

Simon Schama Tells a New 'Story of the Jews'

Simon Schama has told many stories.

The next one is his own.

Best known in the United States for the TV special *Simon Schama's Power of Art* and his book on the French revolution, *Citizens*, Schama is now giving us *The Story of the Jews*. Beginning Tuesday on PBS, this five-part series will examine the history and cultural contributions of the Jewish people. As a historian and a Jew, Schama says this is his most personal film.

"Think of me," the British-born Schama jokes, "as your 'Downton' rabbi."

When many people think of Jewish history, they think of the Diaspora or the Holocaust or the tensions in the Middle East—all of which are treated in the series. But there is more to the story of the Jews, said Schama, than crisis and disaster.

"It's more complicated than that. It's richly exuberant with vitality. Jewish comedy doesn't come out of nothing. Jewish music doesn't come out of nothing. ... I don't want to be part of a story where Jews are just victims or bullies—and I'm not saying that's what the Israelis are."

Indeed, Schama said, the Jewish embrace of music and vitality in religious services is one of the things that offended medieval Christians, who were used to praying in silence. "Silence, this will surprise you not, isn't really a Jewish concept."

Neither is isolation. "Jews have never, ever, ever wished to

be separate, unless they were forced to be.” Which is why, Schama said, the story of the Jews is a lesson in how differing cultures can learn to coexist.

So why tell the story now? “Anti-Semitism is not going away in Europe, something we don’t always realize in the United States. It’s becoming truly toxic, which is one of the reasons I wanted to make this series.

“There’s a genuine life to the Jewish tradition, to which I hope we’ve made a contribution.”

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