to the inhabitants of this street; but to Deronda's mind it brought so strange a blending of the unwonted with the common, that there was a perceptible interval of mutual observation before he asked his question; "What is the price of this book?"

BOOK 4 CHAPTER 33

Yet the presence of those other familiar men promoted expression, for they embodied the indifference which gave a resistant energy to his speech.

BOOK 6 CHAPTER 42

“I say that the effect of our separateness will not be completed and have its highest transformation unless our race takes on again the character of a nationality. That is the fulfillment of the religious trust that molded them into a people, whose life has made half the inspiration of the world.”

BOOK 6 CHAPTER 42

“Behold our people still! Their skirts spread afar; they are torn and soiled and trodden on; but there is a jeweled breastplate. Let the wealthy men, the monarchs of commerce, the learned in all knowledge, the skillful in all arts, the speakers, the political counselors, who carry in their veins the Hebrew blood which has maintained its vigor in all climates, and the pliancy of the Hebrew genius for which difficulty means new device—let them say, ‘we will lift up a standard, we will unite in a labor hard but glorious like that of Moses and Ezra, a labor which shall be a worthy fruit of the long anguish whereby our fathers maintained their separateness, refusing the ease of falsehood.’ . . . Then our race shall have an organic center, a heart and brain to watch and guide and execute; the outraged Jew shall have a defense in the court of nations, as the outraged Englishman of America. And the world will gain as Israel gains. For there will be a community in the van of the East which carries the culture and the sympathies of every great nation in its bosom: there will be a land set for a halting-place of enmities, a neutral ground for the East as Belgium is for the West. Difficulties? I know there are difficulties. But let the spirit of sublime achievement move in the great among our people, and the work will begin.”

BOOK 6 CHAPTER 42

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is your first impression of the Cohen family's shop, of Mordecai their boarder, and of Daniel's encounter with the Jewish community? What is Daniel's first impression of them? How much do these impressions change over the course of the novel?
2. How does the portrayal of the Jewish family differ from the depiction of other family relations in the novel?
3. Does the novel offer any insight into the prospects of the Jews in the English-speaking world? Do they seem promising, benign, or dangerous? Do the various strata of English society—e.g. the Mallingers and Meyricks—differ in this regard?
4. Commenting on the apparent division between the Deronda and Harleth sections of the book, George Eliot remarked that everything in the book is related to everything else. Consider the attempted and actual drownings, the returned pawned necklace and the returned diamond necklace. How do these connect? And how do the individual romantic plots relate to the book's national themes?
5. What is the function of the scene at The Philosophers Club that stands alone, like "a play within a play"? Why are so many of the figures who debate with Mordecai members themselves of national minorities in Britain?

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EPISODE 07:

HOW FICTION DIFFERS FROM PHILOSOPHY

George Eliot, who could write powerful essays, regularly chose to present social and political ideas in fictional form. The contrapuntal voice of Princess Leonora Halm-Eberstein demonstrates how arguments and counterarguments come to life in the characters of the novel, creating a mode of storytelling that speaks to readers' emotions and reason. In asking how the content of *Daniel Deronda* relates to its form, Professor Wisse illustrates the unique power of fiction to engage the imaginative sympathies of the reader.

PASSAGES:

The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it.

WILLIAM BLAKE, "THE MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL"

"Your grandfather . . . never comprehended me, or if he did, he only thought of fettering me into obedience. I was to be what he called 'the Jewish woman' under pain of his curse. I was to feel everything I did not feel, and believe everything I did not believe. I was to feel awe for the bit of parchment in the *mezuzah* over the door; to dread lest a bit of butter should touch a bit of meat; to think it beautiful that men should bind the *tephillin* on them, and women not—to adore the wisdom of such laws, however silly they might seem to me. I was to love the long prayers in the ugly synagogue, and the howling, and the gabbling, and the dreadful fasts, and the tiresome feasts, and my father's endless discoursing about our people, which was a thunder without meaning in my ears. I was to care forever about what Israel had been; and I did not care at all. I cared for the wide world, and all that I could represent in it. I hated living under the shadow of my father's strictness. Teaching, teaching for everlasting—'this you must be,' 'that you must not be'—pressed on me like a frame that got tighter and tighter as I grew. I wanted to live a large life, with freedom to do what every one else did, and be carried along in a great current, not obliged to care. Ah!"—here her tone changed to one of a more bitter incisiveness—"you are glad to have been born a Jew. You say so. That is because you have not been brought up as a Jew. That separateness seems sweet to you because I saved you from it."

BOOK 7 CHAPTER 51

“Ye’re all agreed that societies change—not always and everywhere—but on the whole and in the long run. Now, with all deference, I would beg t’ observe that we have got to examine the nature of changes before we have a warrant to call them progress, which word is supposed to include a bettering, though I apprehend it to be ill-chosen for that purpose, since mere motion onward may carry us to a bog or a precipice. And the questions I would put are three: Is all change in the direction of progress? If not, how shall we discern which change is progress and which not? And thirdly, how far and in what way can we act upon the course of change so as to promote it where it is beneficial, and divert it where it is injurious?”

BOOK 6 CHAPTER 42

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This book introduces many strong female characters of different backgrounds, temperaments, talents, and ruling passions. The most obvious contrast has been between Gwendolen and Mirah. How do they compare in their relation to family and roots? Here we encounter Princess Leonora Halm-Eberstein, who further complicates the images of feminism and womanhood. In a book about nationalism, do the portrayals of women encourage the use of terms like motherland and mother tongue?
2. Consider the other female characters in the book in their roles as daughters, sisters, mothers and grandmothers, lovers, wage earners, and entertainers. Do you find some unifying vision of an ideal balance among the competing trends affecting modern women. Or are the tensions left unresolved?
3. As we learn of Princess Leonora Halm-Eberstein's rejection of her upbringing, we learn of Daniel's embrace of it. Is Princess Leonora Halm-Eberstein's rejection of Jewishness more substantive than Mordecai's Jewish enthusiasm? As we consider the characters and hear their conversations, what do we think matters most in determining the nature and destiny of the Jewish people? Of any nation?
4. Is it significant that Princess Leonora Halm-Eberstein arranged for this conversation with Daniel at the end of her life, and that Mordecai looks for a successor when he realizes that he is dying? How does mortality affect the sense of urgency as a device in literature and a fact of life?
5. How do the techniques of the novel allow for an expression of general ideas? Do the flashbacks, the re-ordering of chronology, the role of the narrator, and other such devices confuse or enhance the presentation of the novel's ideas?

NOTES

EPISODE 08:

THE POLITICAL VISION OF DANIEL DERONDA: SEPARATENESS WITH COMMUNICATION

Daniel Deronda is George Eliot's great novel of nationalism. Through it, she gives voice to the restoration of Jewish pride and the distinctiveness of the Jewish people, ultimately urging a form of political nationhood and moral rejuvenation. But the novel's teaching about the purpose and identity of nations has as much to do with British liberalism as it does with the Jewish people. Professor Wisse draws out the political vision of *Daniel Deronda* by interpreting Eliot's phrase "separateness with communication." Is homogeneity the ideal of political community, or can a society nurture distinct ways of life within it?

PASSAGES:

So, when the bridal veil was around Mirah it hid no doubtful tremors—only a thrill of awe at the acceptance of a great gift which required great uses. And the velvet canopy never covered a more goodly bride and bridegroom, to whom their people might more wisely wish offspring; more truthful lips never touched the sacrament marriage-wine; the marriage-blessing never gathered stronger promise of fulfillment than in the integrity of their mutual pledge. Naturally, they were married according to the Jewish rite.

BOOK 8 CHAPTER 70

"What he used to insist on was that the strength and wealth of mankind depended on the balance of separateness and communication, and he was bitterly against our people losing themselves among the Gentiles; 'It's no better,' said he, 'than the many sorts of grain going back from their variety into sameness.'"

BOOK 8 CHAPTER 60

"I shall call myself a Jew," said Deronda, deliberately, becoming slightly paler under the piercing eyes of his questioner. "But I will not say that I shall profess to believe exactly as my fathers have believed. Our fathers themselves changed the horizon of their belief and learned of other races. But I think I can maintain my grandfather's notion of separateness with communication. I hold that my first duty is to my own people, and if there is anything to be done toward restoring or perfecting their common life, I shall make that my vocation."

BOOK 8 CHAPTER 60

“I am going to the East to become better acquainted with the condition of my race in various countries there,” said Deronda, gently—anxious to be as explanatory as he could on what was the impersonal part of their separateness from each other. “The idea that I am possessed with is that of restoring a political existence to my people, making them a nation again, giving them a national center, such as the English have, though they too are scattered over the face of the globe. That is a task which presents itself to me as a duty; I am resolved to begin it, however feebly. I am resolved to devote my life to it. At the least, I may awaken a movement in other minds, such as has been awakened in my own.”

BOOK 8 CHAPTER 69

A common humanity is not yet enough to feed the rich blood of various activity which makes a complete man. The time is not come for cosmopolitanism to be highly virtuous, any more than for communism to suffice for social energy. I am not bound to feel for a Chinaman as I feel for my fellow-countryman: I am bound not to demoralize him with opium, not to compel him to my will by destroying or plundering the fruits of his labor on the alleged ground that he is not cosmopolitan enough, and not to insult him for his want of my tailoring and religion when he appears as a peaceable visitor on the London pavement. It is admirable in a Briton with a good purpose to learn Chinese, but it would not be a proof of fine intellect in him to taste Chinese poetry in the original more than he tastes the poetry of his own tongue. Affection, intelligence, duty, radiate from a center, and nature has decided that for us English folk that center can be neither China nor Peru. Most of us feel this unreflectingly; for the affectation of undervaluing everything native, and being too fine for one’s own country, belongs only to a few minds of no dangerous leverage. What is wanting is that we should recognize a corresponding attachment to nationality as legitimate in every other people, and understand that its absence is a privation of the greatest good.

“THE MODERN HEP! HEP! HEP!”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean that the spirit of Mordecai will live on in Daniel? What significance do you find in the names Mordecai and Ezra, and in the fact that this character is known by both of them?
2. Is “communication” – as opposed to “coexistence” – between two peoples possible only if both have national homes? England, Daniel notes, has both a homeland and a diaspora. But England is a great power. Do the Jews, or others, pose a problem for the nation-state if they do not possess a homeland of their own?
3. As the themes emerge in *Daniel Deronda*, do you see Zionism, the desire for a Jewish national home in the land of Israel, as an outgrowth of the Enlightenment, a reaction to the Enlightenment, or both? An outgrowth or a reaction to the Romantic movement?
4. Does this novel resolve to your satisfaction the problems that it introduces? This is different from asking whether it has a happy ending, but we might ask that as well: does it have a happy ending?
5. What does Gwendolen mean when she says to Daniel that “it shall be better with me because I have known you”?

NOTES

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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Nahum Sokolow, *History of Zionism 1600-1918* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1919): vol. I, 210-211.
[Sokolow was the first to call Daniel Deronda a "Zionist novel."]

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