

# A Sense of History

**Yisroel Schreiber welcomes Rabbi Mattis Kantor's latest literary effort in making the Jewish time-line widely accessible**

"ZECHOR yemois olam, binu shnois dor v'dor," Moshe enjoined us, "remember the days of old, comprehend the years of every generation, ask your forbears and they will inform you, importune your elders and they will enlighten you." Collectively as a nation, Klal Yisroel has a phenomenally long memory. We still celebrate events from the dawn of our history just as we lament tragedies thousands of years old. The names of for example Yishmoel and Esav, Nimrod and Lovon, Pharaoh and Homon, Nebuchadnetzar and Titus are remembered as if they lived but yesterday. And in every generation we recall anew the sneak attack of Amolek and promise never to forget it.

Yet while historical events should mean a lot to all, few of us can actually specify the dates when even momentous events took place. Though most school kids can rattle off when the Great Fire of London broke out or the date of the Norman invasion under William the Conqueror, even adults are stumped when asked for the specific year of the *Mabul*, *Yetzias Mitzrayim* or *Churban Beis Rishon!* Why do we know more about "1066 and all that" and so much less about the events that shaped our lives as a nation and as a people? Is this how we remember the *yemos olam* or understand the *shnois* of each generation?

Part of the reason is that in the main, dates and history were not that accessible. *Tenach* or *Chazal* do not always delineate the exact year when events occurred; indeed for much of our history, years were counted not from Creation as nowadays but from the reigns of different kings and dynasties (often with overlapping months), the 1,500-year-long legal-documentary *Minyan Shtaros* adopted from Alexander the Great's empire — or a parallel Olympiad calendar used by Hellenists and Josephus based on the 4-year Greek Games' cycle — until the Christians introduced their calendar still dominant today. It does not help when there is a discrepancy between Biblical dating and the chronology of Egyptian dynasties (compiled by the anti-Semitic priest Manetho) or that of the Persian kings.

Furthermore neither *Tenach* nor the Talmud are history books since the *Neviim* and *Chazal* were more interested in the moral lessons to be drawn from historical events than in the mere recording of details in the Greek or

Roman fashion. While Josephus Flavius does provide dates and copious chronicle detail of *Beis Sheni* and its downfall, the brilliant Rav Yitzchok Eizek Halevi-Rabinowitz in his *Doros Horishonim* proves from Josephus' own writings that he was an Essene (the sect who authored the Dead Sea scrolls) who favoured the *Zeddukim* and the Herodians, opposed *Chazal* and twisted history to suit his purpose.

In recent centuries, the subject of Jewish history was monopolised by biased historians like Abraham Geiger and Prof. Heinrich Graetz and their followers (both incidentally originated from Orthodox families and were erstwhile admirers of Rav Shmshon ben Raphael Hirsch) who employed history as a tool to discredit our Masores and promote Reform. Although many of their blatant distortions were manfully exposed by the *Doros Horishonim* the wider public were bemused by the ensuing polemics and tended to shy away from the entire topic.

Yet as the *Chidoh* and others point out, a sound working knowledge of Jewish history and dates is as essential for *Talmidei Chachomim* as

it is interesting for the layman. How can one comprehend entire *sugyas* in *Gemoro*, asks the *Chidoh*, if one doesn't know which generation of *amoraim* came first, who was the *Rebbe* and who was the *talmid*, or *pasken* with only a hazy idea as to who was a *Rishon* and who was a later *Achron?* Even the encyclopaedic *Seder Hadoros* has been found confusing by some and on occasion, according to the *Doros Horishonim*, even misleading.

So the sterling work accomplished by Rabbi Mattis Kantor in his magnum opus *Codex Judaica* is indeed groundbreaking — giving

the date for nearly every event from *Bereshis Boroh* to the Istanbul Shuls' car bombs and Israel's security fence (his last entries) — plus a timeline through the generations, marking significant changes from a national and religious perspective. Indeed his original work was *The Jewish TimeLine Encyclopedia* first published in 1992, updated in 2000 and now re-issued as the *Codex Judaica* in a more reader-friendly version to make it accessible even to those who do not consider themselves history-

buffs. Whereas earlier versions were closely printed and packed with dense material, the latest essential guide to our Torah time-traveller is in a larger format and broken up with occasional graphics and clearer print.

But the entire work remains as invaluable as ever, clearly indexed and cross-referenced to enable the busy researcher to find the elusive date or event quickly and fairly effortlessly (a computer version would be even more useful) plus the Talmudic sources. This is an essential resource for every school, seminary and Yeshiva

library — though those who love history as much as I do may find it harder to put down! As in previous versions, Rabbi Kantor also

includes besides his fifteen chapters of history some interesting appendices:

In his first on the correct date of Chanukah, he takes issue with *ArtScroll's* "*Chanukah*" for relying on the Books of the Maccabees in the Apocrypha whom he claims are inconsistent with *Chazal*; in his second he puzzles over that old conundrum, the true identity of Yochanan Kohen-Gadol mentioned in the *Al-Hanissim* prayer and *Chazal* — especially over which historical personality can possibly fit the description of serving as Kohen Gadol for 80 years. Another appendix discusses the

*Ten Harugei Malchus* commemorated on Tisha B'Av and Yom Kippur, their identification and historical inconsistencies, and essentially agrees with the *Doros Horishonim* that this describes the era of post-Beitar revolt under Bar-Kosiba, but did not necessarily happen all at one time.

His last appendix is perhaps the most radical since he coins a new title for the era of Gedolim between the last *Rishonim* and the first *Achronim* — the *Kovim*, the consolidators or deciders — an interesting concept! That innovative step was already taken in a previous version but *Codex Judaica* also now has a new title for our present post-War generation, "the *Melaktim* and our gravitation towards convenience over commitment", an intriguing assessment.

Rabbi Kantor has undertaken an immense amount of research including wading through the complicated *Doros Horishonim* and the more accessible *Toldos Am Olam* and quotes numerous Talmudic and Torah sources. Yet the simple style by which he communicates the extensive information without extraneous, distracting asides makes it all seem deceptively easy. Thanks to his skills and labour, thousands of years of history are comprehensively and concisely presented in a systematic, balanced, yet readable manner.

If someone wants an understanding of the broad chronological sweep of our unparalleled history — if they truly desire to *zechor yemois olam; binu shnois dor v'dor* — they could do no better than purchase *Codex Judaica*. As a wise man once said, "Those who do not learn from history are bound to repeat it!" And in case you were still wondering, the *Mabul* began on 17<sup>th</sup> *Cheshvan* 1656, *Yetzias Mitzrayim* took place during 2448 and *Churban Beis Rishon* occurred in 3338.

For those who think we are still in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the authentic 21<sup>st</sup> century marked for example the *petiroh* of Avrohom Ovinu and Yishmoel, Shem and Ever, and the birth (and blessing) of Yaakov and Esav, the Shevotim (besides Binyomin). We are not talking Trivial Pursuit but milestones on our nation's and their contemporaries' march through history. So *Codex Judaica* justly deserves an honoured place in every Torah home, not just on the shelves of schools and seminaries.

*Codex Judaica* by Rabbi Mattis Kantor is published by Zichron Press

