

THE

Reconstructionist

A JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY JEWISH THOUGHT & PRACTICE

VOLUME 72 • NUMBER 1 • FALL 2007

Judaism and Islam: Dialogues and Trends

Why Do Jews Need to Know
About Islam?

Reuven Firestone

Preparing Rabbis to be Leaders in
Jewish-Muslim Dialogue

Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer

Interfaith Service Learning: A New Model for
Muslim-Jewish Dialogue?

Nathan Martin

Saving Each Other, Saving Ourselves

Eboo Patel

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FOUNDED IN 1935 BY MORDECAI M. KAPLAN

The Reconstructionist serves as a medium for the continuing development of Reconstructionist ideas, practices, and institutions, by addressing religious, political, social, and moral issues of contemporary Jewish life. By focusing on a single theme in each issue and bringing to bear multiple perspectives on it, *The Reconstructionist* is a forum for significant dialogue and fresh approaches within the contemporary Jewish community.

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The Reconstructionist (ISSN 0034-1495; USPS 457-140) is published two (2) times a year by the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, 1299 Church Road, Wyncote, PA 19095. Second class postage at Wyncote, PA, additional mailing at Hanover, PA. ©2009 by *The Reconstructionist*. Postmaster: Send changes of address to: *The Reconstructionist*, 1299 Church Road, Wyncote, PA 19095.

Subscription: \$50 for two years (four issues); for members of JRF affiliates, \$45.
Single copies, \$12.50 for 1–9 copies; 10 or more copies, \$10 each.

Correspondence, letters and inquiries regarding subscriptions and submissions should be sent to *The Reconstructionist*, 1299 Church Road, Wyncote, PA 19095.

The Reconstructionist is available on microfilm from University Microfilms International. It is indexed in the ATLA Religion Database, published by the American Theological Library Association, 250 S. Wacker Drive, 16th floor, Chicago, IL 60606, atla@atla.com, www.atla.com, and in the Index to Jewish Periodicals, P.O. Box 18525, Cleveland Heights, OH 44118.



Reconstructionist Rabbinical College Press

THE RECONSTRUCTIONIST
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2 From the Editor

JUDAISM AND ISLAM: DIALOGUES & TRENDS

- 5 *Reuven Firestone*, Why Do Jews Need to Learn About Islam?
12 *Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer*, Teaching Islam to Rabbinical Students
26 *Nathan Martin*, Interfaith Service Learning: A New Model
for Muslim-Jewish Dialogue?
35 *Susan Friedman*, In the Hands of Our Children: Collaborative Social
Services for Jewish and Muslim Teens
37 *Eboo Patel*, Saving Each Other, Saving Ourselves

VIEWPOINTS

- 42 *Leon Wiener Dow*, Circumcising Yourself: Reflections on the Challenges
of Jewish Continuity and Authenticity
48 *Alan T. Levenson*, New York and the Cosmopolitan Jewish City
59 *Patti Haskell*, Belonging, Behaving, Believing: Exploring
Reconstructionist Process

BOOK REVIEWS

- 63 *Leila Gal Berner*, Judaism in Feminist Hands, review of *Women Remaking
American Judaism* edited by Riv-Ellen Prell
68 *Elsie Stern*, Accessible Biblical Scholarship, review of *The Hebrew Bible:
New Insights and Scholarship* edited by Frederick E. Greenspahn
73 *Rena Blumenthal*, The Returning Pintele Yid, review of *Journeys to a
Jewish Life: Inspiring Stories from the Spiritual Journeys of American Jews*
by Paula Amann
77 *Richard Libowitz*, Heschel in Tumultuous Times, review of *Heschel in
America* by Edward R. Kaplan

From the Editor

RENA POTOK

This issue of *The Reconstructionist* devoted to the present-day encounter between Judaism and Islam, and its importance for members of both religious identifications. In a post-9/11 world, words like “tolerance” and “difference” teeter on the razor’s edge between reinscribing oppositional polarity and closing the gap between polarities. It is ever more important, then, to build understanding that goes beyond the superficial, that reaches into each faith and creates a unity of purpose and a depth of dialogue that connects the core of one to the core of the other.

The goal, in designing this issue, was to explore ways in which Jewish and Muslim writers, leaders, and thinkers are currently creating action and dialogue, teaching, and fostering understanding and connection — in progressive ways, and in social, academic, or political arenas — both within their own religions, and in encounters with one another. Leaders of interfaith initiatives were invited to reflect upon the kinds of programs and interchanges they have created with local or national communities of the other faith, and to highlight a particularly meaningful or important program or series of programs. Jewish scholars of Islam were asked to examine the often imbricated relationships between the two religions and the meaningful ways in which they inform one another. Muslim writers were invited to comment upon the significance of establishing an ongoing flow of information and discourse. The writers’ responses illustrate not only the significant points of contact between the two faiths, but the intriguing differences between them and their practitioners, as well.

The issue opens with an article by Reuven Firestone, Professor of Medieval Jewish and Islamic Studies at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. Firestone describes the personal journey that took him from a traditional Jewish upbringing in the U.S. to the creation of lifelong friendships with Muslim Arabs and a professional career in the field of Islamic studies. He illustrates his fascination with the many parallels between Islam and Judaism, and the differences that make them separate religious systems. Firestone argues that Islam is a complex religious civilization largely unknown to Jews, and that writing on Islam with the particular interests of Jews in mind is an important undertaking; furthermore, developing a greater

understanding and compassion about Islam is integral to developing both personal edification and responsible decision-making within the Jewish community.

Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, Director of the Department of Multifaith Studies and Initiatives at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, details the development and implementation of a new course created to prepare Reconstructionist rabbis to lead and participate in Jewish-Muslim dialogue, and to become change agents in their communities. Three sets of events and their dramatic effects on the field of inter-religious dialogue inspired Fuchs-Kreimer to create the course: the events of Sept. 11th and their aftermath, the beginning of the second Intifada in 2000, and the coming of age of large numbers of second-generation Muslim-Americans. Moving beyond a typical classroom model, the course was designed to give Jewish students exposure to the pluralism and dynamism of American Islam; to create opportunities for them to meet and interact with their Muslim peers; and to find opportunities to provide interfaith education about Islam in a Jewish setting. A broader goal was to deconstruct preconceived views held about Islam by Jewish students, and to understand the complex reality that stands behind such views.

Nathan Martin, Assistant Director of the University of Michigan Hillel and co-chair of the U-M Association of Religious Counselors, writes about taking a group of Jewish and Muslim students from the U-M to the Gulf Coast to assist with relief work in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. His article is designed to describe the service-dialogue model that was applied in the 2008 trip, to explore key challenges encountered around issues of prayer, food, programming, and group dynamics. Martin reflects on ways both to improve upon and to apply this model elsewhere; while this project was designed with the campus community in mind, it could readily be adapted to synagogues and mosques as well. He argues that service learning provides a unique opportunity to pick up where more traditional dialogues have left off and to create a new path to seeing the commonality in perceived differences between the two faiths.

Susan Friedman, Principal of the Robert Saligman Middle School in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, describes an annual interfaith event co-sponsored by Saligman and the Al Aqsa Muslim School as part of Philadelphia's annual Martin Luther King Day of Service. Each year, this multi-faceted group of Jewish and Muslim teenagers gathers to share in a social welfare project and to participate in a culture-crossing activity intended to bridge the gap between the two religious groups in a nurturing and mutually welcoming environment.

In an excerpt from his book, *Acts of Faith*, Eboo Patel, founder and Executive Director of the Interfaith Youth Core, writes of young American Muslims, a generation both unabashedly American and unmistakably Muslim, their role in shaping American Islam, and the effect of this renewal on the renewal of Islam worldwide. He writes of the effects of global migration on the fabric of Islam, and the contributions of Muslim migration on what he calls “the American song.” Patel describes encounters between Jewish and Muslim teens at the Interfaith Youth Core’s Chicago Youth Council (CYC), and ponders the meaning of pluralism in a world where the forces that seek to reinforce isolationism are strong. His conclusion: the only way to save ourselves is to save each other.

In addition to the articles on Judaism and Islam, we include in this issue three “Viewpoint” essays: Leon Wiener Dow discusses what he terms challenges of Jewish continuity and authenticity in the context of the Talmudic declaration that a father is obligated to circumcise his son. Allan Levenson examines the significance of New York City in the role it has played a Jewish metropolis. And Patti Haskell offers a reading of Reconstructionist process in the context of living dually in Jewish and American culture.

Four book reviews round out this issue, on the subjects of feminism, biblical scholarship, Jewish spiritual journeys, and the life and work of Abraham Joshua Heschel. Leila Gal Berner discusses *Women Remaking American Judaism*, edited by Riv-Ellen Prell; Elsie Stern explores the merits for lay readers of Frederick Greenspahn’s edited volume, *The Hebrew Bible: New Insights and Scholarship*; Rena Blumenthal considers Paula Amann’s *Journeys to a Jewish Life: Inspiring Stories from the Spiritual Journeys of American Jews*; and Richard Libowitz offers his reading of Edward Kaplan’s *Heschel in America*, and the place it holds among the extensive literature on this significant figure in Jewish intellectual history.

Why Do Jews Need to Learn About Islam?*

REUVEN FIRESTONE

Islam is a complex religious civilization that remains largely unknown to Jews, despite the fact that the future of the Jewish people has become profoundly affected by developments in the Muslim world. For our own personal edification and understanding, therefore, for responsible decision-making within the Jewish community and for a world of greater understanding and compassion, writing on Islam with the particular interests of Jews in mind is an important undertaking.

There are aspects of Islam that will be of particular interest to Jews, and some that would be of benefit for Jews to understand even if they may not be of obvi-

* From *Introduction to Islam for Jews* by Reuven Firestone. Copyright © 2008. Reprinted with permission of The Jewish Publication Society. *Reuven Firestone is Professor of Medieval Jewish and Islamic Studies at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles. He is the author of Jews, Christians, Muslims in Dialogue (White Cloud Press, 2007), Introduction to Islam for Jews (The Jewish Publication Society, 2006), Children of Abraham: An Introduction to Judaism for Muslims (Ktav, 2001), Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam (Oxford University Press, 1999) and Journeys in Holy Lands (State University of New York Press, 1990). He is the former Director of HUC-JIR's Edgar F. Magnin School of Graduate Studies and the Jerome Louchheim School of Undergraduate Jewish Studies at the University of Southern California. He received a Center for Arabic Study Abroad (CASA) III research fellowship for study at the American University of Cairo, funded by the Fulbright Binational Committee in Egypt and the U.S. Department of Education. He was the recipient an NEH fellowship for independent research, and was a fellow of the Center for Advanced Jewish Studies at the University of Pennsylvania and a Yad Hanadiv Research Fellow at the Hebrew University.*

ous interest. One of my favorite points of contact between the two is the languages of Hebrew and Arabic, which often show their similarities in relation to religious issues. I am fascinated by the ways that Islam and Judaism have so many parallels, yet are separate religious systems.

As any sensitive reader knows, an author can never dissociate himself or herself from what he or she has written. Because of this truth, it is appropriate to reveal something about myself for the sake of full disclosure.

I am a liberally observant Jew, trained both as a rabbi and an academic. I lived for some six or seven years in Israel and have raised my children in Jewish day-schools in the U.S. and Israel. In addition to scholarly works on Islam and its relationship with Judaism and Christianity and pre-Islamic indigenous Arabian culture, I have written an introduction to Judaism for Muslims.

I grew up in a household that was deeply Jewish but that respected the wisdom and arts of those who lived outside our own particular religious and cultural framework. Despite sensitivity to the universal value of humanity that I learned from my family, growing up in America naturally instilled within me a number of vague prejudices that were simply imbedded in Jewish or American culture. As a result, when I first traveled to Israel as a naïve American Jewish teenager in 1970, I had a vague, unarticulated expectation that the Jewish Israelis would be heroic and upright while the Arabs would be dishonest and deceitful. This evaluation was hazy and indistinct, and I had not thought about it in any kind of conscious way. In fact, it was only some years later that I understood how these prejudices affected my general outlook. I would certainly not define myself as a racist, but like virtually everyone in my generation, I had absorbed vague judgments about self and other that infused my general thinking about the world around me.

Sympathetic but Realistic

But soon after arriving in Israel, I was surprised to find some quite unheroic Israelis and some quite upright Arabs. I found myself living in the Muslim Quarter within the aged Ottoman walls of the “Old City” of Jerusalem, where I remained for a few months exploring its alleys and warrens. I also ventured out into the newer sections of the city both in the east and west as well as the villages in its vicinity. I became particularly close to two young Muslim Arab cousins who had each recently married, and I was privileged to spend quality time with them and their extended families.

This was during a very special period in Israel. The Palestinians who had come under Israeli control were relieved to find that the Israelis did not engage in a campaign of rape and pillage as they had feared during the 1967 War. They were happy when many of their villages were hooked into the electric grid for the first time, and they enjoyed the fruit of that early period when Israelis swarmed into the territories and spent money freely, thus buoying the economic status of many Palestinian families. There was a general feeling at this time among both Israelis and Palestinians that the situation was temporary, so the two sides encouraged engagement at a variety of levels. I felt welcomed as a Jew in the homes of many Arabs, and I took full advantage of that welcome in order to learn something of the culture, the language, the music, and the religious worldview of my new friends. That golden age soon passed. The political situation became increasingly tense and violent over the years, and misunderstandings and cultural misreadings sometimes caused hurt between my friends and me. But our relationship remained strong and we remain close to this day.

That first visit in 1970 was not spent entirely among Arabs. I also lived on a border kibbutz for a few months and found a deep personal affinity with the struggles and dreams of Zionism. My experience among Jews deepened my sense of connection with my collective past and aspirations for a common future when Jews would live in peace in the state of Israel. I subsequently returned to Israel many times to study and work and visit, as many American Jews do. But I always spent time with my Arab friends, and I always kept very closely in touch with their developments. It was that profound experience in 1970 that forever changed my life. I found myself continually being drawn back to the relationship between Jews and Arabs and between Judaism and Islam. I found that the most rewarding area of study for me in college and beyond was Judaism, then Islam, and then the study of religion in general. And I found that the most meaningful area of activism for me would be in improving relations between Jews and Muslims. I not only returned to Israel to study and live, but also to other parts of the Middle East. Most recently I took a sabbatical in Cairo with my family, where my children attended an Egyptian school. Having lived in Israel and having attended American Jewish day-schools and Israeli schools, it was a moving and most positive experience for them to live among and attend school with Arabs, most of them Muslim.

Because of my experiences, my general approach to Islam is sympathetic, but also, I hope realistic. I feel no need to be polemical, because I do not feel threatened

or fearful of Islam. I have learned that Islam, like Judaism and Christianity (and I would suppose all religions), allows for certain expressions and behaviors that I would consider terribly problematic, and others that I consider transcendent and even sublime. I do not believe that religion is the cause of the world's problems, but I do believe that it can be part of the solution. Religion has proven to be a very effective means of rallying large numbers of people to engage in extraordinary behaviors, sometimes tremendously inspiring and sometimes terribly malevolent. While religion is not the cause or the sole solution to the world's problems, it can make them worse, and it can alleviate them.

I just mentioned that my general approach to Islam is sympathetic. That may strike the reader as odd, since one would generally expect a writer to claim an objective approach that is neither sympathetic nor condemning. In the study of religion, however, I question whether a purely objective approach is possible. Religion is so powerful, its images and ideas so potent, and its engagement so energetic, that it is probably impossible to remain neutral. One finds oneself attracted or even deeply moved by certain aspects and indifferent or perhaps even repulsed by others. The result is that the observer cannot help but form an opinion at various times, despite the intent to withhold judgment.

I consider it my responsibility, therefore, to convey my general attitude toward Islam, and that general attitude is indeed sympathetic. This is only partly based on my studies. It is true that the more I understand it, the more appreciative I become. But my approach is also based on my understanding of Jewish values. I take the famous dictum of Rabbi Hillel and apply it not only to human individuals but also to human collectives: "Do not judge your fellow until you have been in his place." As I come to understand the complexity of issues that drives my fellow to act the way he does, I can appreciate his behavior even if I do not always agree with it. In fact, I may be sympathetic even when I disapprove of his behavior. This is my approach also to larger collectives, in this case to Muslims and to the religious system of Islam.

One of the reasons that religionists tend to think negatively of other religions is that they employ different methods for judging their own religion than they use to judge the religion of the other. Jews and Judaism have often been victimized by this problem over the ages as the ignorant or enemies try to prove that Judaism is a primitive or even evil religion. The simplest way this false-comparison is made is to compare the "best" of one religion with the "worst" of another. One can do

this with a variety of topics, but one particularly relevant topic today is war and peace. If one compares the peaceful verses of the Torah with the militant verses of the Qur'an, one will evaluate the two quite differently than if one compares the militant verses of the Torah with the peaceful verses of the Qur'an.

The Jewish reader will certainly compare Islam with Judaism. This is natural, even inevitable, and I do not consider it inherently problematic. In fact, I have found comparing the two to be a greatly enjoyable enterprise. But it is important to compare fairly and not to compare in order to score points. This requires, among other things, comparing apples with apples. For liberal, Westernized Jews, for example, it is neither accurate nor fair to compare traditional Islam with non-traditional forms of Judaism. There is a range of positions in Islam on most issues, just as there is a range of positions in Judaism. Keep in mind that Islam did not experience the European Enlightenment and Christian Reformation in the same way as did the peoples living in Europe, including the Jews. In order to engage in an honest assessment, one must be willing to apply the same methodology to judge the religion of the other as one applies to one's own religious tradition.

Distinct Religious Civilizations

Certainly, Jews can, and should, read general introductions to Islam. But there are questions and issues that are unique to the history and practice of Jews and Judaism that these general books on Islam do not address. If we look closely at Judaism and Islam, we see many parallels in practice, theology, and religious outlook. We may also note commonalities in the language, history, and culture of the two religions. In these, Judaism and Islam may be more similar to one another, interestingly enough, than either is to Christianity. But there are very important differences as well, some quite clear and some more subtle, that distinguish between these two distinct religious civilizations. It is fascinating to learn the complex ways in which we are both so similar and so different from one another.

Today, as the twenty-first century unfolds before us, there is a wide gap between impressions and understanding of Islam, between media representation and informed knowledge. Jews, as never before, have a pressing need to understand the history, theology and practice of Muslims and Islam.

In learning and reading about Islam, Jews need not take up a specifically Jewish analysis. In other words, Islam need not be subject to appraisal based on Jewish values or Jewish political interests or needs other than the fact that it treats issues

that are of interest to Jews. There is no attempt here at moral evaluation. This is a non-judgmental approach to the study of an extremely complex phenomenon.

For the past few centuries, most Jews have lived among and under the rule of Christians (although earlier, during most of the Middle Ages, most Jews lived under the rule of Muslims). Jews entered modernity through the Christian world, and all of the great Jewish achievements and calamities of modernity were influenced one way or another by the profound underlying relationship between Jews and Christians that had been developing for centuries. Although the ambivalences that have marked this foundational relationship continue to a greater or lesser extent today and will undoubtedly influence the future, it has become clear that the religious civilization that is having the greatest impact on Jews in the twenty-first century is Islam, both in the Middle East and in the West.

The conflict between Israel and its neighbors is at its core one of competing nationalisms, but religion has become increasingly identified with it. Islam has taken a much greater role in Palestinian political and social movements. The Middle East in general as well as the entire Muslim world has experienced a similar growth in the influence of Islamic perspectives in government, social movements, and even science. As the Muslim population and the impact of Islam have increased in the West, they have had a growing influence on Jews' sense of identity and security. Yet Jews know precious little about Islam. Responsible decision-making is impossible without understanding. For the sake of the future of the Jewish people and the future of the world as a whole, it is important to develop a firm, sober, realistic understanding of Islam and how Islam affects the outlooks and behaviors of Muslims as they act in the world.

Having said that, it is critically important to understand that Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, is an extraordinary complex and multi-faceted religion. It cannot be reduced to simple slogans, despite the attempts by some of its enemies and some of its self-appointed spokespeople to do so. So much of what we think we know about Islam is only a very small part of the whole picture (and it is not even necessarily accurate). What comes to mind is the famous story of the blind men and the elephant, a parable that came to the West through the great Muslim thinker, Jalal al Din Al-Rumi. Unable to see the elephant, they can only feel a part of it, and depending upon where they touch, they believe the elephant to be like a water spout (from the trunk), a fan (from the ear), a pillar (from the leg), and a throne (from feeling the back). No single part alone provides enough to form an accurate understand-

ing of the elephant, yet each is a critical component without which one could not make sense of the animal. Even with the whole picture of the elephant, we cannot predict its behavior, but we can have a better sense of understanding for its form, and also a greater sensitivity and compassion for its needs and desires.

Teaching Islam to Rabbinical Students

NANCY FUCHS-KREIMER

In the fall of 2002, after a four-year hiatus, I returned to the work of interfaith relations and discovered a new world. The events of September 11, 2001 had dramatically transformed many aspects of American life, including — I soon learned — the field of interreligious dialogue. I had spent years keeping up with the burgeoning literature on Jewish-Christian dialogue, attending conferences and participating on boards and in coalitions, serving as “the rabbi” on countless panels with priests and ministers. The invitations I now received were virtually always for “Abrahamic” encounters — programs involving Christians, Jews and Muslims.

I was surprised by how unprepared I felt. I had dutifully taken notes in my course on Islam in graduate school and had even been part of an international scholars forum in the early 1990s with Muslims from abroad. But, lacking ongoing relationships with individual Muslims, I had failed to integrate what I had learned. In the case of Jewish-Christian relations, I knew what the issues were between us — historical, theological and political. More important, I had some idea of what was at stake for our communities in our public encounters. I could anticipate what

Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, Ph.D., Director, Department of Multifaith Studies and Initiatives, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, received a bachelor of arts degree from Wesleyan University, a master of arts from the Yale Divinity School, rabbinic ordination from RRC and a doctorate in religion from Temple University. She currently serves on the boards of the Metanexus Institute for Science and Religion and the Interfaith Center of Philadelphia. She is the author of Parenting as a Spiritual Journey (Harper Collins, 1996; Jewish Lights, 1998) and of articles in Journal of Ecumenical Studies, Religious Education, Cross Currents, Lilith, The Reconstructionist, and Jewish Social Studies, among other journals.

would be said and what would be left unsaid. Over time, I had developed relationships of trust with some Christians with whom I could share, over a late night meal, what was usually considered “unsayable.”¹

The opportunity for interreligious dialogue with the Muslim community both challenged and intrigued me. Who was promoting this surge of activity? What hopes did Muslims bring to this endeavor? What were their fears? What motivated Christian interest in the conversation? And what about our community? What would it mean for Jews now to be part of a tripartite American civil faith, for the “Judeo-Christian tradition” to be replaced by the “Abrahamic tradition?” One thing was clear: I had a lot of catching up to do.

As I participated in ever more three-way encounters, I realized that I was not alone in my questions. Many of us — Jewish, Christian and Muslim — were stumbling about in new territory. As I thought about the knowledge and experiences I needed to do this work effectively, something else became clear as well. It was time for a new approach to teaching Islam to rabbinical students. Our elective academic course in Islam at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College needed to be rethought. After several experiments, the work of rethinking came to fruition in the spring of 2008 with a new course, Islam for Rabbinical Students, funded by the Henry Luce Foundation.

Teaching about Other Religions at RRC

For almost 30 years, RRC has included courses in religious traditions other than Judaism as part of its core curriculum. The college sees this as an indispensable component of a rabbinical education. Students develop a sharper and more nuanced understanding of Judaism by appreciating it in the context of other traditions, gaining perspective on both its unique and its universal elements. If religious traditions are valued as “keepers of conversation about ultimate questions across the generations,”² then it behooves us to learn what we can about those other conversations. As a matter of spiritual formation, studying other religions can be a component in the overall process of developing as a religious person, of growing in one’s faith. As author/journalist Yossi Klein Halevi put it, “religious pluralism is the great spiritual adventure of our generation.”³

Knowledge of other faiths serves our rabbis in more practical ways, as well. Increasingly, RRC graduates and the Jews with whom they work live in a multifaith world. Half of our graduates find work outside congregations — often in pluralistic

settings such as universities, hospitals or agencies. Those who do become pulpit rabbis find their pews filled with family members who are Jews by choice or, in some cases, active participants in other faiths. As religious leaders concerned with the world around them, our rabbis often partner with clergy of other faith in activities related to social and communal concerns.

The Need to Teach about Islam

By 2002, three historical developments had converged to make RRC's focus on an Islam program especially salient. First, the events of Sept. 11 and their aftermath, from the Iraq war to the USA Patriot Act, had put Muslims and Islam at the center of the news. A concerned American citizen would fail to understand national and international issues without first understanding something of Islamic thought and history.

Second, since the beginning of the Second *Intifadah* in 2000, there has been a growing awareness that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict cannot be understood apart from the context of the religious passions involved. Most observers agree that the religious conversation surrounding the conflict is growing in importance; they speak of the "religionizing" of the conflict. The religious dimension complicates an already difficult situation. Yet, some see in this complication a potential for understanding and resolution not otherwise available.⁴

Most important, in recent years, we have seen the coming of age of large numbers of second-generation Muslim-Americans. In 1965, the Immigration and Naturalization Act passed Congress with overwhelming support. Few anticipated that this act, the first major change in immigration law since the restrictive act of 1924, would change the face of America, creating a new geo-religious reality.⁵ The Muslim community in America had been small, largely composed of African-Americans and earlier immigrants from Syria and Lebanon. After 1965, Muslims from the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East began swelling its ranks. Today, between 3 million and 7 million Muslims live in America. Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States and, while exact numbers are disputed, it is fair to say that in the not-too-distant future, America will be home to more Muslims than Jews.⁶

In the absence of Muslim chaplains, Reconstructionist rabbis sometimes find themselves serving the religious needs of Muslims. For example, an RRC graduate working on a college campus was responsible for helping a Muslim student decide whether and how to observe *halal*, the Islamic laws concerning permissible foods,

and then for working with the college dining service to meet her needs. In another case, a Reconstructionist rabbi serving as a U.S. Army chaplain wrote the request for leave for a Muslim enlisted woman who wished to go on the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca.

Yet all is not well between Jews and Muslims in our country. Ironically, our experience of dialogue with Christians provides us with a reverse model of what we now confront. In Jewish-Christian dialogue, we explore a centuries-old, painful history. Over the last half century, the Jewish-Christian relationship has been characterized by reconciliation. In the case of Jewish-Muslim relations, however, our problem is less with history than with current events, dating back less than 100 years.⁷ The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is at the center of our often contentious agendas, but larger issues swirl around it. Toxic levels of Jew hatred exist in the Arab world and radiate out to the worldwide community of Muslims. Some Jewish intellectuals and activists see a role for themselves in alerting Americans to the “dangers of Islamic extremism.”⁸

In my experience, the Jewish fear of Muslims exists alongside a genuine concern for the well-being of a marginalized religious minority. I have met Jews who actively seek the opportunity to become allies with Muslims in America. I have also met Jews who are frightened by the “other” — this particular “other” more than most. Finally, I have met Jews who, in differing measures, harbor both of those impulses. As Roger Gottlieb wrote, we Jews often have a perplexing two-sided sensibility — empathy for victims and a terrible fear of becoming victims ourselves.

In any case, many Jews are grateful for the opportunity to discover more about Islam and Muslims. For example, Jews frequently appreciate learning that only a minority of African-American Muslims are now connected with the notorious Nation of Islam and that the majority are mainstream Sunni Muslims. Jews are often surprised to discover that a Muslim in America is more likely to be of South Asian origin than Arab. Most Jews are eager to learn facts about the Muslim world — for example, that the proper word to use is “Muslim,” not “Moslem,” and that “Allah” is simply the Arabic word for God, not a proper name.⁹

Jewish religious leaders need to develop clear thinking on what is true and what is not true in the narrative surrounding the Middle East conflict, with its discourse about the clash of civilizations and the relationship between Islam and the West. Slapping on labels, such as “Islamophobia,” to views that strike us as unduly critical is not nearly as effective as understanding the complex reality that stands behind such views.

The goal for a newly revised course on Islam was, at a minimum, to give our students basic competence in this area. Maximally, we hoped to instill in at least some students the motivation to continue learning so that they might become leaders and change agents in their communities. For that, we needed a course that went beyond the typical classroom model. In designing the course, three elements were crucial: 1) giving the students exposure to the pluralism and dynamism of American Islam; 2) creating opportunities for them to meet and interact with their Muslim peers; and 3) finding opportunities to provide interfaith education about Islam in a Jewish setting.

Exposure to Pluralism

Reconstructionists understand that religious ideas, including our own, are historically rooted efforts by men and women to make sense of their individual and collective lives. Islam, like Judaism, is a pluralistic, evolving religious civilization. It is important to avoid essentializing such a complex weave of text, tradition and history. As guest speaker Rumees Ahmed, the first Muslim chaplain appointed at Brown University, told our students, “Islam is not one thing. It does not wake up in the morning and brush its teeth.”

At RRC, our religion courses typically focus on the heterogeneity of religious traditions, as well as on their evolution through history. This is particularly important in teaching Islam. The popular media in America promotes simplistic images that fail to capture diversity and, even more serious, often ignore the possibility of change.¹⁰

In order to give students a sense of the variety within American Islam, the class met with five different Muslim instructors, each of whom joined us for one or two weeks. I served as an anchor person. Our guests included a woman of South Asian background whose dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania is on a 13th-century commentator on the Qur’an; an award-winning poet who became a Sufi 38 years ago; and an African-American sheik from a Philadelphia mosque who memorized the Qur’an while growing up in Saudi Arabia. We emphasized how different these versions of Islam are from each other, at the same time noting how, in America, these distinct communities are interacting and affecting one another.¹¹

We especially focused on trying to sort out the complex phenomena that go by the names of “radical Islam,” “Islamist thought,” “political Islam,” and “Wahabi Islam.” When and why did these ideas emerge? How do the labels “moderate” and “extremist” fit in this context? How do different American Muslims relate to these

movements? One of our guests said, “Al Qaeda hijacks true Islam,” while another said of the feminist, pro-Israel writer Irshad Manji, “She isn’t really a Muslim, even if she says she is.” We remained agnostic regarding such essentialist claims. It is our job to understand Muslim ideas as products of particular situations and to watch with informed curiosity as Islamic civilization continues to evolve in the years to come.

Muslim Peers

When I surveyed some RRC graduates regarding their experiences studying Christianity in rabbinical school, many emphasized the value of participating in *Seminarians Interacting*, a former program of the National Conference of Christians and Jews¹² that arranged for cross-religious seminary visits. They almost all agreed that classroom learning at RRC, even with an excellent Christian scholar, went only so far; the most powerful education came from relationships with their Christian counterparts.

It was clear that pairing our students with Muslim peers would have many benefits. In previous courses on Islam at RRC, we had required students to visit a mosque. This had proved to be a difficult assignment. Students had trouble locating mosques where they might feel welcome, discerning how to behave while visiting a mosque, and interpreting what they saw there. In some cases, such visits had proved to be negative experiences. My goal for this course was to provide each rabbinical student with a Muslim partner; together, they would engage in some shared text study. The partner would also serve as host on our student’s visit to a mosque.

Our challenge was to locate young, emerging leaders in the Muslim community. Most imams in America are products of a classical education in “the old country” (often Saudi Arabia or Egypt). The Zaytuna Institute and Academy in Berkeley, Calif., recently graduated the first American-trained imams, five young leaders conversant in Arabic and Islamic textual traditions who are also committed to engaging Western thought and society — as we would say, “living in two civilizations.”¹³ Since these individuals were not local, we had to work with the next best thing: Muslim graduate students studying in Philadelphia universities. Most of the Muslim students who volunteered to participate in our program were working toward degrees in Islamic studies; a few were students in other fields, such as law or computer science.

The goal of these encounters was not necessarily to foster long-lasting relationships. Rather, we hoped to equip our students with the confidence to seek out Muslim peers in the future. In the end, at least some of the partners will continue

to remain connected through the Internet. A few wrote that they were grateful to have made a new friend.

Opportunities to Practice: Serving Learning

My third concern was that our students have hands-on experience as interfaith educators. I wanted them to practice helping other Jews to learn about Islam. Since one of the most effective ways to learn about a religious tradition is from a participant in that tradition, I asked the students to work with their Muslim counterparts to plan and then execute an educational experience about Islam for a group of Jews in a congregation, Hebrew school or university setting.¹⁴

A student who planned a Hebrew school class with her Muslim counterpart wrote, “As the class progressed, I became ever clearer about the importance of the message we were sending. The children knew that these adults had worked together and were now teaching the class together. They had an experience of seeing adults engaged in respectful, easy Jewish-Muslim collaboration. There was nothing scary or uncomfortable . . . The most important thing we had done that day was to model our relationship to the students. They saw that we are in conversation with each other and that we are grateful for our relationship.”

Challenges Along the Way: Traversing Different Worlds

As expected, the requirement to study and collaborate with a Muslim peer over a period of weeks turned out to be challenging. Our students had to stretch themselves in some ways they anticipated and some ways they did not. Our students were mindful that their version of Judaism is on one end of the spectrum in its embrace of progressive values. From what they knew of Islam, they thought they might find some of the same issues emerging as those that often emerge in encounters with more traditional Jews or Christians.

This was especially pronounced for a few students in the class who were in same-sex relationships. One such woman who had been married in a Jewish religious ceremony worried that talking about her wife and son might undermine the relationship with her Muslim peer. She worried, however, that “not talking about them might seem cold or guarded.” One of the students in this situation wrote about the “challenge of entering into relationship and dialogue with someone whose tradition might not welcome or even tolerate me. . . . How would I bring my whole self to the encounter, when my whole self might be offensive to my dialogue partner?”

One female student wrote, “The gender dynamics were a major factor for me, especially when I visited my [male] partner’s mosque, where I sat behind a gigantic cloth barrier in the corner of the prayer space, blocked off from seeing any activity, listening to the prayer service through a malfunctioning P.A. system. I feared for a few days that this negative experience might color the rest of my encounters with my partner, but when we next met to study texts together, I came to that experience with enthusiasm about our opportunity to learn from each other. I knew that we would not have time to process this issue, so I let it go.”

And then there was “the elephant in the room,” as the Palestinian- Israeli conflict is known among veterans of Jewish-Muslim conversation. Would these students’ fragile new relationships falter on their presumed different responses to the word “Zionist”? In one case, a relationship did falter; in another, a good conversation (although hardly agreement) ensued. The other student pairs stayed focused on the tasks at hand, which, by design, were about text, worship and education, and not about Middle East issues. This is not to say that those issues should never be part of Jewish-Muslim conversation. On the other hand, American Jews and Muslims need not engage around it, especially at the start of building a relationship.

Students began to learn, by trial and error, what could be discussed and when. They struggled to achieve a balance between being “too nice” and, alternatively, endangering a warm and fruitful connection by insisting on discussing topics best left on the sidelines. A student wrote, “I was less afraid that our sessions would dissolve into polemics than that they would dissolve into politeness.” On the other hand, when people do not know each other well, and trust has not yet been established, politeness is often a far better choice than polemics.

One student reflected that she was able to draw upon the lessons she had learned at RRC while studying earlier periods of Jewish history. For example, when she was learning Talmud, her teacher, Rabbi Sarra Lev, had encouraged her to “put yourself at the table.” By this, Professor Lev meant that she would benefit most if she could surrender to the norms and values of a different social context, rather than lay her own on top in contention. In this situation, the student sometimes found it best to “put herself at the table” in order to forgo judgment in the service of learning.

As in most things in life, sensitive listening for the other’s burden and a respectful desire to help bear it go a long way. As one student put it, “Our relationship feels like a gift that each of us wants to take very good care of.” Sometimes, that meant speaking and, sometimes, it meant remaining silent.

“Parallelomania”

The late Rabbi Samuel Sandmel, a scholar of the New Testament and a pioneer in interfaith work, coined the word “parallelomania”¹⁵; often, I found it ringing in my ears as we moved through the semester seeking the similarities and differences between Judaism and Islam. We were warmed by discovered connections, both expected and unexpected, and we were surprised when apparent similarities turned out to be a matter of our imposition of Jewish categories on Muslim ideas.

When Jews first encounter Islam, it is difficult not to notice the parallels between our traditions. Because of the connection between Hebrew and Arabic, cognates abound. Sometimes, noting parallels is entirely appropriate. In one Hebrew school class, a student and her Muslim partner created a matching game using Hebrew and Arabic words — easy ones, like “*shalom/salaam*,” and more difficult ones as well. The kids got to participate in the game, and the shared linguistic roots gave them a sense of comfort with something that might have felt alien.

Other parallels proved meaningful and worthy of focus. A student with a strong personal passion and knowledge of Jewish mystical tradition was paired with a doctoral student named Hasan who was studying Sufi texts. He wrote, “Hasan would mention a teaching of Al-Arabi, and I would say, ‘That is just like this concept in the *Zohar*.’ I would say, ‘There is this Hasidic concept I really connect to,’ and he would respond, ‘I know what you mean. That is like . . .’” The two found themselves finishing each other’s sentences and, like some — although not all — of the pairs, they did a good deal of laughing. This particular dyad envisioned a meditation retreat for Jews and Muslims to plumb the depths of connection.

The natural tendency to want to relate through commonality is enhanced in this case by two factors. Muslim theology understands Islam as a culminating faith, integrating into itself all that is good in the other traditions. In addition, American Muslims engaging in dialogue are often eager to move from the margins of American society toward the center. Emphasizing what Muslims share with other American religions is crucial to that goal. To take a prominent example, the focus on Abraham as our common ancestor serves an important purpose, providing the organizing symbol and language for Muslims, Jews and Christians to rally around.

On the other hand, the focus on parallels can be misleading; it can obscure the richest learning. Jewish scholar Jon Levenson, Albert A. List Professor of Jewish Studies at the Harvard Divinity School, speaking about the example of Abraham,

concludes, “When different communities understand each other better, it’s usually because they understand how they are different.”¹⁶

As the semester progressed, we began to probe the easy linguistic connections more fully, noticing the more subtle nuances and even the more radical differences between words that sounded the same. We began to discipline our listening to notice how we quickly impose our own categories on what we hear. We appreciated the fact that Muslims in America have a strong drive to enter as full partners into Judeo-Christian culture. And there is much that is quite true about the common sources of our Abrahamic traditions. At the same time, we tried to be more attuned to the new and the different, for therein lay the challenge and growth for us.

Living in Two Civilizations: A Complicated Parallel

While American Jews and Muslims both have faced the challenge of living as minorities in a dominantly Christian culture, this shared experience might appear to be more parallel than it actually is. It is fascinating for Jews to learn how Muslims are now negotiating “living in two civilizations,” a process American Jews have been engaged in for several generations. One of our guests, an African-American Muslim who teaches at a local Quaker school, told us that when he was in college, he read Mordecai Kaplan, the seminal thinker of the Reconstructionist approach to Judaism, to try to “figure out how to create a progressive Islam.” Many American Muslims are trying to discern how to fit in and also remain distinct, how to preserve tradition and also reap the benefits of the contemporary world — in sum, how Islam will evolve in the American context.

The encounter with America is very different for Muslim immigrants today than it was for our Jewish ancestors. To take just one example, when most Jews immigrated to America from Europe, they did not have continued access to the “Old World” through jet travel, cable television, the Internet and Skype. Our students quickly learned that you couldn’t fit most Muslims into our matrix of Orthodox, Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist Judaism, for example. The categories just did not work. Our traditions are different, the Muslim confrontation with modernity has been different, and America’s relationship to Islam is different.

One student reported a conversation she had with her Muslim partner regarding their respective decisions to publicly don (or not don) a *hijab* or a *kippah*. Another commented about how different the very questions are for progressive Islam from those facing progressive Jews. She began to frequent Web sites such as [---

VOLUME 72 · NUMBER 1 · FALL 2007](http://www.Mus-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

limwakeup.com to begin to understand the issues as they are seen inside a Muslim context.

Although both Jews and Muslims in America are members of minority religious communities of similar size, there is an asymmetry in the relationship between us. The Jews and Muslims in our project were all young people pursuing graduate education at fine schools. But our communities are not similarly balanced. The Jewish community, for the most part, is further along in wealth, organization and power. Some Jews nurture a self-image as the vulnerable outsider. It comes as a surprise to them that to Muslims, our community appears to be one of insiders who “have it made” in ways that they can only imagine. One of our students reported that this project made her more aware of her privileged status in this country.

Reading Sacred Texts

As Jews, we assumed that shared text study would be an obvious way to build relationships. Perhaps the most surprising learning to emerge from our program was how much more complicated the reality was. More than a few students commented that the requirement to study texts together, in *hevrutah* — one on one — was the most difficult part of their interactions with their Muslim peers.

We learned that the place of the Qur’an in the world of a believing Muslim cannot be overstated. Personal testimony helped to make this clear. In the middle of the semester, we brought Islamic feminist and scholar Amina Wadud to Philadelphia to speak at a synagogue. Wadud grew up as an African-American Christian, but as a young woman, she was given a gift that, in her words, “made all difference in my life to this moment — a copy of the Qur’an.” As she described it, “a romance began with sacred word and the sacred made manifest in language . . . I am still in a love affair with Qur’an.” Her words helped make sense of the statement by Mahmoud Ayoub, professor of Islamic studies and comparative religion at Temple University in Philadelphia, that while Muslims accept a human role in the scribing of the Qur’an, the Islamic science of textual study never questions the basic conviction that God revealed the Qur’an. He wrote, “To ask Muslims to doubt the divine origin of the Qur’an is to ask them to abandon Islam as a faith and a worldview.”¹⁷

Of course, the Muslims we heard from and met with differed radically among themselves in how they understood that statement. It is also the case that some of our students would say the very same thing about the Torah, if given an opportunity to speak with nuance about what they meant by those words. Nevertheless, we were

almost always bridging not only different textual traditions, but also different ways of thinking about the authority of scripture.

This is not to say that wonderful learning did not emerge from these sharings. One of our students spoke to her Muslim partner about the story of Abraham feeding the strangers (angels) in Genesis 18; she wanted to share emphasize the role of hospitality in her spiritual life. Her partner responded by flipping through the Qur'an and showing her all the places where angels appeared.

Another student and her Muslim partner, in planning a presentation before a Hebrew school class, initially thought they would model how to politely probe major similarities and differences between the two religions. But in the end, they went for something more risky. They decided to do a text study around a provocative question: What do children owe their parents? They used as their texts the fifth commandment in the Bible and the Qur'an passage involving Luqman's Advice to His Son in Sura 31: 13-19. Sidestepping the issue of hermeneutics and avoiding as well a simple "compare and contrast" model, they used their respective texts to jump-start an animated discussion about parent/child relationships.

Looking to the Future

As the semester came to a close, students often wondered how they would go about finding Muslim study partners in the places where they would next live and work. They wondered, as well, about the hurdles they might face as Jewish leaders advocating for stronger Jewish-Muslim connections. How could they play a positive role in their cities or towns? One student wrote, "After this course, I plan to make it my business to develop solid bonds with Muslim leaders before a crisis or conflict emerges in my community." At least by their stated intentions, most students confirmed my premise that increased knowledge and exposure would lead to higher motivation to engage with Muslims and to encourage other Jews to do so, as well.

We ended the semester by meeting with Raquel Ukeles, an Orthodox Jew who holds a doctorate in Islamic and Judaic Studies from Harvard University and who is now a post-doctoral fellow at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. She shared with us her evaluation of the current state of relations between Muslims and Jews on an institutional level.¹⁸ Ukeles encouraged us to judge individuals and groups based on their own stated positions, rather than on the positions of others with whom they might be affiliated. She reminded us that if we set the bar for political correctness (as we define it) too high, we would limit ourselves to a very small pool of Muslims

with whom to dialogue and collaborate. She said, “ I believe it is in the interest of the Jewish community to be active, open and risk-taking.”

In the two years that have elapsed since I initiated this course, enormous advances have taken place in Jewish-Muslim relations. At the national convention of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association in March, 2008, a session with Imam Yahya Hendi, the Muslim chaplain at Georgetown University in Washington, concluded with an opportunity, taken by many of the rabbis, to speak about successful efforts in Jewish-Muslim relations in their communities. In November, 2008, James Jones, a professor of Islam at Manhattanville College and President of Masjid Al-Islam in New Haven, Conn., spoke at the national convention of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation about his work with Jews on Middle East issues. A volume published by the Union for Reform Judaism in cooperation with the Islamic Society of North America includes a list of almost 20 American organizations that are promoting dialogue between Jews and Muslims.¹⁹ The proliferation of new initiatives suggests that this issue is growing in importance for both Muslims and Jews. Our learning curve is steep. For that reason — among others — it is a privilege to be a part of this work.

The author acknowledges the generosity of the Henry Luce Foundation for making this course possible, as well as the Middle East Center at the University of Pennsylvania and the Institute for Interreligious, Intercultural Dialogue at Temple University.

Notes

1. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu refers to the said, the unsaid and the unsayable.
2. Tippett, Krista, *Speaking of Faith: Why Religion Matters and How to Talk about It*. New York: Penguin, 2007.
3. Halevi, Yossi Klein, *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden: A Jew's Search for God with Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001, 9.
4. Adam Seligman, “Muslims and Jews: Conflict and Dialogue,” *Sh'ma*, May 2005, 8-10.
5. Eck, Diana, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001, 2.
6. U.S. Census Bureau data does not include the category of religion. The number of Muslims in America is a disputed statistic, ranging from the American Jewish Committee's estimate of 2.8 million to that of some Muslim organizations, which approximate a figure as high as 8 million or 9 million.

7. This point is made by Mark Cohen, professor of Near-Eastern studies at Princeton University, one of the guest speakers we hosted in our course. See his widely read and translated (recently, into Arabic) book, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995. Cohen also made more complex for us the issue of the so-called “Golden Age” of Jewish-Muslim harmony in Spain, and described the ways in which different groups have made polemical use of their readings of that period. See Ben-Yehuda, Roi, “False Memory: Misusing History in the Arab-Israeli Conflict,” *Zeek*, August 2007.

8. See, for example, Jewish talk-show host Dennis Prager’s challenge to U.S. Rep. Keith Ellison (D-Minn.), the first Muslim member of Congress; independent scholar Daniel Pipes’s Web site, jihadwatch.org; the Boston-based David Project Center for Jewish Leadership, a non-profit organization that describes itself as promoting a “fact-based understanding of the Arab-Israeli conflict; and the promotion by Aish HaTorah of the video “Obsession: Radical Islam’s War Against the West.”

9. Jews are frequently unaware that in 19th- and 20th-century Germany, Jews were in the forefront of establishing the field of Islamic studies, which they dominated until World War II. Susannah Heschel, who holds the Eli Black Chair of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College, shared this history with us when she was our guest at a public event.

10. Abdo, Geneive, *Mecca and Mainstreet: Muslim Life in America after 9/11*. New York: Oxford, 2006.

11. See pewresearch.org/pubs/483/muslim-americans.

12. RRC participated in this program throughout its existence, from 1990-2000.

13. See www.zaytuna.org/seminary.

14. The model I found most helpful in folding this work into our academic program was that of “service learning,” a form of education in which students acquire information, values and skills through a cycle of classroom work, reflection and meaningful experiences addressing community problems. This definition is adapted from information available at www.servicelearning.com.

15. Samuel Sandmel, “Parallelomania,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962): 1-13

16. Newhouse, Alana, “Abraham on Trial: Biblical Fad Tests Interfaith Dialogue,” *The Forward*, November 22, 2002.

17. Hinze and Omar (eds.), *Heirs of Abraham: The Future of Muslim, Jewish and Christian Relations*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005, 122. Ayoub’s remark is in response to a historical critical treatment by Judaic scholar Rabbi Reuven Firestone of his own sacred text, the Hebrew Bible.

18. Ukeles, Raquel, “Locating the Silent Muslim Majority: Policy Recommendations for Improving Muslim-Jewish Relations in the United States,” *Mosaica*, Winter 2003-4

19. Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, “Children of Abraham: Jews and Muslims in Conversation,” Washington D.C.: RAC, 2008.

Interfaith Service Learning: A New Model for Muslim-Jewish Dialogue?

NATHAN MARTIN

In February 2008, I joined a local Muslim imam and a group of 18 Jewish and Muslim students from the University of Michigan on a one-week service trip to the Gulf Coast to assist with relief work in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.¹ While university-sponsored service trips are not new, this marked the first time that a group of Jewish and Muslim students came together not only to engage in the important work of *tikkun*, repairing brokenness in the world, but also to pursue the explicit goal of deepening the connection and dialogue between the Jewish and Muslim communities on campus. This form of Jewish-Muslim interfaith engagement through service is still relatively new, and currently exists on only a handful of North American college campuses.

By and large, the 20 participants emerged from this experience with a deeper connection and respect for each other and with more open attitudes toward the two faith communities on campus.² As one Muslim student noted in a follow-up debriefing after the trip: “When I saw a Jewish student walking around campus with a *kippah*, I used to turn and walk the other way, because I just assumed that [he] would be intolerant of Muslims. Now, when I see someone like that, I get excited, because I know that there is so much that we share in common.”³ It seems that this formula of engagement in service work and dialogue can help Muslim

Rabbi Nathan Martin currently serves as the Assistant Director at the University of Michigan Hillel and co-chair of the U-M Association of Religious Counselors. Prior to his rabbinical work Nathan lived for a year in Cairo, Egypt, received a masters degree in International Relations from the Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies, and worked for several years in the field of energy efficiency policy research.

and Jewish communities break through the isolation that often separates them on college campuses and in other locales.

This article is designed to describe the service-dialogue model that we applied in the 2008 trip, to explore some key challenges we encountered and to reflect on ways both to improve upon and to apply this model elsewhere.

Forming

A crucial element to creating a strong esprit de corps among the participants was to create the space for strong group interaction before the trip. After the university selected students through a written and oral interview process, the group participated in 10 90-minute meetings, several fundraisers and a four-hour training session on interfaith dialogue skills led by the Interfaith Youth Core. At each meeting, a Jewish-Muslim student pair developed and facilitated a 20-minute interactive activity and the group also engaged in brief dyad listening exercises. The remainder of the meeting was dedicated to logistics, more structured dialogue or general education and learning. (Table 1)

Table 1: Preparatory Meeting Topics

Meeting	Topic
1	Introduction and icebreakers
2	General planning, “line” values-clarification exercise about class and privilege
3	Interfaith Youth Core Training on developing interfaith dialogue skills
4	Roosevelt Institute presentation about challenges in New Orleans
5	Fundraiser preparation; Martin Luther King Jr. Day presentation on justice and faith
6	Fundraiser
7	Discussion of what students find most meaningful in their religion
8	Discussion based on Spike Lee’s documentary film “When the Levees Broke”
9-10	Planning and logistics

While the formal dialogue aspect of the pre-trip gatherings was limited, these meetings did provide the framework for creating a certain amount of group cohesion by providing opportunities for students to work together for common goals. The Jewish-Muslim facilitator pairs developed and led creative and engaging activi-

ties; the group planned and executed various fund-raising projects together; and the brief learning and dialogue exercises helped to cultivate participants' listening skills — a necessary ingredient for the more intensive dialogues that took place during the trip itself. Also, given our limited time, we chose not to focus our interactions in the pre-trip meetings on controversial subjects, such as the Middle East conflict, and rather to focus on our life stories and personal experiences during the dialogue exercises.

The biggest pre-trip challenge was handling the competing objectives of fund-raising and dialogue. In order to finance the trip, the group needed to raise \$16,000 — an objective that took a tremendous amount of pre-trip organizing energy — thereby cutting into the time available for dialogue and more casual interaction.⁵ In ensuing years, we hope to move to a model in which pre-trip meetings could be dedicated primarily to dialogue, group building and social time, while spending limited time on fundraising and logistics.

The Immersion Experience

During the one-week service trip, the group spent 30 hours during four days working at four different sites in New Orleans that were managed by local non-profits that work with volunteer groups.⁶ Working at multiple sites gave participants exposure to the extensive nature of the damage throughout the city. They saw how the disaster had affected residents representing various socio-economic levels, and they also became aware of the differences in the ability of particular neighborhoods to recover. These experiences were both shocking and challenging for many students as they encountered the extent of the devastation in New Orleans more than two years after the storm.

On the Friday and Saturday of the trip, students participated in Friday prayers (*Jum'a*) and meetings with the Muslim community, as well as *Shabbat* prayers and interaction with the New Orleans Jewish community. In addition, students participated in about 20 hours of reflection and structured dialogue at the end of each workday. This activity included a discussion of Jewish and Muslim values and how they relate to the volunteer work, interpersonal dialogue sessions and structured dialogue sessions around specific interfaith topics. Nearly all of these discussion and reflection sessions were developed and facilitated by students, with some staff support. (Table 2)

Table 2. Learning and Dialogue Components of the Trip

Hours	Service Component
1	Discussion of Jewish-Muslim values related to helping those in need
2	Conversations about Jewish-Muslim identity
3	Conversations with Jewish and Muslim community leaders about their respective communities and their response to Hurricane Katrina
4	Reflection/processing of volunteer service experience
5	Structured dialogue on specific interfaith topics: the role of women in Judaism/ Islam, tension between tradition and modernity, the role of physicality (e.g., food, fasting, contact between the sexes)
6	Attending and observing various ritual traditions

As a model, this service-rich and dialogue-rich immersion schedule has its benefits. Participants have the time to focus and to engage each other while everyone struggles to adjust to an unfamiliar environment. They have an opportunity to reflect on differences in faith, theology and practice in ways that move beyond the personal. And they have more opportunities to take on leadership roles as group facilitators.

At the same time, structured conversations and dialogue require a fair amount of preparation. Facilitating useful dialogue is a skill that needs to be developed among participants who vary in their background and training. Also, the preparation of relevant materials requires more time than students can reasonably be expected to invest. In the future, such efforts could well be shared by several groups or perhaps funded as a joint project involving Jewish and Muslim seminaries.

We learned from the ambitious dialogue schedule that “less is more.” Almost half of the dialogues took place on Friday and Saturday, which led to a degree of “burnout,” despite the best intentions of all the participants.

Becoming Better Allies by Confronting Conflict

Some of the best learning and engagement among participants actually took place around conflicts and challenges that emerged within the group during the course of the week. By working through such conflicts (and, sometimes, by not working through them), participants gained a deeper understanding of what it

means to be Muslim or a Jew and, ultimately, how students can become better allies. The conflicts are identified in the table below and elucidated in the discussion that follows.

Table 3: Conflict and Ally Formation Summary

<p style="text-align: center;">Becoming Allies to Jews</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Observing kashrut as a group deepened Muslim sensitivity to Jewish dietary sensitivities and needs.• Conflicts over the Friday night Jewish prayer format exposed the Muslims to the divisions between liberal and Orthodox perspectives and practices in the Jewish community.• Muslim students were faced with having to cope with or explain triumphalist language used in a Friday sermon at a local mosque. <p style="text-align: center;">Becoming Allies to Muslims</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Jewish students saw firsthand the difficulties of travel for Muslims after some of the Muslim students were stopped at airport security.• Jewish students better appreciated the dedication and commitment Muslims devote to their daily prayer practice.• Jewish students had to deal with the Muslim participants' disappointment over the fact that the trip contained more Jewish programming than Muslim programming

Kashrut

Since the group prepared their meals communally, the participants had to develop a policy and approach around *kashrut* and *hallal*. They decided to use two sets of cookware (strictly kosher and other) and to have the food preparers (Jews and Muslims) use both sets while being careful not to render any utensils treyf (non-kosher). This meant that most people in the group, Jews included, had to change their standard way of preparing food, and that more time and care had to go into the preparation of each meal and into the training and supervision of cooks.

Friday Night Jewish Prayer

The Jewish student participants came from a variety of backgrounds: liberal, secular and Orthodox. While these differences were generally muted in pre-trip meetings, they did emerge during the discussion about how to structure Friday night services. With limited planning time, we decided to have the Friday night services (*kabbalat Shabbat*) follow the Orthodox norm of having separate seating

for men and women. We would then follow with combined seating for *ma'ariv* following liberal norms. One non-Orthodox student became visibly upset when she realized that there would be a *mekhitza* (a curtain separating the men and women) for some of the Friday prayers.⁷ As the Muslim participants witnessed the Jewish students trying — and failing — to find a prayer setting that would satisfy both the Orthodox and liberal students among them, they were able to appreciate the diversity that exists within the Jewish community around practice — even as the Muslims tended to identified with the more traditional point of view.

***Jum'a* Prayer Sermon**

The group attended Friday prayer in a mosque located in one of poorer, primarily African-American, sections of New Orleans. Because the regular imam was out of town, an elder layperson from the community delivered the *khutba* (sermon) — and he did so with a decidedly triumphalist tone. The speaker claimed that Christianity and Judaism, while both honorable religions, ultimately represent the wrong path in comparison with Islam, and that Muslims should be working hard to convey that message to the world. Parts of the *khutba* upset several of the Jewish students. They later expressed their feelings at a debriefing, noting that the marginalization of Jews is a longstanding part of anti-Semitic rhetoric. The discussion sensitized the Muslim students — especially those who had not initially realized the hurtful impact of the sermon — to the Jewish students' feelings.

Travel

On our way to New Orleans, several Muslim student participants were briefly detained in the Detroit airport, both at check-in and during the security check. (A student had joked about this happening in a “hopes and fears” exercise the previous week). This was eye-opening for some of the Jewish students, who were able to see up close the additional challenges their friends faced because of racial/ethnic profiling.

Muslim Daily Prayer

Many of the Muslim participants prayed five times daily, beginning with the early-morning sunrise prayer (*fajr*). For many of the Jewish participants for whom prayer was not a daily practice, it was a powerful example of dedication to spiritual practice. Additionally, Jewish students had to negotiate how to best support

their Muslim peers during the afternoon prayers that took place at public sites. This often took the form of welcoming them back to the volunteer project or using the post-prayer time as an opportunity to have some informal dialogue about the role of prayer in their lives.

Programming

In a programming oversight, more time was scheduled for communal participation in Jewish ritual (and meetings with local Jewish communities) than for participation in Muslim ritual and meetings with Muslim communities. This created a tension that, while discussed, was not fully resolved. Some Muslim participants felt shortchanged by this imbalance. The Jewish students became more sensitized about the challenges of marginalization that the Muslim students were experiencing — as well as about their role in unconsciously supporting this marginalization.

Dealing with such conflicts actually played a valuable role in strengthening the bonds within the group and in sensitizing the participants more deeply to the complexity of Jewish and Muslim identities in our society. While conflict is not a component that can be formally structured into a trip, a certain amount of it is likely to emerge. If participants build up a sense of security and mutual trust, then they may actually share the pain they are experiencing and empathize with each other — an important step in ally formation. If group tension is minimal, then it actually might be worthwhile for group leaders to consider introducing some tension into the proceedings (perhaps by pointing out imbalances that exist) to deepen the participants' engagement. Clearly, if we had not experienced and processed conflict during our trip, we would not have learned as much.

Next Steps

In the aftermath of the Jewish-Muslim service-learning trip, many of the participants have maintained connections with each other and they have helped to spread the word about this work to the Muslim and Jewish communities on campus. The success of the first trip has led us to rethink the structure for the coming trip, which is planned for February 2009. In addition to the intensive schedule of pre-trip meetings, we hope to: a) include formal discussions about the Middle East conflict, b) build in a post-trip engagement component for participants and c) find ways to connect participants to other interfaith service and dialogue opportunities on campus.

But the larger challenge in beginning any new initiative, especially an interfaith one, is to find ways to institutionalize it more broadly on campus. I envision the Jewish-Muslim service-learning trip to some day be one of many interfaith trips in which students could choose to participate. And while there has been some buy-in to this concept at the University of Michigan, especially at its Ginsberg Center for Service Learning,⁸ it is still not clear whether this concept will take root in today's campus environment, where so many interests compete for limited student attention and institutional funding.

While this project was designed with the campus community in mind, with some adjustment it may be applicable to synagogues and mosques as well, given enough professional and lay support. Perhaps service learning can pick up where more traditional dialogues have left off and create a new path to seeing the commonality in our perceived differences.

Notes

1. The trip, called "MuJew o8" was a collaboration between the University of Michigan Hillel and students from the campus's Muslim Student Association. The co-staff person was Imam Radwan Mardini, a longtime participant in interfaith dialogue work in Michigan. The group is indebted to the financial support of International Hillel Weinberg Tzedek, the Michigan Hillel Consortium, the U-M Ginsberg Center for Service Learning, the Michigan Student Assembly, the American Muslim Center, and many other contributors.
2. Given limited time and funding, we conducted a post-trip online survey that asked students, among other questions, what their main insights were from the trip. The majority reported that they were most pleased by seeing similarities among individuals that they did not realize existed, the opportunity to develop friendships, and being able to see the person and not just the stereotype in the opposing group. There is an opportunity here for more research on the long-term impact of interfaith service learning on shaping attitudes toward other faith communities.
3. Post-trip debriefing, student name withheld for confidentiality.
4. The Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) is a national organization based out of Chicago that seeks to build mutual respect and pluralism among young people from different religious traditions by empowering them to work together to serve others. (See www.ifyc.org for more information.)
5. It is important to emphasize the role of humor and casual interactions (e.g., ice-breakers) as necessary and often overlooked ingredients in group formation.
6. Volunteer activities included removing dead growth in City Park, clearing out debris in the Lower Ninth Ward, repainting a community center and clearing out lawns and yards in the Lakeview district.

7. A *mekhitza* is a barrier that separates males from females. The separation of the sexes is a norm in Orthodox prayer settings.

8. The Ginsberg Center has hired a 2008-2009 AmeriCorps fellow to develop interfaith service learning and dialogue opportunities more broadly on campus.

In the Hands of Our Children: Collaborative Social Service for Jewish and Muslim Teens

SUSAN FRIEDMAN

“Celebrating! Learning! Service!” This catchphrase of the annual Greater Philadelphia Martin Luther King Day of Service aptly describes the spirit of a partnership that has existed between the Robert Saligman Middle School of the Perelman Jewish Day School and the Al Aqsa Muslim School for the past eight years. As students from these schools honor the everlasting spirit of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. on the Day of Service each year, they also engage in a *hesed* and learning project together.

As Todd Bernstein, founder and executive director of the Greater Philadelphia Martin Luther King Day of Service, has stated, “The national King Day of Service was created in 1994 through federal legislation, co-authored by former Pennsylvania U.S. Senator Harris Wofford and Georgia Congressman John Lewis, both veterans of the civil rights movement with Dr. King. The act called for the transformation of the King federal holiday from simply a ‘day off’ into a ‘day on’ of active citizenship and service.”

Robert Saligman Middle School, a Solomon Schechter affiliate, opened its doors on September 7, 2001. Among our list of dreams, right from the start, was a strong desire to help our children appreciate how meaningful community service can be and how much the quality of our own lives improves as we learn to value, understand and accept the traditions and customs of others. It is important for children

Susan Friedman is the Principal of the Robert Saligman Middle School in Elkins Park, PA.

to celebrate the commonalities as well as the differences that make all of us who we are.

Therefore, in the fall of 2001, we had the idea to invite Al Aqsa Muslim School to join us in our observance of Martin Luther King's birthday. That first year, we were guests of Al Aqsa and began a dialogue with one another, discussing our many shared attributes, such as holiday rituals, dietary habits, dress codes and social morés. Since then, we have had the privilege of partnering with Al Aqsa every year in a social-service project that integrates interreligious dialogue and learning with service to community.

In January of 2007, both of our schools were the very proud recipients of the ninth annual Harris Wofford Active Citizenship Award, presented to Robert Saligman Middle School and Al Aqsa Muslim School for our many years of partnership and participation in the Greater Philadelphia Martin Luther King Day of Service and our ongoing commitment to building better intergroup understanding. There is no finer honor, as we firmly believe that peace lies in the hands of our children!

Saving Each Other, Saving Ourselves*

EBOO PATEL

My heart has grown capable of taking on all forms
It is a pasture for gazelles
A table for the Torah
A convent for Christians
Ka'bah for the Pilgrim
Whichever the way love's caravan shall lead
That shall be the way of my faith.

—Ibn Arabi

“My dear brothers and sisters, Assalamu Alaikum. I come to you in this beautiful house of worship with the Muslim greeting of peace.” It is February 2004 and I am listening to Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf give the Sunday sermon at Riverside Church. He talked about Islam as a tradition meant for all places and times, a faith that had sustained billions of followers for over a thousand years and contributed enormous quantities of beauty to human civilization. Imam Feisal wore a traditional white robe from the Middle East, and his accent bore the traces of his past, the Arab world,

* *From Acts of Faith by Eboo Patel. Copyright © 2007 by Eboo Pael. Reprinted with permission of Beacon Press, Boston. Eboo Patel is the founder and executive director of the Interfaith Youth Core, an international nonprofit building the interfaith youth movement. He is a regular guest on Chicago Public Radio, a regular panelist for the Washington Post/Newsweek On Faith blog, and a frequent contributor to the op-ed pages of The Chicago Tribune. He serves on the Boards of the International Interfaith Center, CrossCurrents Magazine and Duke University's Islamic Studies Center and is also an active member of the Council on Foreign Relations' Religious Advisory Committee and the EastWest Institute's Task Force on American Muslims. He is the co-editor of Building the Interfaith Youth Movement: Beyond Dialogue to Action.*

Malaysia, England. But his message was about the here and now. In that church where King gave his famous speech against the Vietnam War, Imam Feisal talked about the emergence of a twenty-first century American Islam.

I approached Imam Feisal after his sermon and told him about the Interfaith Youth Core. He resonated with the vision immediately, and suggested I visit him and his wife Daisy Khan at their home the following evening. The living room of their apartment on the upper west side was set up like a mosque, with prayer rugs stretched from wall to wall. I arrived at dusk, prayed the *maghrib* prayer with Daisy and Imam Feisal, and then talked with them about how America, with its unique combination of religious devotion and religious diversity, was the ideal place for a renewal of Islam. "In the twentieth century, Catholicism and Judaism underwent profound transformations in America," Imam Feisal observed. "I think, this century, in America, Islam will do the same." Imam Feisal believed that it was young American Muslims, a generation both unabashedly American and unmistakably Muslim, who would be the shaping force in American Islam. And he hoped that my generation in America could reach out to our peers across the Muslim world, approximately seventy percent of whom were under thirty years old, and we could renew Islam together.

Islam is a religion that has always been revitalized by its migration. The waters of the faith, says one scholar, are so clear that they pick up the colors of the rocks they flow over. Islam in India looks Indian; in China, Chinese. The cultural tradition of contemporary Islam owes enormous amounts to Indian architecture, Persian cuisine, Turkish poetry, Arabic calligraphy and Greek philosophy. What colors will America add to Islam?

America is a nation that has been constantly rejuvenated by immigrants. For centuries, they have added new notes to the American song. There is now a critical mass of Muslims in America. About seventy-five percent are people who undertook a geographic migration, coming from South Asia, the Middle East and various parts of Africa. Approximately twenty-five percent are those born in the United States, mostly African-Americans, who chose the spiritual migration of conversion. Most estimates put the total population of Muslims at six million, about the same as the number of Jews in America and almost triple the number of Episcopalians. What notes will Islam contribute to the America song?

Imam Feisal introduced me to a community answering both questions at once. At the Muslim Leaders of Tomorrow conference that he and Daisy convened in

the spring of 2004, I met the best of my generation of Muslims: artists and bankers, African American converts and Middle Eastern immigrants, Sunnis and Shias, women who wore headscarves and women who didn't. We woke up early to do sufi chants with Imam Feisal, had heated debates over how best to participate in American politics and rolled off our chairs laughing at the act of Muslim comedian Azhar Usman. Three themes emerged in the discussion: Islam had to be a big tent for all believers, not a small room for only the purists; Muslims needed to contribute to all aspects of human civilization, not obsess exclusively over a handful of causes; and American Muslims needed to be just as concerned with the future of the country we lived in as we were about the places of Islam's glorious past.

I had grown up comfortable with diversity but unclear about my identity. Finally, I had found a community I could call my own.

Growing Up in a Jewish Bubble

Jen had the opposite experience. Her parents wanted Jen to have a strong Jewish identity, so they raised her entirely within a Jewish bubble. She grew up in a Jewish neighborhood, attended a Jewish school and went to Jewish summer camps. One day, at a restaurant, Jen grew visibly upset around a dark-skinned employee. Her mother realized that Jen's discomfort was based on her limited contact with non-Jews, and that if Jen was going to make her way in a diverse world, she needed to come out of the Jewish cocoon. How to do that while maintaining a strong Jewish identity? Jen's parents hoped the Interfaith Youth Core's Chicago Youth Council (CYC) would help.

Sayyeda, a young woman from a traditional Muslim family, joined at about the same time Jen did. I watched them, a devout Jew and a devout Muslim, each raised in the bubble of their own community, slowly come to know one another. They built their relationship by volunteering next to one another — tutoring children, spending time with senior citizens, painting the walls of community centers. After a particularly challenging afternoon with refugee children on the north side of Chicago, I saw Sayyeda recite to Jen Sura Asr from the Qur'an, about the importance of staying patient while doing good work. During an interfaith discussion on the importance of teachers in different religions, Jen talked about a famous Jewish scholar named Rashi, and how he gave his daughters the same duties as his sons. I could see Sayyeda's mind working away on that idea. She had spent the last several years thinking about gender issues within Islam, and hearing Jen point

to Rashi had made her curious about whether Islam had a similar teacher. They also had several lighter moments together. Before leading a discussion on shared values between religious communities at Catholic Theological Union, the two of them slipped away to the restroom together. They came out laughing hysterically. “What’s so funny?” I asked. They had been trading the prayers that Jews and Muslims say while using the bathroom.

“Honestly, it’s like talking to another Muslim,” Sayyeda said of their friendship. “I have the same relationship with Jen as I do with some of my Muslim friends. I find that kind of ironic.”

Jen nodded. “Anyone spiritual goes through very similar struggles in their lives. Would I go to Sayyeda to talk about how to practice modesty? Absolutely, because she’s exemplary in her modesty. Even if we have different traditions, we still grapple with the same ideas.”

One of the ideas that Jen and Sayyeda both grappled with was being committed to your own tradition while empathizing with the other person’s perspective. During one CYC meeting, Sayyeda confessed: “It seems like most of my life I’ve only been looking at one side. I’m struggling with this idea of seeing both sides. I’ve been opened up to these new cultures, these new faiths, new people. I guess it’s better to open up the lid in a box than to just close it.” She explained that she had not gone to a protest on behalf of Palestine because she didn’t feel like concrete solutions were offered, and she didn’t feel right about just denouncing Jews.

Jen’s eyes flipped wide open as she listened to Sayyeda. “I was invited to go to the anti-protest to that Palestinian rally. And as much as I support Israel, never would I go and protest someone else, and it’s probably out of a direct relationship with you,” she said, gesturing to Sayyeda.

“See, yeah, that’s it,” Sayyeda said. “I used to look at a newspaper and see a heading that says, ‘Palestinian terrorist blows himself up,’ and as sad as this sounds, I could understand why. But now, it seems like there are much better alternatives than to turn to violence.”

“We had a really pro-Israeli event at my Jewish youth group and somebody told the story of an Islamic leader being assassinated and people started clapping. I was about to stand up and say, ‘What are you doing? That’s a human life. You can’t clap when somebody dies.’” She choked back tears, and then continued. “I find myself in every situation arguing the opposite side, because now I know you and I see both sides.”

“Same here,” said Sayyeda.

We talked about the Muslim concept of being a mercy upon all the worlds. Jen brought up the saying of Rabbi Hillel: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I?” Understanding the other person’s point of view, we determined, was a core value in both Islam and Judaism.

The Heart of Pluralism

To see the other side, to defend another people, not despite your tradition but because of it, is the heart of pluralism. It was this same ethic that I saw exemplified in the Indian art film *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer*. It is about a young Muslim photographer and a young Hindu housewife who come from very different backgrounds and have very different temperaments but find themselves on the same cross-country bus. The bus stalls in a part of the country where riots are raging. Muslim and Hindu mobs are roaming the area and murdering people of the other religion. A group of extremist Hindus climb aboard the bus and start checking IDs. They murder the ones with Muslim names. When they approach the young Muslim photographer, the Hindu woman stops them and says that he is her husband. The two finally escape the Hindu extremists on the bus and make it out to a nearby village only to find themselves in the midst of a group of Muslim extremists. The photographer risks his life to protect the woman and the baby, claiming that they are his own.

I saw the film in a theater in Bombay. I thought about the times when my family had to lock themselves in their home for fear of the raging Hindu and Muslim mobs on the streets of their city. I thought about my own failure to protect my Jewish friend in high school when people targeted his religion for ridicule. I thought about what the young religious extremists we read about in the news every day could have been if different influences had gotten to them first. I thought about the meaning of pluralism in a world where the forces that seek to divide us are strong. I came to one conclusion: We have to save each other, it’s the only way to save ourselves.

Circumcising Yourself: Reflections on the Challenges of Jewish Continuity and Authenticity

LEON WIENER DOW

How do we know that a father is obligated to circumcise his son? As it is written, “And Abraham circumcised his child Isaac” (Genesis 21:4). And how do we know that when the child’s father did not circumcise him, the [community’s] court is obligated to do so? As it is written, “. . . You shall circumcise every male child amongst you” (Genesis 17:10). And how do we know that if the court fails to circumcise him, he must circumcise himself? As it is written, “And an uncircumcised male who fails to circumcise the flesh of his foreskin [shall be cut off from his people, for he has broken my covenant]”

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Kiddushin* 29a

We have here an absolutely astonishing passage of Talmud. Its attentive-but-playful reading of the verses from Genesis is magnificent — but its literary qualities are overshadowed by its message: If no one circumcised me, I have to do it myself. It sounds very demanding — and very painful.

This passage occurs amid a broader discussion of the mutual obligations between parents and children. Immediately prior to this passage, the Talmud quotes an early rabbinic source that offers the following list of what a father must do for his son: circumcise him, conduct *pidyon ha-ben*, the ritual redemption of a first-born son, teach him Torah, marry him off, teach him a trade, and — according

Leon Wiener Dow is the founder and former director of Ta Shma (now a division of Melitz). He currently teaches Talmud and Jewish Thought at BINA’s Secular Yeshiva in Tel Aviv and at Kolot. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and their five children and is completing his doctorate in philosophy at Bar Ilan University.

to some authorities — teach him how to swim. The latter three obligations clearly aim to establish the child's long-term welfare, offering him the tools with which he can survive in the world. The former three obligations, however, entail the father's discharging a different sort of obligation: He must bring his son into the Jewish community, offering him the tools for Jewish survival.

Let us now return to the text cited above. Some consider the crises of Jewish meaning and survival that we encounter today to be unprecedented — and they may be right. But they can at least take comfort in the fact that the first substantive question that the Talmud asks upon citing that list of parental obligations is: What should we do when there is a breakdown of responsibility? That is, the Talmud asks the very same question so many Jewish communities ask today: What do we do when parents have not brought their child into the Jewish fold? In the passage above, the Talmud asks what to do when the parent fails to circumcise the child; in subsequent parallel passages, it asks the same question regarding a parent's failure to redeem the firstborn child or to teach the child Torah (on 29a and 29b, respectively).

All three discussions consist of the same succinct structure. The question begins: If the father does not discharge his obligation to his son, upon whom does the burden fall? The Talmud responds: The community must make amends for the father's failure, and a court must perform the circumcision. Should the community fail to do so, then what? The answer: The child must act on his own — presumably, once he has entered adulthood.

A Deeper Discourse

What appears to be a technical discussion masks a much deeper discourse. For what does it mean for a father to fail to circumcise his son or to teach him Torah? (For the purposes of this discussion, I will ignore the issue of *pidyon ha-ben*, partly because its symbolic meaning is a bit more obtuse, but primarily because it applies only to a firstborn.) It means that the child did not receive a Jewish upbringing, for while the home may have been nominally Jewish, the parents failed to provide that most basic indicator of Jewish belonging (for males, of course!) — circumcision. The parents left no Jewish imprint, so to speak, on their child. They failed to provide their child with a Jewish education — an immersion in Torah — simultaneously the child's means of participation in the Jewish world and the great mechanism of survival for the Jewish community in the larger world.

So, in fact, these conversations are the Talmud's way of getting at the deeper issue: What do we do when there is a crisis of continuity? And this is not just any crisis; it is a deep one, for the failure was not only that of the parents. Their backup — the community and its representatives (the court) — failed, as well. When such a child reaches adulthood, he will realize that the most basic makings of his Jewish existence are lacking. He knows nothing Jewish; he looks like a non-Jew, foreskin and all. He has been failed by the community that wants to claim him as one of its own as well as by the tradition with which he is supposed to provide himself spiritual and intellectual sustenance — and that he, in turn, is expected to pass on. He is left floating in the air, ungrounded in his community or his textual tradition. In fact, chances are that, to him, they don't feel like "his" at all.

This, of course, should sound familiar; it echoes the situation that so many Jews find themselves in today — in the Diaspora, no doubt, and also in Israel. (In Israel, many "secular" Jews — two generations or more after the forging of a secular, nationalistic Jewish identity that rebelled against the existent religious Jewish self-conceptualization — find themselves in a peculiar, Hebrew-Zionist version of the same struggle that Jews of the Diaspora are undergoing.) Tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands of Jews find themselves to be of Jewish ancestry, but lacking in the most basic elements that identify them as Jews — to others or to themselves, outwardly or inwardly. Continuity does not exist. Here, I refer to "continuity" not as a euphemistic catchword for the survival of Judaism or the Jewish people, but rather in a more literal sense, as an inter-generational shared discourse on issues of identity and meaning. The Talmud is describing a crisis that is spawned by a rupture with the past — a discontinuity.

Many (perhaps most) of the Jews who find themselves in this space feel no emptiness, no sense of loss or crisis. They go about their lives as individuals, joining whichever hegemonic community attracts their allegiance. But for those who struggle with the issue, the pain is indelible. How am I to "recover" what I never had? How am I to "invent" myself as a link in a chain of tradition, when, in fact, I am unattached? How am I to gain a sense of Jewish authenticity when I find myself in a Jewish vacuum? How can I start to "speak Jewish" when I have no knowledge of Hebrew and not the slightest acquaintance with the textual tradition? How can I utter Jewish words of prayer when the words are foreign to me at every level? How can I celebrate Jewish observance when the tradition's guidelines constantly refer me back to a received tradition I did not grow up knowing? Every step toward

establishing some kind of rapprochement with my Jewish past seems enormous. When I dare to traverse the terrain, my footing is slippery; and when I get “there,” it feels uncomfortable, unnatural, artificial — inauthentic.

Jean Amery, one of Europe’s leading intellectuals of the 20th century, an Auschwitz survivor whose father was Jewish, discovered his Jewish identity upon reading the Nuremberg Laws in a newspaper while at a café in his hometown of Vienna. Amery puts it thus:

If being a Jew means sharing a religious creed with other Jews, participating in Jewish cultural and family tradition, cultivating a Jewish national ideal, then I find myself in a hopeless situation. I don’t believe in the God of Israel. I know very little about Jewish culture. I see myself as a boy at Christmas, plodding through a snow-covered village to midnight mass; I don’t see myself in a synagogue. I hear my mother appealing to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph when minor household misfortune occurred; I hear no adjuration of the Lord in Hebrew. The picture of my father . . . did not show me a bearded Jewish sage, but rather a Tyrolean Imperial Rifleman in the uniform of the First World War. . . .

Certainly, it could be argued that heritage can be acquired, ties established, and that therefore to be a Jew could be a matter of voluntary decision. . . . I have the freedom to choose to be a Jew, and this freedom is my very personal and universally human privilege. That is what I am assured of.

But do I really have it? I don’t believe so. . . . One can re-establish the link with a tradition that one has lost, but one cannot freely invent it for oneself[;] that is the problem. Since I was not a Jew, I am not one; and since I am not one, I won’t be able to become one. . . . Everyone must be who he was in the first years of his life, even if later these were buried under. No one can become what he cannot find in his memories (Amery, pp. 82-84).

Amery’s claim is a powerful one: We cannot authentically invent a tradition for

ourselves, for beneath — and infinitely more powerful than — the conscious levels of identity that we garb as adults lurk layers of de facto belonging that defined us as children. Our authentic selves are woven out of the fabric of our deepest memories, and so our later, adult attempts to invent tradition will inevitably result in a tear in that fabric — and an accompanying sense of alienation.

The Talmud — in this passage and elsewhere (I am thinking especially of a passage in *Bava Metzia* 58b, based on the Mishnah there, and also of *Brakhot* 34b and *Yoma* 87a) — revolts against this rather ominous vision of how the individual's sense of personal identity and communal belonging are constituted. However, like Amery, the Talmud emphasizes the ineluctable holding power of our memories of "home." That is why the obligations to circumcise and to teach Torah are initially assigned to the parent — and, barring that, to the child's hegemonic community. But to reduce everything that we are — and all that we can be — to what our parents or home-community offered us during our childhood is to underestimate greatly the power of the human spirit to determine and create meaning for itself.

A Bridge to the Past

The Talmud here urges that as adults, we can — and, in fact, we have an obligation — to circumcise ourselves, to teach ourselves Torah. We cannot hide behind the failures of our parents or our community, claiming that a link to the past is irrecoverable. Notice that in saying this, the Talmud has not merely tried to stir us from our laziness. In fact, quite ingeniously, in the very act of making this demand of us, the Talmud has provided us with a bridge to the past — for being commanded is a form of belonging. (I would argue that this is true generally speaking — but regardless of the accuracy of this statement as a general truth, it is certainly irrefutable that the Jewish tradition views being commanded as a privileged expression of belonging.) That is, by commanding us as adults to circumcise ourselves — to teach ourselves Torah — the Talmud has established the very link to the past that our parents and communities have failed to provide.

As we anticipated upon first reading the passage, the process of circumcising ourselves, so to speak, once we have come into adulthood is, of course, extremely demanding, arduous and painful. Yet the Talmud has now assured us that regardless of our feelings of inadequacy or alienation (or perhaps alongside them), our actions are Jewishly authentic.

Of course, I have learned so many things from my father (and continue to learn! *Ad me'ah ve-esreem!*) — about being a person; about being a Jew; and about living a life of integrity, sensitivity and responsibility. But one of the greatest and most inspiring things to have witnessed was my father's assumption of the yoke of Jewish learning as an adult. He grew up in a very Jewish home. His parents, Lily and Harry Dow, lived as Jews ethnically, ideologically and religiously. But deep Jewish learning and a substantial familiarity with Torah were not among the blessings he received from his home or his community. So what did he do? After-hours, late at night, once he had come home from the office and before finishing off more dictations for the next day, he took private Hebrew lessons. He taught himself *Pirkei Avot* and *Talmud*, and he studied the weekly Torah portion, crafting a weekly Shabbat discussion that ostensibly was designed to provide learning for his children, but also, I surmise, to foster intellectual and spiritual sustenance for himself. During the day, he offered us a link in an unbroken chain of tradition. What we did not know or fully understand was that he stayed up working late into the night in order to repair the chain — closing, or inventing, a link of his own. In so doing, he taught me this talmudic lesson on Jewish continuity and authenticity long before I found it on *Kiddushin* 29a.

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New York and the Cosmopolitan Jewish City

ALAN T. LEVENSON

“If you live in New York or any other big city, you are Jewish. It doesn’t matter if you’re Catholic; if you live in New York, you’re Jewish. If you live in Butte, Montana, you’re going to be goyish even if you’re Jewish.”

— Lenny Bruce, “Jewish and Goyish”

“Not only is New York the nation’s melting pot, it is also the casserole and charcoal grill.”

— Fran Leibowitz, “Metropolitan Diaries”

“Even the bums in New York are talented.”

— Walter Lippmann

Alan Levenson is Schusterman Professor of Jewish Religious and Intellectual History at the University of Oklahoma. He has been a visiting professor at the College of William and Mary, John Carroll University and Case Western Reserve University. He is the author of Modern Jewish Thinkers: An Introduction (Jason Aronson, 2000), Between Philosemitism and Antisemitism: German Defenses of Jews and Judaism (University of Nebraska Press, 2004) and The Story of Joseph: A Jewish Journey of Interpretation (William & Mary, 2006), as well as numerous essays on German-Jewry, modern Jewish thought and pedagogy. He has received fellowships from Tel Aviv University, the American Council of Learned Societies, the German Academic Exchange Program and the Littauer Foundation. He is currently at work on a popular book titled, The Making of the Modern Jewish Bible.

I. A Proposed Dichotomy: Cosmopolitan and Insular Jewish Cities

My hypothesis is a simple one: New York is the greatest representative of an infrequently celebrated Jewish tradition that I will term “the cosmopolitan Jewish city.”

There have been others: Alexandria in the first centuries BCE and CE, Cordova-Seville in the 11th century, Amsterdam in the 17th century and Vienna-Berlin in the late 19th/early 20th centuries. These cosmopolitan Jewish cities shared certain qualities: They had big populations and they were established — that is, they were not new settlements. They had wealthy, successful and diverse roles; they enjoyed decent to favorable political status; and, perhaps most of all, they had a receptive gentile population that enabled these Jewries to make extraordinary contributions to the general culture while at the same time generating various and intense expressions of their Jewishness.

I distinguish these cosmopolitan cities from insular ones. For instance, as far as we know, no non-Jews attended the great rabbinic academies of Sura and Pumbedita. The Babylonia of the rabbis and Geonim was self-contained.¹ Nor, unlike the Alexandrian model, do we have any record of Babylonian impact in any other cultural arena beyond Torah. Rashi's Troyes — like most settlements in medieval Europe — was really just a town, and not a city at all. And the Jews of Northern Europe authored precious few Latin works. The point here is not to disparage the Geonim of Babylonia in the ninth and 10th centuries, or the Tosafists of 12th-century France, for both groups forged highly creative cultures. But the elite products of these cultures were fundamentally insular, nourished principally by Jewish intellectual influences, and interesting mainly to other Jews of their own and subsequent eras.

When we enter modernity, with its generally greater incidence and intensity of Jewish-gentile interaction, we still find few analogues to this cosmopolitan model. The Jewish Warsaw of Y.L. Peretz outnumbered any Jewish city of its day except New York, but it had little impact on an unreceptive, anti-semitic Polish culture. Of Vilna's 200,000 residents before the Second World War, fully 60,000 were Jewish. Yet, Lucy Dawidowicz recalls, “You could live a full life in Vilna for a year, as I did, or even a lifetime, as many Vilna Jews did, speaking only Yiddish, without knowing much Polish or knowing it well” (Davidowicz, 1989, p. 37). The Jews of Odessa, another large city in the Pale of Settlement,

enjoyed economic and political tolerance rare for the Czarist regime, and a constrained (Jewish) religious establishment, to boot. Nevertheless, Steven Zipperstein makes little claim that Odessan Jewry deeply influenced the surrounding culture — although it surely did produce a Jewish Renaissance at the end of the 19th century. As we travel westward in the 19th century, the picture gets more complicated. Hillel Kieval stresses the ambiguity of Jewish identification in Prague (the 1930 Jewish population was about 35,000). Like the Jewish communities of Budapest, Cracow and Posen, Prague Jewry embraced the politically/culturally dominant Germans at midcentury, then experienced a drift toward the local, ethnically dominant cultures of Hungary, Bohemia and Poznan. Sean Martin's book on Cracow probably goes furthest in stressing the acculturation of an Eastern European Jewish population: "The overwhelming majority of Jewish children attended Polish schools where the primary language of instruction was Polish" (Martin, pp. 240-241). Yet Martin also stops shy of claiming a two-way flow of influence: Cracow Jews were Polonized; Cracow's Poles did not "Judaize," however one wants to define that term. In sum, Eastern Europe comprised cities as well as *shtetls*, but the external environment simply precluded large-scale, two-way interaction.

We would expect the metropolises of Western Europe in the modern era to yield some examples closer to the New York model. By the beginning of the 20th century, London's East End and Paris's Pletzl had lots of Jews and less anti-semitism than Warsaw, but English and French culture expected high levels of conformity. Todd Endelman, the dean of British-Jewish historians, has emphasized time and again that the German model of intellectual achievement and high drama simply does not describe the Jews of Georgian England. Benjamin Disraeli worked his Jewish identity to advantage, but he could not have become prime minister had he not been baptized as a child and raised in the Church of England. I do not think any scholar would claim that either English or French (or Italian) Jewries had a profound impact on their host cultures.² Western Jews in the modern era succeeded as individuals, and even as Jewish communities, but they did not greatly impact the majority culture. Possibly, as the anti-Semitic Prussian historian Heinrich von Treitschke claimed, there were simply too few of us in the West to matter.³ More likely, England and France, unlike Germany or America, had better-defined national identities that did not provide the impetus for Jews to make their mark in so noticeable a fashion. This much is certain: Paris and London had large Jewish populations and relatively open societies, but did not produce anything akin to the late 19th-century

German-Jewish grandees sketched so memorably in Stephen Birmingham's "Our Crowd," or the New York "intellectuals" of the 1940s and 1950s. Neither did they offer the mind-boggling cornucopia of religious and cultural opportunities currently available. Google "New York and Jewish" (without the quotation marks) today and you get some 33 million "hits."

The last couple of paragraphs read like a standard paean to American "exceptionalism" — the claim that America is so fundamentally different from all other Jewish civilizations, principally in the matter of equality and acceptance, that it defies all comparison. Without entering into the pros and cons of the claim of American exceptionalism, or the historiographic implications of that viewpoint, what really strikes me is closer to the exact opposite: namely, that New York has had precursors. Let us take a brief look at them.

II. Precursors of Cosmopolitan New York

Before the Nazis came to power, a now-forgotten author, Artur Landsberger, wrote a novel with a dystopian theme, *Berlin ohne Juden* (Berlin Without Jews). His point, as you can guess, was to highlight the Jewish contribution to what had become, by the 1920s, a great European city. (The Jews had been admitted into Berlin in 1670 under Frederick William, the Great Elector. Naturally, many residential and occupational disabilities remained well into the 19th century.) About one-third of German Jewry (600,000) lived in Greater Berlin by 1933. Jews founded many of the department stores in Berlin, as elsewhere in Germany. The publishing houses of Mosse and Ullstein were Jewish, and Jews were well represented in many fields of endeavor as well as in German philanthropy. Similar claims have been made for turn-of-the-century-Vienna, most notably by Steven Beller, who treats the modernist culture of late-19th-century Vienna as largely a Jewish creation.

Berlin in the 1920s, like Vienna in the 1890s, was a flourishing Jewish city. However, turn-of-the-century Vienna and Berlin of the Roaring Twenties were not the first of their kind. Around the year 1,000 CE, Hasdai Ibn Shaprut — courtier soldier and poet — became the second most powerful man in Cordova. The Ibn Nagrela family later succeeded him. Seville and Cordova competed for top honors, but, like Vienna and Berlin, each merits a gold star. For roughly 200 years, the Jews of medieval Spain (Andalus) contributed to the fields of astronomy, mathematics, philosophy and linguistics in Arabic and in Hebrew. Cordova was not only where

Yehuda Halevy practiced medicine, it was also where Maimonides spent his childhood before fleeing a radical Muslim regime. Nineteenth-century scholars discovered that *The Fountain of Life* (Fons Vitae), assumed to have been authored by a Muslim or a Christian, existed in a Hebrew manuscript (Mekor Hayyim), and was written by none other than Solomon ibn G'virol, Jewish philosopher and namesake of a major Tel Aviv thoroughfare (Gerber, p. 76).

In retrospect, given the level of convivencia (coexistence) in Muslim Spain, the only real surprise about this discovery is that ibn G'virol chose Hebrew over Arabic for a text of philosophy.

Before the Golden Age of Spain, Alexandria produced not only the philosopher Philo, but also many of the works of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha — Jewish books by Jewish authors preserved exclusively in Christian Bibles. The Egyptian diaspora, which began in the prophet Jeremiah's day, lasted for centuries. It enjoyed longevity, large numbers, wealthy members and, despite the constant complaints of the indigenous population, favorable political status. In short, Alexandrian Jewry possessed considerable staying power. Regarding Alexandria's ultimate decline as a Jewish center, historian Gershon Cohen wrote:

Alexandrian Jewry did not defect to Hellenistic religions, nor did they convert to Christianity. What happened to the Alexandrian Jewish community was precisely what happened to many Jewish communities throughout history: it suffered expulsion (Cohen, p. 190).

Before the clash prompted by crazed Caius Caligula (40 CE), the pogroms (115-117 CE) and the final expulsion, Alexandrian Jewry contributed mightily to the Greek culture. If only that great library in Alexandria were still in existence. Chances are we would find many books by many Jewish authors — beginning with multiple copies of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible.

Seventeenth-century Amsterdam had a smaller Jewish population and was the product of more recent settlement than the aforementioned examples. Sephardic Jews migrated to Amsterdam from Iberia, Ashkenazic Jews from troubled East-Central Europe. Both groups were drawn by favorable political conditions and economic opportunity. By Spinoza's day (1632-1677), the Sephardic element of that population had succeeded socially and economically. Culturally, Amsterdam merited Salo Baron's appellation, "Dutch Jerusalem," as it rapidly emerged as one of the intellectual centers

of the Jewish world. Not only Spinoza, the most famous product of these Jewish civilizations, but also some of his teachers (Saul Morteira, Isaac Aboab, Menasseh ben Israel) reflected the Netherlands' intellectual milieu. As Steven Nadler demonstrated in his *Spinoza: A Life*, Baruch/Bento/Benedictus found non-Jewish groups (e.g., the Remonstrants and Collegiates) very interested in giving him a hearing.⁴ Given its size and settlement history, Amsterdam may or may not fit this "cosmopolitan model." Its namesake, New Amsterdam, epitomizes it.

III. The Nature of New York as a Jewish City

New York has been the largest Jewish city in America since 1654. At many times in the last 350 years, fully half of the Jewish population of America has lived in the Greater New York area. Today, for the first time since the huge wave of Eastern-European immigration that brought most of American Jewry to this country, the Jewish population of New York City proper is less than 1 million. But if one adds the Jews of Westchester, New Jersey and Connecticut, the Metro New York area still accounts for about 2.5 million of America's 5.2 million Jews. By the end of the 19th century, New York City's Jewish population dwarfed Warsaw's, and it has only recently been surpassed by that of metropolitan Tel Aviv, whose style follows this cosmopolitan model.

Since Salo Baron, Jewish historians have agreed that demographic size matters. But so do longevity and economic success. As already noted, New York had been an important site of Jewish settlement in the United States since the colonial period. By the end of the 19th century, the Schiffs, Strausses, Warburgs, Marshalls and Seligmans had already built many of the institutions — and even the buildings — that we take for granted today. The Independent Order of B'nai B'rith started in New York, as did the American Jewish Committee, the Educational Alliance and the 92nd Street Y — not to mention the plethora of organizations designed to assist and Americanize the greenhorns, which the older German-Jews funded, inspired to some degree by embarrassment, and to some degree by a sense of community (klal Yisrael). This organizational fecundity can still be appreciated by walking the East Side during the business day, where the AJC, American Jewish Congress, Anti-Defamation League and World Jewish Congress are all within a short walking distance from one another.

Size, longevity and wealth all matter, and so does political will. In 1900, many more Jewish tailors were at work in New York than financiers. In “The Jewishness of the Jewish Labor Movement in the United States,” Lucy Dawidowicz explained the role Jews played in the garment industry, steering the labor movement away from violence and toward collective bargaining and, ultimately, from socialism toward progressive liberalism (Davidowicz, 1997, pp. 185-193).

The evolution of Abe Cahan, editor of the Yiddish-language newspaper *Forverts*, toward moderation and American pragmatism symbolized this trend. Jews continued to play a huge role in the unions — the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and New York’s United Federation of Teachers offer two examples. While not quite as adept at politics as the Irish, New York Jews also played an important role in state Democratic politics; Jewish support for Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his New Deal was legendary. The Jewish community’s mélange of liberalism/Yiddishism/secularism/unionism, as limned by Irving Howe’s *World of Our Fathers*, has lost its hold, but its legacy of political activism remains in many forms, including AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, regularly judged to be one of the most effective lobbying groups in Congress. For all its brilliance, the Alexandrian Jewry of Philo’s day never overcame hostility from the indigenous Egyptians, nor did German Jewry ever approach American Jewry’s level of advocacy.

In more specifically Jewish ways, too, New York has made its mark. On one end of the spectrum, the New York area houses major ultra-Orthodox communities — both Hasidic and non-Hasidic. At the other end of the spectrum, perhaps no other city in America offers a milieu where a secular “ethnic” Jewish identity can still be cultivated so easily. One example: not long ago, journalist Deborah Solomon interviewed Gloria Steinem in *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*. Consider for a New York minute the ethnic dynamics: A Jewish reporter interviews a Jewish feminist/publisher/activist in a Jewish-owned newspaper — without the “J” word ever being broached. But I do not think this is self-censorship. It is simply that Jewish identity is so woven into the fabric of New York (American?) culture that it requires no comment. Anyone can experience the social and cultural diversity of Jewish life by walking the Upper West Side any time of day or evening. Within minutes, you can walk from the West Side Judaica shop to the Barney Greengrass eatery — from holy books to heavenly herring.

In between ultra-Orthodoxy and secular Jewishness, the three largest Jewish religious denominations all have a seminary in Manhattan: the Orthodox movement’s

Yeshiva University, the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary of America and the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. The fourth American-Jewish denomination, Reconstructionism, is based just outside Philadelphia, but its ideological patriarch, Mordecai Kaplan, spent most of his 101 years in New York. America today can lay claim to many distinguished centers of Jewish learning. However, I would argue, both quantitatively and qualitatively, New York certainly stands in first place.

New York certainly did not generate all of what American Jewry has offered America: Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore and Cleveland all have distinguished histories. But my claim is more vertical than horizontal, more diachronic than synchronic. New York, like Alexandria, Cordova, Amsterdam and Berlin, belongs in an exclusive but little-appreciated club. Within this club, I would argue, New York most fully combines every facet of socio-cultural strength: large numbers, wealth, longevity, political stability and receptivity on the part of gentiles. Returning to Kaplan a moment, it may be true that Jews always live in two civilizations, but the quality of that mediation differs according to time and place. From the Jewish side — and not only within Orthodoxy — the degree of resistance and accommodation varies. But more striking still is that at times we incorporate our external circumstances but influence them only slightly; the cosmopolitan Jewish city offers a model of more thorough two-way influence (whether a minority culture can ever exert the same degree of influence as a majority culture may be questioned).

IV. An Imaginary Experiment: New York Without Jews

As noted above, humorist Fran Leibowitz wrote, "Not only is New York the nation's melting pot, it is also the casserole and charcoal grill." Imagining the culture of New York without Jews is nearly impossible. New York without bagels? Without comedians Sam Levenson or Jerry Seinfeld or Jon Stewart? Of course, the same could be said of Irish, Italians, Asians and Hispanics: New York without a great slice of pizza or steaming bowl of hot and sour soup is inconceivable. In the early 20th century, Harlem was Jewish. But from the years between the two world wars until today, it would be fair to describe 125th Street as the epicenter of African-American culture in America. New York has long been an ethnic mosaic and Jewry has been one of the tiles.

As Walter Lippmann once said, “Even the bums in New York are talented.” However elitist, I think that cultures are ultimately judged by the high culture they produce. Cordova nurtured Maimonides, one of the greatest medieval thinkers. Amsterdam produced not only Spinoza — the first modern thinker and the greatest Jewish heretic — but also Menasseh ben Israel, who defended the Jewish readmission to England, and Isaac Aboab, the first rabbi in the New World — as well as a slew of lesser luminaries in Dutch Jerusalem, as Salo Baron called it. And German Jewry? The list is simply too long to even begin to cover. In a sad effort to chronicle German-Jewish contributions, Siegmund Katznelson once compiled a 2,000-page volume of names titled *Juden im Deutschen Kulturberreich* (Jews in the German Cultural Milieu). Was there even a Viennese culture in the 1890s or in Berlin in the 1920s without German Jewry and its gentile coworkers and admirers?

To continue our experiment, we would have to imagine American culture without the Jews among the New York intellectuals of the 1940s and 1950s (Irving Howe, Lionel Trilling, Clement Greenberg, Meyer Schapiro), without the Jews in the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, Bella Abzug), without the songwriters of Tin Pan Alley (Irving Berlin, George and Ira Gershwin), without the composers and lyricists/playwrights of Broadway (Alan Jay Lerner, Frederick Lowe, Oscar Hammerstein II), without the social gadflies (the partly Jewish Dorothy Parker and émigré intellectuals like Hannah Arendt), and without the Nobel laureates who graduated from the Bronx High School of Science and Stuyvesant High School.

V. Conclusions

My thesis is a simple one, but it is not without its implications. The first, as I see it, is that if this historical tradition exists, it constitutes a rejoinder to the notion that only insular, parochial forms of Jewish life from the past offer viable models for the present. (Maybe scholars do not voice this; laypeople assuredly do.) Thus, I am arguing that the Spain that produced poet Yehuda Halevy and Maimonides was as consequential as Rashi’s Troyes; that the Vienna of Martin Buber and Sigmund Freud was as important as the Vilna of the Netziv and Rav Abraham Isaac Kook. Putting aside Jerusalem as a city *sui generis*, the great cosmopolitan Jewish city evidences a model of vibrant diaspora life not fully appreciated. One could respond: but look at what happened to Alexandrian Jewry (crippled in the pogroms

of 115-117 CE), or to the Jews of Cordova-Seville (forced into conversion or exiled in 1492), or to the Jews of Berlin ("Jewish Berlin," in Nazi parlance). True. But Bavel in the Netherlands sank to insignificance; the medieval Rhineland succumbed to the Crusades and the Black Death; and the traditional Jews of Eastern Europe fared worse than their more acculturated Western counterparts during the Shoah. Jewish history has no permanent safe-harbors. But to focus only on the termini ad quo and ad quem (starting and ending points) and nothing in between leads back to the long-discredited, lachrymose conception of Jewish history.

This reflection leads to my second, more academic, conclusion. Jewish historians customarily divide up our past into periods (biblical, rabbinic, medieval and modern). Alternatively, we categorize the Jewish experience geopolitically: that is, homeland or diaspora, a distinction especially attractive to the Zionist historians of the last generation. Or, we divide Jewish history according to intellectual categories (e.g., mystics and philosophers) or geographical-cultural ones (e.g., Sephardic and Askenazic). More recently, gender has emerged as an important distinction, since the lives of Jewish women and men clearly differed. All of these historiographic categories have validity and heuristic value. I humbly propose one more dichotomy: the insular and the cosmopolitan models of Jewish civilizations.

Notes

1. My colleague Dr. Ron Brauner reminds me that Berossus, a third-century BCE historian, was interested in Jewish life in Babylonia. But the impression I get from the work of Robert Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia* (and the works of Jacob Neusner), leaves my claim intact: Babylonia's Jews were influenced by their environment; they did not greatly influence it in return.
2. Todd Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian England, 1714-1830*; David Katz, *Philosemitism and the Re-Admission of the Jews to England*. The absorption of Jewish law into English law may be an exception, but it may also be an unwitting and unacknowledged process, like Christian Hebraism in the 16th century. In the latter case, there is biblical influence and the presence of Jews, but, I would argue, no Jewish influence.
3. Heinrich Von Treitschke's remarks are found most conveniently in Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz, eds., *The Jew in the Modern World*, 2nd. ed., pp. 343-346.
4. Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, esp. pp. 80-115.

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Belonging, Behaving, Believing: Exploring Reconstructionist Process

PATTI HASKELL

Not every question has a simple answer, nor does every situation have an easy resolution. Life does not always fit neatly into one specific format. Many of us understand this, because, as Jewish Americans, we sometimes find it difficult to live simultaneously in both Jewish and American culture. Reconstructionism seeks to address this diversity, and to help us make room for it in our Jewish lives.

Today's Orthodox Judaism is a wonderfully orderly form of Judaism in which everything is laid out. This orderliness can be incredibly comforting. It allows people to feel as if there is, indeed, an answer to every question. Congregants can go to their rabbis with any question or situation, and their rabbis will provide an answer. An Orthodox Jew knows exactly when to *daven* the three daily prayer services and exactly what words and prayers to pray. An Orthodox Jew knows exactly what foods are acceptable and what can and cannot be eaten in combination. An Orthodox Jew knows the rules of Shabbat and observes them diligently. In many cases, Orthodox Jews in the United States live a Jewish life that takes precedence over their lives as Americans.

Reconstructionism, on the other hand, is not at all tidy. It is a process of constant readdressing and reevaluating. The way a Reconstructionist community answered a particular question yesterday may differ from the way in which that very same community will answer that very same question tomorrow. If the same set of circumstances were to be presented to two different Reconstructionist communities, it is almost certain that their responses to those circumstances would

Rabbi Patti Haskell is Director of Spiritual Life at Seacrest Village Retirement Communities in Encinitas California, where she is chaplain and rabbi to 250 Jewish elders.

differ. This is because the geography of where the Reconstructionist community is located plays a part in its nature. A congregation in the rural Midwest has different influences than a congregation in Boston.

An Evolving Civilization

Reconstructionism defines Judaism as an evolving civilization, whereas the traditional Jewish belief is that there has been little alteration in Jewish practice since the rabbis of the Talmud wrote down the oral Torah. The Reconstructionist perspective is that there is, and always has been, constant change, a constant ebb and flow and constant influence from other cultures. For example, Mordecai Kaplan, who was the founder of Reconstructionism and a teacher at the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary of America, struggled with the issue of *kashrut* and with its implications and value in modern culture. In 1922, he spoke with a congregant about the meaning of keeping kosher in the 20th century. He told her that *kashrut* “was obviously a defense against assimilation, but if in some way it proved ‘socially harmful,’ it is [our] duty...to insist on its elimination” (Sculpt, p. 297). Since Kaplan made this statement, Reconstructionism has developed creative and meaningful ways for observing *kashrut* — a subject for another discussion.

Reconstructionism even regards Shabbat observance from the perspective of what will nourish us spiritually in the ongoing process of balancing the six days of creation with the weekly day of rest in our lives. So, instead of following Shabbat to the letter of the law, a Reconstructionist Jew might choose to observe some laws and disregard others. If a person finds it nourishing to attend services at a synagogue that is beyond walking distance, then driving might be acceptable in that person's thinking. If Shabbat is the only day of the week when a person has the opportunity to listen to or to play cherished music while devoting his or her full attention to it, enjoying music might become that person's regular Shabbat practice.

Three important words describe Reconstructionist process: belonging, behaving, believing. The biblical story of Sarah illustrates this progression from belonging to behaving to believing, and it is illuminating to consider a contemporary *midrash* (commentary) on it.

Sarah's Crisis of Faith

Consider Sarah, whose husband does something absolutely unthinkable — the binding of their son, Isaac. The situation is resolved, and her son and her husband

are physically unharmed, but she has suffered such pain that she has taken to her bed, is hardly eating, and can no longer make sense of the world. She won't even let Abraham in to see her. How can she face a husband who would blindly follow God to the point of coming only inches away from sacrificing their only son? Isaac is the son of their old age, the son promised to them by God. And then God waited years, while Abraham and Sarah raised him and loved him, before demanding that they return him. No, Sarah could not take this in, could not look into Abraham's eye.

A chaplain approaches Sarah's tent, knocks on a post, and listens. Sarah calls out, "Yes?" For a few moments, they talk in niceties and generalities. Her rage has cooled off a bit; the sand storms have subsided. Then, there is silence. Sarah lifts her eyes longingly and the chaplain asks, "What is it, Sarah?" Sarah's eyes settle on her hands fidgeting in her lap. She sighs. "I loved God so, and Abraham, too. How could they do this to me?"

The chaplain looks caringly at her and responds, "Sarah, let's ask God that question. What do you want to say to God or to ask God?"

"I am so furious, I want God to know how furious I am! Why? Why has God done this to me? How can I go on?"

The chaplain fashions Sarah's words into a prayer. At the end, the chaplain adds a comment about how precious Sarah is. Sarah listens silently. She begins to weep.

Now, a conversation can begin. Together, the chaplain and Sarah delve into what Sarah needs and wants, now and for the rest of her life. Gently, the chaplain asks about her past, her history with God, with Abraham and with Isaac. Does the past make a difference? Does Sarah want to take the past into consideration now, as she thinks about her present pain and her possibilities? Does she have a secular life that informs her Jewish life? Is community important for her? Is there anyone other than Abraham and Isaac whom she has felt supported by and whom she wants to reconnect with now? What about ritual? In the past, has she connected with God through certain rituals? If so, would those same rituals bring her peace or be meaningful for her now? Or would new rituals be more likely to repair her spirit from this sense of being torn apart, not only from God, but also from her family? Is repair of her relationship with Abraham possible?

No Right or Wrong Answers

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions; there is only process. Sarah's chaplain opens a door to belonging and Sarah walks through. On the other

side, a new door faces her, one labeled “behaving.” As Sarah and her chaplain talk and address each of these issues, Sarah will feel her way and settle on the direction that she feels most comfortable with in that moment. Tomorrow, she may see things differently. Perhaps she will go on to explore some of her questions within her community, asking for personal support, as well as the support of tradition, the Bible and other texts. Sarah’s feeling of belonging has led her to behaving. She begins to pray, this time not to a God who will hear her prayer and answer her, but to a God who exists in the universe as a power through which she can find the release and comfort she seeks — a power through which she can find herself. She is beginning to believe.

Sarah’s sense of belonging has been challenged, but she begins through that challenge to explore what belonging means for her. With the chaplain’s help, she begins the conversation that opens her up to behaving in a new way. This, in turn, leads her to question and consider the past, as well as where she is in that moment and where she wants to be. Sarah, who once believed so strongly in God, is now on a path that may bring her back to that belief, and beyond.

According to this story, Sarah would have made a great Reconstructionist. She came to a point where she was able to consider the untidiness of her life, her situation with Abraham and her relationship with God. She learned to allow other individuals, secular and religious alike, and her community as well, to join her. She learned to join them. She explored tradition with a discerning eye — all the while keeping in mind that she lived at a particular time and in a particular circumstance and that her individual and community decisions could and should reflect that. Sarah lived a full and satisfying life of belonging, behaving and believing. This is the Reconstructionist hope for all Jews.

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Judaism in Feminist Hands

Women Remaking American Judaism

edited by Riv-Ellen Prell (Wayne State University, 2007), 352 pp.

REVIEWED BY LEILA GAL BERNER

Women Remaking American Judaism is a welcome addition to the growing literature in Jewish women's studies. Organized into three sections that could roughly be described as theoretical, denominational and ritual, the book opens with Rochelle Millen's reflections on Jewish feminist theology. Millen's chapter in Part One is an extended survey of the "hit parade" of Jewish feminist theologians: Judith Plaskow, Rachel Adler, *et al* — useful for those who haven't read their works, but, for those familiar with the seminal scholarly feminist works, adding nothing new to our understanding of feminist theology as an agent of change.

In contrast, Chava Weissler's "Meanings of *Shekhinah* in the 'Jewish Renewal

Movement'" is excellent. The fruit of her nine years of research into this movement, the chapter is highly informative and *au courant*.

Taking an ethnographic approach, Weissler participated in many local and national Jewish Renewal programs and conducted some 40 interviews with key leaders of ALEPH, the Alliance for Jewish Renewal, including its current executive director, chief operating officer and director of spiritual resources. She is also well-acquainted with Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, founder of the Jewish Renewal movement, and she interviewed him as part of her research.

The results of this meticulous research are evident. Weissler's chapter is both highly informative about the Jewish

Leila Gal Berner (RRC '89) received her B.A. from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in English literature and history and her Ph.D. in medieval Jewish history from the University of California at Los Angeles. The founding director of the Center for Jewish Ethics at RRC, she is currently ongoing scholar-in-residence in the philosophy department at The American University in Washington, D.C. and also serves as rabbi of Reconstructionist Congregation Kol Ami, the Northern Virginia Reconstructionist Community.

Renewal movement in general and very helpful in conveying an understanding of how Renewal Jews specifically relate to the *shekhinah*. Ultimately, Weissler concludes that it is the “artistic and the mythic” that animate many Jewish Renewal Jews: “. . . [W]e misunderstand the meanings of *shekhinah* for Renewal Jews if we fail to attend to the artistic and the experiential dimensions. Jewish Renewal attracts a great many people with artistic talent and sensibilities, and fosters artistic expression of spirituality. The draw of Jewish Renewal for such people is that it is an opening to the imaginal dimension, to creativity and to the mythic.”

Part One ends with a very interesting article by Adriane B. Leveen entitled “A Tent of One’s Own: Feminist Biblical Scholarship, a Popular Novel and the Fate of the Biblical Text.” Here, Leveen contrasts feminist scholars’ wrestling with biblical text to Anita Diamant’s treatment of the text in her best-selling novel *The Red Tent*. Leveen’s intriguing approach and her contrast between scholarly readings of the text (such as the writings of Tikva Frymer-Kensky, z”l) and Diamant’s is especially useful for midrashists and for those who teach midrash.

Part Two, which comprises almost half of the book, addresses women’s roles in American Jewish denominations. Karla Goldman’s chapter on “Women in Reform Judaism: Between Rhetoric and Reality” is a solid history of women’s involvement in changes in Reform Judaism up to the present day. Goldman demonstrates how feminist leaders have significantly changed the internal dialogue within the denomination and how they have been at the forefront of impor-

tant progress in several areas. She touches on the issue of the inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people, and also on the creation of publications that reflect a feminist ethic (the very recent publication of *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* is just one such example). Goldman ends her narrative with some enduring questions and suggests that the Reform movement’s rhetoric concerning gender equality may actually impede progress in that area.

“Mitzvah, Gender and Reconstructionism,” a chapter co-authored by Deborah Dash Moore and Andrew Bush, is disappointing in several ways.

The authors’ main contention is that Mordecai Kaplan deftly focused on our people’s “folkways” and, through that focus, ascribed to the Jewish people a central role in reshaping Judaism for the future. However, they do not demonstrate in any substantive way (other than by noting Kaplan’s inherent egalitarianism and the groundbreaking bat mitzvah of his daughter, Judith, in 1922) how women contributed to the reshaping of a new and innovative Judaism from that time forward.

In addition, while the authors do a good job of recounting early Reconstructionist history and Mordecai Kaplan’s conception and formation of Reconstructionist ideology, they end their narrative with the establishment of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) in 1968. The authors are completely silent about the ways in which women in the Reconstructionist world have remade American Judaism after RRC opened its doors. Indeed, they dedicate only three brief paragraphs to Recon-

structionism after 1968. The reader is left with the impression that a Reconstructionist engagement with issues of gender was frozen in place some four decades ago. The very opposite is the case.

Where are the last four decades, during which Reconstructionist women profoundly influenced the remaking of Judaism? Where is any mention of the establishment of the Jewish Women's Study Project at RRC in 1990, or of the later advent at RRC of the fully funded Kolot: Center for Jewish Women's and Gender Studies? Where is the authors' commentary on the advancement of Jewish feminist scholarship, or their analysis of the "post-Kaplanian" feminist thought that is demonstrated in the works of such Reconstructionist feminist scholars as Rebecca Alpert, Lori Lefkowitz and Tamar Kamionskowski, among others?

Where is any mention of Kolot's development of resources and programs in the fields of Jewish women's and gender studies for Jews across the denominational spectrum, or its offering of expertise in the gender analysis of Judaism to Jewish agencies and academic settings around the world? Much has changed at RRC since 1968, but Dash Moore and Bush fail to mention these changes. The authors also fail to note the significant contributions of Reconstructionist women in the fields of new feminist rituals, music and poetry. One need only glance at the Ritualwell.org Web site (contained within Kolot's Web site, Kolot.org) to see a tiny part of that creative work. Where is there mention of innovative programs for adolescent girls, such as Rosh Hodesh: It's a Girl Thing, a

project initiated by Kolot that later spun off into an organization of its own? These areas of creative activity have significantly contributed to the remaking of contemporary Judaism. Also missing in this chapter is any acknowledgement of the pioneering work done in the *Kol Haneshamah* series of prayer books, in which egalitarian language, feminist prayers and a feminist sensibility infuse so much of the books' pages.

Why did Dash Moore, a member of the editorial board of *The Reconstructionist* who also belongs to a Reconstructionist congregation led by a woman rabbi, fail to comment on the significant leadership role women have played in the movement since 1974? And why did the editor fail to catch this puzzling omission?

Shuly Rubin Schwartz's strong article, entitled "The Tensions that Merit our Attention: Women in Conservative Judaism," explores the ways in which internal debates precipitated by Conservative Jewish women have fundamentally changed that denomination. Among those changes are increased egalitarianism in the ritual realm, such as the inclusion of women in the minyan and the elevation of women to ritual leadership roles, culminating in the ordination of the first Conservative female rabbi in 1985. In the organizational realm, change can be seen in the increasing numbers of women who are serving as presidents of congregations and Conservative organizations. Rubin Schwartz points to a changing halakhic perspective in which women's issues can no longer be left out of the conversation. She calls this expansion of the Conservative movement con-

versation “challenging the Tradition and change ratio.” Along with this challenge, Rubin Schwartz notes a new “coupling of egalitarian and pluralism,” a development that Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin calls a “strained co-habiting.” This is exactly the “tension that merits our attention,” Rubin Schwartz asserts — and it is precisely here that women have helped to remake American Conservative Judaism.

Norma Baumel Joseph’s enlightening chapter, “Women in Orthodoxy: Conventional and Contentious,” examines the dialectic in the Orthodox world between women’s acceptance of male rabbinic authority and women’s activism to increase women’s religious education, expand women’s ritual expressions (albeit in single-gender settings only) and create many more women’s *tefillah* groups. The last of these activities, the establishment of women’s *tefillah* groups, proved to be the area in which the conventional clashed with the contentious, as Orthodox women asserted their needs and encountered rabbinic objection. Nonetheless, over time, significant adjustments have been made as a result of women’s continuing activism, and the world of modern Orthodoxy is being reshaped. Baumel Joseph asserts, “Women in the Orthodox world expected and accepted to [sic] defer to their male authorities and traditions. The women of these prayer groups do not deny that. Nevertheless, they broke with tradition, asking to be included in new ways, forcing accommodation to their needs. Their resistance to rabbinic opposition is based on their own knowledge, skills and needs and that is radical.”

Pamela Nadell’s excellent chapter, “Bridges to a Judaism Transformed by Women’s Wisdom: The First Generation of Women Rabbis,” directly addresses the implicit question of the book’s title: How have women remade American Judaism? By assuming the role of the “symbolic exemplar,” (as Rabbi Jack Bloom describes the rabbi), women have brought new elements to the role, Nadell asserts. They have brought a feminist critique to the discussion of Jewish tradition, noting the absence of women or the mistreatment of women, even as they bring women to the forefront).

Women rabbis, through modeling and personal example, have created new professional guidelines and boundaries, demonstrating what a rabbi can be and how a rabbi can function professionally beyond the conventional male model. They have spoken “in a different voice,” communicating the spiritual through the personal, helping to construct a new language of spiritual discourse within their communities. Finally, they have helped to expand the range of life-cycle rituals available to both women and men as they mark significant moments in their lives in a Jewishly meaningful way. Nadell concludes that in all these ways, the first generation of women rabbis has been an important agent of change in remaking American Judaism.

Both following and reinforcing Nadell’s chapter, Part Three of this volume addresses women’s impact on contemporary Jewish ritual. Jody Myers surveys the revival and popularization of the observance of Rosh Hodesh, correctly noting its entry into the mainstream of Jewish ritual life and the diver-

sity and sophistication of Rosh Hodesh celebrations as signs of the “institutionalization of feminism in American Jewish life as well as the success of American Jewish women in transmitting their pride at being Jewish to the next generation.” Vanessa Ochs documents the ritualization of the presence and leadership of the biblical Miriam. She points to the intriguing fact that the rebellious Miriam gains recognition (almost subversively) as a legitimate leader through the introduction of rather benign ritual objects, such as the cup and the tambourine. “Miriam’s radical nature is obscured within objects so mundane, domestic and innocuous that it feels nonthreatening,” she writes. “Strategically disguised, Miriam’s new objects innovate through this same innocuous nature. The objects appear so humble, so simple; the cup evokes the domestic, a household item, and the tambourine is like a child’s toy. Neither object points to the women’s agenda it facilitates.” Finally, Lisa Grant writes of the development of the adult bat mitzvah ceremony and the phenomenon of the deepening spiritual and communal involvement of Jewish women who were far less involved in Judaism in the past.

This volume contains much of great value. Nevertheless, it yields mixed results. The chapters are uneven, and the book has some surprising gaps in information and analysis. One consistent lapse in most of the articles (even the

best ones) is a failure to address directly the question that the book’s title implicitly raises: how have women in the various denominations or movements (e.g., Jewish Renewal) “remade” American Judaism? For example, an exposition of new feminist theology is useful in and of itself, but the reader is left wondering: what deeper impact has this feminist theology had on the larger Judaism of our time? A solid history of the advances made by Reform women is valuable per se, but again, one is left asking — what are the meta-level changes that have occurred as a result of these advances? Have there been deep systematic transformations, or are there simply new faces of both genders present in the American Jewish picture? That, in and of itself, is to be celebrated, but is it enough, and does that fact alone truly constitute a “remade” Judaism? We may deduce a great deal by implication about the influence and impact of Jewish women in each of the areas covered in this book. Nonetheless, this reviewer would have hoped for more direct attention to the book’s central question as suggested by its title.

This book is not perfect, but I commend the editor and authors on their most worthwhile contribution to the field of Jewish women’s studies. I will certainly use the book in my university classroom in a spirit of respectful criticism and appreciation for its considerable merits.

Accessible Biblical Scholarship

The Hebrew Bible: New Insights and Scholarship

Edited by Frederick E. Greenspahn. (New York: NYU Press, 2007) 231 pp.

REVIEWED BY ELSIE STERN

This volume contains nine essays and an epilogue by leading scholars in biblical studies, including Adele Berlin, Leonard Greenspoon, Peter Machinist, Marvin Sweeney and Ziony Zevit. The essays are divided into four sections: the Bible and History, New Approaches to the Bible, Ancient Practice and Judaism and the Bible. The individual essays treat topics that have received significant attention in the past few decades, including the relationship between the Bible and archaeology, literary and feminist criticism, law, ritual, canon, theology and the relationship between ancient Israelite religion and rabbinic Judaism. While most of the essays are ecumenical, the preface and final section identify the project as a Jewish one. Most of the

essays are about 20 pages in length and include useful footnotes.

This collection is part of a growing body of literature that aims to make the results of biblical scholarship accessible to non-professional students and readers of the Bible. Like many other recent publications (*The Jewish Study Bible*, foremost among them), this volume succeeds in communicating to readers the majority position on many central biblical topics. The chapter by Elizabeth Bloch-Smith on “Bible, Archaeology, and the Social Sciences: The Next Generation” is particularly noteworthy. Bloch-Smith clearly and cogently presents the mainstream position on the emergence of ancient Israel in the highlands of Judea in the 12th to 10th centuries BCE

Elsie Stern is assistant professor of Bible at RRC. She is the author of From Rebuke to Consolation: Exegesis and Theology in the Liturgical Anthology of the Ninth of Av Season (Brown Judaic Series) and is a contributor to The Jewish Study Bible (Oxford University Press) and Torah: A Women's Commentary (URJ Press). Her current research focuses on the transmission and reception of biblical texts in ancient and contemporary Jewish settings. In addition to her research and academic teaching, Dr. Stern has taught widely in communal settings in the U.S. and abroad.

and the degree to which these Israelites were, and were not, culturally distinct from other indigenous residents of Canaan. Similarly, the essay on “The Laws of Biblical Israel” by Raymond Westbrook presents the mainstream position on the development of the biblical law codes, while the essay “By the Letter? Word for Word? Scripture in the Jewish Tradition” by Greenspoon, brings together the most frequently cited evidence for the development of canon in early Judaism.

However, as Frederick Greenspahn writes in the preface, the goal of the book is not merely to make the results of biblical scholarship accessible to a general readership. Rather, “the goal of this book is to share these conversations [about the nature, history and historicity of the Bible], which have been going on in academic circles for decades with a larger audience (xii).” Unlike other volumes that distill conclusions, syntheses and mainstream opinions and present them to a general readership, this volume rehearses the scholarly conversations that undergird and shape those positions. As a result, there is much more discussion of method than is found in other recent popular works.

Many of the essays in the book follow the conventional form of scholarly articles and monographs: They begin with a review of major trends in scholarship dating back some 50 years (and sometimes more). They then describe two or three methodological approaches or stances that have been dominant in the past few decades and end by staking out a position that either counters or synthesizes those earlier positions.

Over the course of the volume, the authors describe the history of scholarship and the state of the field on subjects ranging from meta-issues like the relationship of the Bible to history to more circumscribed questions, such as the origin and development of the biblical law codes. The essays that describe fundamental positions that shape interpretations of the text are the most useful for lay readers and students and teachers of Bible. In her essay on “Literary Approaches to Biblical Literature,” Berlin distinguishes between interpretive stances that locate the source of meaning exclusively in the text from those that locate this source in the reader as well. In her essay on “Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible,” Esther Fuchs describes three approaches to gender in biblical texts that have been subsumed under the rubric “feminist.” Finally, and most effectively, Peter Machinist’s Epilogue characterizes two trends in biblical interpretation: the historical approach and the approach that “sees the Bible [as] an object of study and appreciation in its own right, the text itself defining, at least primarily, the world within which it is to be read and interpreted” (213). He classifies theological and literary readings of the Bible in this second type. He demonstrates how these fundamental approaches determine different sorts of answers to perennial questions about biblical texts, including: how to account for internal contradiction, how to determine the boundaries of canon, and how to determine the authority of the biblical text.

Naming, describing and reflecting on these stances are all incredibly useful for lay readers. In my experience,

students of Bible in non-academic settings experience and articulate their understanding of biblical texts as responses to the texts themselves. They are rarely self-conscious about the fundamental methodological assumptions that also shape and generate their readings. By providing lay students and their teachers with a map of the methodological terrain, these essays help readers to name and reflect on their own assumptions about the text and to see how these assumptions shape their readings. It also lets them know that these assumptions, whatever they may be, usually find a home in a long and venerable reading tradition. In so doing, these essays help students to become not only more knowledgeable about the Bible, but also more reflective and sophisticated readers of text.

While perhaps interesting to some general readers, conversations about the development of the biblical texts seem to me to be less useful, at least in the form in which they are presented here. For example, Raymond Westbrook spends much of his essay outlining different understandings of the development of the biblical law codes. By the end of the article, he rejects the singular positions that he describes and opts for a synthetic position that contains elements of each. The problem with this presentation is that the different positions are difficult, if not impossible, for a lay reader to evaluate. Evaluation demands intimate and detailed knowledge of the biblical texts in question as well as mastery of a wide group of other ancient Near Eastern texts. This depth and breadth of knowledge are precisely what distinguish

scholars from thoughtful and intelligent lay readers. Since the reader will depend on a scholar like Westbrook to evaluate the evidence, the elaboration of the stances he rejects, along with their strengths and weaknesses, ends up being largely rhetorical. A more extensive elaboration of Westbrook's final position, with due note of positions that he does not advocate, would be of greater benefit to general readers and teachers.

The greatest drawback to the inclusion of reviews of academic scholarship and the rehearsal and ultimate rejection of counter-positions here is the importation of the essential conservatism that these conventions perpetuate. In terms of pure page count, much of the volume concerns opinions that the authors deem outdated or incorrect. As a result, lay readers are being asked to spend a lot of time on material that they are then asked to reject. Also, as the footnotes reveal, most of the scholarly literature cited comes from the last decades of the 20th century rather than the first decade of the 21st. Consequently, the "new" of the title, is often what was new 15 to 20 years ago. For the most part, the positions advocated in this volume have become the accepted positions that are now the starting points for contemporary research and debate. Their general acceptance testifies to the prominence and influence of the volume's contributors, many of who were primary architects of the positions that are now central to their fields.

This is particularly striking in the chapter on Jewish biblical theology by Marvin Sweeney. Sweeney has been one of the strongest advocates for the devel-

opment of a field of Jewish biblical theology — a campaign that has been quite successful. In the past few years, there has been a renewed burst of creativity in the fields of Jewish biblical and rabbinic theology. However, Sweeney's contribution to the volume largely rehearses the arguments for the validity of the discipline, rather than sharing with readers the newest trends and developments in the field. Even the debate over the historicity of the Bible, which is rehearsed with vigor and vitriol by Gary Rendsburg ("Israel without the Bible"), has settled significantly in the past few years. There are still certainly "maximalists" and "minimalists" — the former being scholars who presume that the biblical text correlates strongly to historical events unless there is abundant explicit evidence to the contrary; the latter being scholars who assume that there is no correlation between biblical accounts and historical events unless there is abundant explicit evidence for such a correlation. Most biblical scholars agree that the biblical narratives in the Torah and the books of Joshua and Judges are largely ahistorical, and that at least the chronology, lists of kings and major international alliances narrated in the books of Kings I and II have greater historical reliability. Currently, lively debates about the historicity of the Bible are largely confined to the subject of the "united monarchy" described in the books of Samuel.

This is not to say that there is nothing new here. The integration of social-science method into the study of the biblical texts and the history of ancient Israel is a central topic in today's biblical

studies. Also, as Berlin notes in her essay, the construction of Israelite identity, especially in the "colonialist" contexts of the Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian empires, has become a central concern of biblical studies. The study of the complex oral-literary processes that contributed to the composition, development, transmission and authorization of the biblical texts, as explored in the essays by Westbrook, Greenspoon and Machinist, has become one of the hottest areas of biblical scholarship as well. However, in this volume, these issues arise as subtopics rather than as rubrics unto themselves.

What, then, would be required of a book that makes the scholarly conversations of the early 21st century accessible? First, it would assume as its starting point many of the synthetic methodological stances advocated by the authors in this book. In particular, it would probably advocate for a "new historicist" approach that attempts to read texts as both products of and responses to the historical contexts in which they were composed. Thus, biblical narratives about the patriarchs and matriarchs and the Exodus would be read as parts of a project of identity definition and construction that may have been particularly pointed in the context of the heterogeneous and cosmopolitan Persian empire.

Such a book would also spend more time on the scholarly conversations around the oral-literary development and transmission of the biblical texts. While most scholars agree that the biblical collection includes texts that articulate different perspectives and may even derive from different segments of society,

few ascribe to a “documentary hypothesis” that envisions discrete literary sources, labeled J/E, P and D, that were somehow combined into the Pentateuch that we have today. Advocates of the documentary hypothesis envision a process that is nearly entirely literary and depends on the transmission and successive redaction of authoritative written texts. Both comparative material from elsewhere in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean worlds, as well as the insights of scholars in the fields of anthropology, linguistics and communications, have made this scenario seem increasingly unlikely. Instead, scholars are articulating and hypothesizing a range of reconstructions that take into account the roles of education, empire, writing and oral communication in the production and transmission of traditional literature.

The historical focus of such a book would range from the reign of Hezekiah in the eighth century BCE to the end of the Hellenistic period in the first century BCE. This is the period in which most scholars locate the composition of the biblical texts.

Finally, it would ask questions about unitary categories like “Israel” and “Bible” in rigorous ways. What do we mean when we talk about “Israel”? Is

this the northern kingdom, the southern kingdom or an ethnic group, (real or constructed) that may have inhabited one or both? Is the community of Judean descent that remained in Babylon part of Israel? What about the “people of the land” in Ezra-Nehemiah? Similarly, what do we mean when we talk about the Bible? Or, more accurately, should we even be talking about “Bible” before the fourth century or so CE? What were the “sacred texts” of Jews in the centuries around the turn of the first millennium? How did they receive those texts? How did they understand them? These are among the questions that are prompting the most creative and interesting work in biblical studies today.

The Hebrew Bible: New Insights and Scholarship achieves its goal of giving intelligent and interested general readers a window into the world of biblical scholarship. It reveals the important insights and methodological advances that have been achieved over the past several decades. It also shows how the conventions of the discipline, which are grounded in great respect for earlier generations of scholars and their work, can make it difficult to fully let go of old paradigms in favor of the truly new.

The Returning *Pintele Yid*

Journeys to a Jewish Life: Inspiring Stories from the Spiritual Journeys of American Jews by Paula Amann (Jewish Lights, 2007) 208 pp.

REVIEWED BY RENA BLUMENTHAL

This past Rosh Hashanah, after morning services, a Vassar sophomore came to my office choking back tears. Having come from a thoroughly assimilated Jewish background, he could not understand why he had been so moved by the prayers. We spoke briefly, then met the next day for a long talk over coffee.

I thought about this young man while reading Paula Amann's *Journeys to a Jewish Life*, not because it was the beginning of a profound return to Jewish engagement — I have never again seen him at a Shabbat or holiday service — but because of how powerfully the encounter affected me. Why, I wondered, am I so much more engaged by the alienated Jewish student who shows the faintest glimmer of interest in Jewish life than I am, for example, by the former United Synagogue Youth president who has never strayed in her enthusiasm for Jewish affiliation? Shouldn't the latter be at least as inspiring as the former?

Journeys to a Jewish Life is a paean to the tale of the returning Jew. The book is structured around a series of vignettes based on Amann's interviews with 62 people who have returned in some way to Judaism. Although the specifics vary greatly, there is a set pattern to these stories. We are given a name and a brief biographical descriptor, followed by an account of the obstacles that individual faced to living a Jewish life — the insensitive rabbi, the unaffiliated parents, the stultifying Hebrew school. Then comes the often cathartic epiphany — the tears evoked by Shabbat candles, the transformative experience of meeting a famous rabbi, the book or talk or illness or birth of a child that suddenly awakens a dormant Jewish soul. Finally, we hear the successful outcome — she is now a rabbi or rabbinical student, he is now the president of his congregation or a full-time Jewish educator. The vignettes are rarely longer than two or three paragraphs.

Rabbi Rena Blumenthal is assistant director of the Office of Religious & Spiritual Life, and Rose & Irving Rachlin Adviser to Jewish Students, at Vassar College.

The repetitive pattern of these vignettes made me wonder why so many of us are drawn to the simple and stereotypical narrative of those who stray and then return. What is so alluring about the myth of the *pintele yid*, the Jewish seed that lies hidden in even the most alienated Jewish life, awaiting just the right *niggun* (wordless melody), just the right *drash* (Torah commentary), to make it blossom and flourish into a full-blown Jewish life? So enamored is Jewish tradition of this myth that we even impose it on the convert who was, of course, at Sinai and just got lost along the way. There is something about the inevitability, the very lack of volition, projected onto the straying *yidische neshome* (Jewish soul) that moves us deeply. It strikes me that there is a deep insecurity embedded in the romance we Jews, and especially Jewish professionals, have with this story. Every tale of return is a heart-warming validation that what we are doing still matters, and perhaps we should at least question our hunger for this particular kind of affirmation.

But this is all a bit tangential to the task at hand, since I am clearly not the target audience for Amann's inviting and generous book. Her intention is to provide Jews on the margins of Jewish life with "a sign, a guide, or a trail trodden by others to lead them homeward," and if the return to Jewish practice is indeed a journey home, then this volume is a warm, wide welcome mat. The book is aimed at the Jewish seeker who is on the very first steps of his journey, perhaps daunted by the challenges of finding a way in, and its strength is in its breadth, not its depth. The book provides so

many models of Jewish return that even the most tentative seeker should find one that speaks to her. Such readers will find much encouragement in the book's warm tone. They will also find a good deal of useful information, since it covers a lot of Jewish ground. The wide-ranging vignettes are interspersed with many easily digestible Jewish nuggets — stories and quotes and practices that are clearly explained and contextualized.

My main critique of the book is that there are just too many narratives; at under 200 pages, *Journeys to a Jewish Life* staggers under the weight of 62 life stories. Some of these life sketches are certainly intriguing. One individual spent 35 years as a Jehovah's Witness, rising to the position of elder, before "one day, something shifted" and he realized that he was living "a role with a mask," returning to Jewish affiliation and practice. There are hints of a fascinating life journey here, but it is not explored in any depth.

As someone who was herself "lost on her way to Sinai," as Amann puts it, I could easily imagine my own story in this parade of pithy, self-consciously inspiring narratives. I, too, suffered from brain-dead Hebrew school, experienced a couple of cathartic moments ("She cried when she heard *Leha Dodi* for the first time in twenty years"), and can report a "successful" outcome ("She is now a campus rabbi"). But such moments of epiphany don't really explain how I went from being a sworn atheist to a God-hungry rabbi; they are no more than random signposts on a complicated and multi-determined journey of self-discovery. I am acutely aware

of how circuitous and non-definitive my evolution has really been. The brief narrative arc that is so celebrated in this book would do no justice to the awkward meandering that was integral to my own spiritual journey.

The book gets considerably more interesting toward the end where, instead of introducing yet more vignettes, Amann begins to revisit some of her earlier subjects with greater focus and nuance. The sections that describe new approaches to theology and practice will be helpful to people who are seeking innovative ways of understanding and living a Jewish life. The final chapters of the book assume the tone of a how-to manual, and this is all for the better. Here, readers will discover how to experiment with ritual, how to find a mentor, and how to embrace the idiosyncracies of their own distinctive paths. Reading the final chapters, I began to appreciate the real wisdom Amann has to share. She has thought deeply about the complexities of Jewish engagement. I suspect that she could have written a more compelling book had she either chosen a handful of subjects to explore in depth, or conceived the book from the start as a straightforward guide to discovering one's Jewish spiritual self.

As inclusive as the book is, it should be noted that its interest in the Jewish journey is limited, as the subtitle makes clear, to the spiritual. There are sections on the arts, Torah study, social action, Torah-themed yoga and Jewish environmentalism, all understood as instruments for spiritual development. Amann even quotes one subject describing the eating of bagels and lox as a "spiritual

path." The vignette that opens the chapter on social justice tells the story of a young Azeri man who is looking for a spiritual home, but is uncomfortable at traditional Jewish services. Finally, he finds a "comfortable door" into Jewish life through Jews United for Justice, which Amann describes as "activism with a Jewish name." In a later chapter, Jewish environmental organizations are explicitly valued to the extent that they "are funneling Jews into synagogues." These may be welcome developments, but I thought it unfortunate that Jewish cultural practices, Jewish study and Jewishly identified social action could not be appreciated for their own sakes as authentic forms of Jewish expression. In Amann's eyes, culture, politics, text study, bagels and nostalgia are all valued in one way — as portals into a Jewishly spiritual life.

One final concern: The over-inclusion of vignettes about rabbis, rabbinical students and full-time Jewish educators is a bit disheartening. Amann herself states that "for a surprising number of late-blooming Jews, the road to inner growth has led to careers in the Jewish community, as clergy, educators and professionals." I found myself hoping this was no more than an artifact of her sampling methods, which were never clearly explained. Either way, her intended audience of Jewish seekers may well find themselves wondering whether they can have a committed Jewish life and still keep their day jobs.

Despite these reservations, *Journeys to a Jewish Life* is a helpful addition to the growing literature about Jewish outreach, and many Jewish professionals

will want to recommend it to congregants, students and clients who are feeling the first tugs toward Jewish spiritual engagement. The book is a generous and openhearted introduction to Jewish life, precisely the kind of warm embrace to all forms of spiritual seeking and return that our movement strives to encourage.

But Jewish identity in the 21st century is a complicated business, and for most modern American Jews the obstacles to living a Jewish life are more profound than secular parents and boring Hebrew schools. That is not to say that we shouldn't aggressively address the abysmal state of Jewish education in this country. But I find that even young Jews with strong day school backgrounds and Jewishly engaged parents struggle with rarely articulated concerns about power and class in America, pervasive Christian and secular worldviews, embarrassment over Jewish particularism, the almost unbearable quagmire of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the discordance between the complexity of Jewish identity and the narrowness of Jewish

institutional structures — an awful lot to take on for a tiny *pintele yid*. For every inspiring story of return, there are at least 50 Jewish souls that will remain stubbornly indifferent to even the most breathtaking *niggun* or *drash*. In the end, I am not terribly surprised that my tearful sophomore has not returned for another gevaltic dose of *yiddishkayt*. Despite the moving service and over-eager rabbi who dropped everything to reach out to him, the obstacles to real Jewish engagement are still overwhelming. If we don't get in the habit of analyzing the deeper reasons for Jewish alienation, we will be hard put to find sustainable solutions. And to the extent that we wish to honor the true spiritual journey, we would do well — even (or especially) when trying to inspire — to recognize, and even celebrate, the difficult, convoluted, meandering pathways it almost always traverses.

Not that I won't drop everything again for the next stunned, tear-choked student who crosses my rabbinical path.

Heschel in Tumultuous Times

Spiritual Radical: Abraham Joshua Heschel in America, 1940-1972

by Edward R. Kaplan (Yale University Press, 2007), 530 pp.

REVIEWED BY RICHARD LIBOWITZ

During its first years of existence, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College gathered to its North Philadelphia bosom a collection of students from across the United States — primarily male, and possessed of a range of Jewish backgrounds, from practiced daveners to Hebrew semi-literates. Their commonalties included high levels of academic achievement in their undergraduate careers, a curiosity to know more about Judaism, a general allegiance to Mordecai Kaplan's concept of Jewish peoplehood and an opposition to the war in Vietnam.

In those tumultuous times, the students quickly became acquainted with writings by the leading academic and intellectual figures in 20th-century Judaism — the elder: Solomon Schechter, Joseph Ber Soloveitchik, Louis Ginsberg, Louis Finkelstein and Salo Baron; and the younger: Richard Rubenstein, Emil

Fackenheim and Jacob Neusner; as well as the movement's foremost teachers, Mordecai Kaplan and Ira Eisenstein.

Among the giants, however, one name stood out — that of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Even those of us who had not yet read any of Heschel's books knew of the bushy-haired and bearded figure who had marched in Selma alongside Martin Luther King, Jr. We knew that Heschel was one of the first Jewish leaders to protest America's involvement in Vietnam and that he was kept under surveillance by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI. Above all, his was the prophetic voice that called out "*Tzedek, tzedek, tirdof*" (Justice, justice, you must pursue, Deuteronomy 16:20).

Heschel's death in December 1972 was a shock to those of us who had been unaware of his precarious health, and we turned for comfort to his books. What

Richard Libowitz (RRC '76) is Assistant Professor in the Intellectual Heritage Program at Temple University and on the Theology faculty of Saint Joseph's University. The twin foci of his scholarship have been the life and thought of Mordecai M. Kaplan and the Holocaust. His most recent study, "Bringing the Holocaust to America" will appear in the upcoming Casner Annual.

we found there was a spirit that was very different from that of our own mentors, whose *ahavat Yisrael* (love of Israel) may have been just as strong, but who expressed that feeling and their hopes and agendas for *klal Yisrael* in far more prosaic language.

Although they were ideologically poles apart, Heschel exemplified, in an unhappy way, Mordecai Kaplan's observation that, outside of the Land of Israel, Jews lived in two civilizations — Jewish civilization, and the civilization of the nation-state in which they resided. The original *raison d'être* for RRC had been to train a generation of Jewish leaders who would be comfortable working within both of those civilizations. But Heschel struggled with this dual existence, and he was neither accepted by some groups within Judaism nor fully at home in secular America, despite his activism.

Fleeing from Poland to temporary shelter in England, Heschel was part of the group of Jewish scholars — a so-called “Jewish College in Exile” — who were rescued by Hebrew Union College President Julian Morgenstern in 1940. HUC brought Heschel to Cincinnati and gave him a low-paying position as a “fellow in Jewish philosophy,” teaching basic-level courses at the Reform seminary. The scion of several Hasidic dynasties, Heschel arrived in America clean-shaven and without *payes*. He began his new life residing in a student dormitory, taking his meals in the school's *treyf* dining hall, where he ate bareheaded but managed to keep kosher. His students were candidates for the Reform rabbinate whose lack of traditional knowledge and skills

he bemoaned, and whose definitions and practices he opposed. He davened alone in his room.

Edward K. Kaplan's detailed and very readable sequel to his 1998 volume, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness* (written with Samuel Dresner), chronicles the second half of Heschel's life, the American years, presenting his readers with a detailed portrait of both the public scholar/social activist and the private, psychologically tormented individual.

A man of prodigious learning who was comfortable in many languages, Heschel never quite fit within the institutional structures and categories of American Judaism. Whatever his soul (and *yikhes*, or distinguished lineage), he was no longer a Hasid. Moreover, the leadership of America's modern Orthodox movement rejected him because of his insistence upon a flexible view of Orthodoxy that combined adherence to *halakhah* with the soul-searching *kavanah* (intention) of his Hasidic childhood. Heschel believed strongly that, without *halakhah*, Judaism was bereft of its identity and reduced to vestigial, arcane habits. He could in no way accept the “classical” Reform Judaism of the Pittsburgh and Columbus platforms. Neither was he fully comfortable with the Conservative Judaism he found at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, where he joined the faculty in 1945. There, under the authority of Louis Finkelstein and Saul Lieberman, an academic, objective, talmudic education was considered the *sine qua non* of a rabbinic education.

It seems almost needless to add that Heschel disagreed with Mordecai Kap-

lan's concept of Reconstructionist Judaism, seeing Kaplan's theories as a sociological reduction of divine faith to a set of humanistic practices — theories thus devoid of the sense of awe conveyed by the words placed over many a synagogue's ark: "*Da lifnei mi ata omed*" (Know before Whom you are standing). Even so, Kaplan was one of Heschel's closest colleagues on the seminary faculty, with each respecting the other despite fundamental disagreements over their respective viewpoints.

The connections between Heschel and Kaplan transcended personal respect. Each felt himself an outsider at JTS, belittled or put upon by Finkelstein and Lieberman. Heschel was not permitted to teach a course on Hasidism until 1970, nor did Finkelstein allow him to move to a larger space from the cramped office in the Teachers Institute building that he had occupied since 1950. Heschel once wrote to Kaplan, his fellow rebel, that "each of us has attempted the same task, I poetically and you through prose." While Heschel may have been more gracious than accurate in his remark, each man was, in fact, confronting the challenges posed to Judaism by the trend toward assimilation in America. Each was attempting to preserve and protect a precious heritage. While Kaplan developed his radical reframing of Judaism as a civilization whose members possess the right and the ability to adapt to the needs of the Jewish people, Heschel maintained that Jewish life would be best protected through an adherence to *halakhah*, which he insisted could be far more flexible than authorities such as Soloveitchik or Lieberman claimed.

Heschel's extensive study and extraordinary memory allowed him to cite a variety of rabbinic authorities in his writings without benefit of scholarly apparatus. This was both a blessing and a curse. The breadth, depth and passion of his knowledge caused many — particularly those in the non-Jewish world — to embrace him as the embodiment of Judaism. Some even referred to him as "rabbi to the world." But Heschel's non-academic literary approach aroused the contempt of many in academe. His approach sometimes frustrated his students as well. Arthur Green, former president of RRC, is quoted as saying, "When I wanted a rebbe, he was a professor, and when I wanted a professor, he was a rebbe." Edward Kaplan, in *Spiritual Radical*, ponders this situation and wonders for whom Heschel's writings were intended, a general Jewish readership or the academic world. The answer appears to be an amalgam. Heschel sought to bring learning to the general Jewish community, hoping he could inspire a renewal of the community's commitment to the *halakhah* he cherished, while also seeking to infuse coldly objective scholars with the passion he held for Judaism, for the covenant and for God.

The concept of deity was an abstraction for Mordecai Kaplan. To Heschel, Adonai was no theory, but rather the source and ground of all being; approachable but unreachable; capable of failure; and needing humankind at least as much as humankind needs the divine. The quest for the divine began with a renewal of spiritual sensitivity, developing a sense of awe that surpassed Buber's brief encounters of *I and Thou* with a

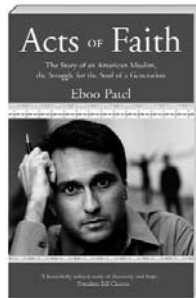
realization of the constant presence of God, even in the face of Auschwitz, and argued with the “death of God” theologians that “to repudiate God would be to enhance the holocaust” and to blame the Shoah on humanity’s lack of moral courage.

Few understood Heschel fully — or were allowed to view the essential soul of the man — neither his colleagues, nor his students, nor the general public who read his books, attended his lectures and watched him on television. Perhaps the best way to understand his *hester panim* is through his writing on the prophets, for Heschel’s stance in many ways mirrored theirs. Like Jeremiah, he brought the voice of God to the people and, in his wishes, carried the voices of the people to heaven.

He struggled with the task; it tore and wore at him, but, like Jeremiah, he was compelled to continue his efforts. He could not be still; he could not be silent. That compulsion, summarized by the prophet Micah in his exhortation “to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (6:8), led Heschel to Selma, AL, to march next to Martin Luther King, Jr. It led him to stand in protest of America’s policy in Vietnam. And it led him, on one of the last days of his life, to travel to Danbury, CT, to greet the activist Catholic priest Philip Berri-gan upon his release from federal prison.

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Kaplan’s extensively researched book reveals a man of essential contradictions — a passionate writer but an indifferent teacher, a man who craved adulation and yet was riddled with self-doubt. Heschel was an ardent defender of traditional Jewish concepts and practices who nevertheless insisted that Judaism could be pluralistic and open to contradictory views. Even in death, Heschel’s contradictions came to the fore. Because of what Kaplan describes as “difficulties,” Heschel’s funeral could not be held at JTS. But his Hasidic relatives would not enter a Conservative synagogue. So a

funeral home — neutral territory — became the setting. Hasidim recited *tehillim* (psalms), while Wolfe Kelman, a Conservative rabbi, gave the eulogy and a Kopitzhinitzer Hasid chanted the *El Malei Rahamim*. Heschel was buried in Elmont, Long Island, surrounded by family, including his uncle the Novomin-

sker rebbe of Williamsburg — interred in the New World among devotees of the Old. Whether Heschel was a "spiritual radical" or a conflicted prophet, Kaplan presents him through a prism that is at once objective and warm. This is a book to be appreciated by academics, rabbis and general readers alike.