

# *The Reconstructionist*

Volume 68, Number 2, Spring 2004

## Table of Contents

- 2      **From the Editor**
- Challenges and Responses**
- 4      *Rachel Adler*, “To Live Outside the Law You Must Be Honest” —  
         Boundaries, Borderlands and the Ethics of Cultural Negotiation
- 16     *Ilan Peleg*, Israel as “Jewish and Democratic” —  
         Revising the Sacred Formula
- 26     *David Fox Sandmel*, Who Is Israel?
- 34     *Shaul Magid*, Rainbow Hasidism in America —  
         The Maturation of Jewish Renewal,  
         a review essay of *Wrapped in a Holy Flame: The Teachings*  
         and *Tales of the Hasidic Masters* by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi
- 61     *Ellen Bernstein*, Rediscovering Israel
- 65     *Sandy Eisenberg Sasso*, Once Upon a Time — The Rabbi as Storyteller
- 70     *Dayle A. Friedman*, Everything I Need to Know I Learned in  
         the Nursing Home — Torah for Confronting Fragility and Mortality

## **Book Reviews**

- 82     *Seth Goldstein*, Membership, Identity and Status, a review of *The*  
         *Jewish Political Tradition, Volume 2*, “Membership,” edited by Michael  
         Walzer, Menachem Lorberbaum, and Noam J. Zohar; co-editor, Ari  
         Ackerman
- 87     *Shai Gluskin*, Seeking a New Way for Jewish Education, a review of  
         *Visions of Jewish Education*, edited by Seymour Fox, Israel Scheffler and  
         Daniel Marom

## FROM THE EDITOR

As the Jewish community moves well beyond the time when the impact and issues of modernity first called into question issues of interaction with surrounding cultures, we find ourselves facing ever-more complex questions of identity and boundaries. Where earlier generations could assume a commonality of ethnic-religious identity, Jews of the 21st century face a whole range of questions unanticipated by our ancestors.

Among the most challenging issues are those that focus on what exactly it is that people who are identified as or who identify as “Jews” share in common. A related issue is what the various versions of “Judaism” are able to identify as being held in common, when so many of the assumptions, as well as the content, of those versions are at odds with each other.

Add to this the ever-expanding challenge of how “the Jewish community” and “Judaism” intersect and interact with other ethnic groups, cultures and religious traditions — when we cannot always identify our own place in the world, let alone understand that of the Other — and we are increasingly aware of having entered uncharted waters. In this issue, we offer several perspectives on different dimensions of these issues.

Rachel Adler analyzes the area she labels “the borderland,” places where Jews and non-Jews are enmeshed with each other, and traditional concepts and categories may not be adequate for negotiating issues of relationship. Ilan Peleg raises thoughtful and complex questions about how, and if, the old assumptions about the State of Israel being easily “Jewish” as well as “democratic” can hold in a time of increasingly complex relations with Arab Israelis and with Palestinians. In a related essay, Ellen Bernstein offers a more personal perspective on the impact of Israel on Jewish identity.

The encounter with Judaism’s most significant theological Other, Christianity, is examined by David Sandmel through the prism of the contested theological title of “Israel.” Shaul Magid uses the work of Zalman Shachter-Shalomi to raise provocative questions about the future of Jewish theism, and of the impact on Judaism of eastern religious traditions as well as of Islam. Seth Goldstein reviews a new book that surveys the political history of Judaism’s attempts to work out issues of identity, status and membership.

In addition to these essays, we are privileged to offer two important reflections on innovative approaches to Jewish spiritual life. Sandy Eisenberg Sasso challenges us to (re-)discover the opportunities inherent in the art of storytelling, using narrative to support spiritual discovery. Dayle Friedman, a pioneer in lifting up the sanctity of the spiritual that can be found in the lives of the older members of our community, shares some of the Torah she has learned from her work with that community.

And as education is always a topic of interest, Shai Gluskin reviews a new volume on visions for Jewish education, and shares some of his own visions for Reconstructionist Jewish learning.

## **In the Movement**

Our readers will want to know about:

- The upcoming convention of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (JRF), November 11-13, 2004 in Portland, Oregon, at which the JRF will celebrate its 50th anniversary. For more information, see [www.jrf.org](http://www.jrf.org) or call (215)782 8500.

- Readers in the greater New York area should mark their calendars for December 5th for the annual New York Reconstructionist Rabbinical College event, with a luncheon to be held at the Museum of Jewish Heritage. For more information see [www.rrc.edu](http://www.rrc.edu) or call (215) 576 0800.

We wish our readers a relaxing summer, and early wishes for a Shana Tova.

— Richard Hirsh

# “To Live Outside the Law, You Must Be Honest” — Boundaries, Borderlands and the Ethics of Cultural Negotiation

BY RACHEL ADLER

I live in Los Angeles, a city in love with cultural negotiation: on the west side, strictly kosher sushi bars and Asian-French fusion cooking, and at the east end of town, pastrami burritos and my favorite shop, straddling Korean and Salvadoreño neighborhoods, Hacienda Oriental Foods. L.A. culture, with its fusion cuisines, its natty metrosexuals, and its constantly mutating and mingling argots from the film industry and rap music, attests to a phenomenon some find frightening: the porous boundaries that allow for flow among communities.

## Cultural Negotiations

I am a theologian and an ethicist and not a social scientist. My focus is not cultural diffusion in general, how lan-

guage, ideas, and practices ooze across cultural boundaries. My concern is, rather, with how people of integrity, people who value their Judaism consciously, conduct cultural negotiations in a diverse environment. What I propose to present is a theological ethics of boundary negotiation informed by feminist insights into this issue.

When we talk about diversity, we are talking about the positioning and texture of boundaries — the boundaries different religious or cultural groups maintain with one another and the boundaries religious groups maintain with the pluralistic secular cultures in which they are embedded. A group's boundaries are eloquent about how easy or difficult the group finds it to maintain its distinctness and its integrity. Can anyone participate, or are

---

Dr. Rachel Adler holds a joint appointment as Associate Professor of Modern Jewish Thought and Judaism and Gender at the School of Religion, University of Southern California and at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles.

there strict membership requirements? Is it forbidden to watch TV or to listen to popular music? Are there special clothes or dietary laws that maintain the distinctness of group members and bind them socially to one another? Features like these attest to the extent to which the group feels at home or at odds with an inevitably homogenizing larger environment.

For Jews, boundaries have always been a vexing issue. The ancestors of Judaism, the ancient Israelites, inhabited a narrow strip of land between the desert and the sea that offered the only access between great rival empires north and south of it. Empires competed to annex it; armies tramped through it, seeking to transplant their gods, their words, their visions. Israelites were exiled or immigrated to surrounding lands, where other tongues and other ways prevailed. Small wonder that fears of inundations and pervasive anxieties about the boundary integrity of this permeable social world have marked Judaism!

### **Anxiety at the Boundary**

The anthropologist Mary Douglas sees this anxiety about the social body inscribed in rules governing the individual body as well.<sup>1</sup> Hence, Leviticus legislates what is to be taken in or cast out, pure or impure, permitted or forbidden. Categories such as *tevel*, that which creates chaos in the natural world, and *toevah*, that which imitates idolatrous cultic practices or undermines definitive Israelite practices, map the boundaries of the natural and social worlds. This boundary map pro-

tests the distinctions that demarcate the creation from the erosions and erasures that could uncreate the world and return it to undifferentiated chaos.

What is more remarkable about Leviticus is that conjoined with rules whose symbolisms no longer resonate for us are others we would characterize as ethical.<sup>2</sup> Leviticus constitutes a code for how to construct boundaries that will maintain not merely boundary integrity but the integrity we call justice.<sup>3</sup> To the extent that justice is a legal as well as an ethical value, it is not static and absolute, but must take into account the specific social and historical settings in which it is situated.<sup>4</sup>

Even if P and H and their hypothetical colleagues did not realize that their understanding of justice as a form of holiness would introduce contextuality and contingency into their social vision, that is just what they did; for justice occurs in the realm of time, the world of human societies in which people and their boundaries are endlessly mutable. And therefore, despite the lasting Jewish concern for boundary maintenance, and despite the lasting fear of having our distinctness erased, of being flooded by other cultures and uncreated as a people, there can be no pure Jewish culture unshuffled by outside influences.

### **Encounter and Influence**

A nostalgia for such a time is a nostalgia for what never was. There never was a time when ancient Israelite religion or the Judaism that succeeded it were not being influenced by the cul-

tures and religions they encountered. And there were many, many encounters.<sup>5</sup> If the boundaries of Judaism inevitably change with changing historical-cultural settings, if our Judaisms are, as David Myers claims, “radically hybridized,” what does boundary integrity mean?<sup>6</sup> Is there a difference between porous boundaries and outright inundation? And how will we determine what kinds of boundaries promote justice? Boundary maintenance, then, turns out to be a much more slippery affair than it would have been had there been a single, pure and static set of boundaries to maintain.

To complicate matters still further, this motif of boundary maintenance is counterbalanced by a narrative motif of boundary crossing. Some biblical narratives represent the Israelites as the people other peoples called the Hebrews, the *ivrim*, literally, the crossers-over, those whose progenitors Abraham and Sarah came from the other side of the river Euphrates.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Scripture uses *ivrim* only when Israelites interact with non-Israelites. *Ivri*-narratives affirm a deity who transcends boundaries and localities altogether, a God who through covenant bridges even the boundary between divinity and humanity.

To be an *ivri* is to know that there are other places, other perspectives. To remember having been an *ivri* is to know what it means to be an Other. What I term *ivri*-narratives are narratives that transfigure the moral possibilities of boundaries by demonstrating the possibility of crossing over. A slave can become free, a Moabite can

become an Israelite, and an Assyrian city doomed to destruction can turn in repentance and be saved.

## Trespassing and Transgressing

The slipperiness of boundary maintenance is matched by a similarly protean problem about boundary crossing. Sometimes, I am supposed to be a boundary-crosser, an *ivri(a)*, to go forth as Abraham and Sarah did to a land they did not know. But this same root, *a-v-r*, can mean to trespass, to transgress. This is the dilemma that confronts me in cultural negotiations. When, where, and how am I called upon to trans/pose, trans/act, or trans/mute, and under what circumstances would my act be a trans/gression, an *averah*, an unmaking of some boundary that maintains a distinct and irreplaceable meaning?

When should I guard the boundary? When should I cross the boundary? When should I resituate the boundary or perhaps uproot it altogether? These are questions of *halakha* in the root meaning of that term: going, making a path. How do I make my path so that I am mindful of the One toward whom I walk, and of those who walked before me, those who walk with me, and those whose path is adjacent to mine and who may have something to teach me?

These questions are complex, because religions and cultures are not fixed or static, nor are they completely separate from one another. Religions, after all, imply, reflect and create cultural worlds and are embedded in cul-

tures. Cultures have environments — natural, social, historical — to which they are constantly responding. This being so, the contents and boundaries of both religions and cultures are continually being renegotiated.

Being conscious of this reality carries a sobering obligation: If the boundaries and content of our Judaism are fluid, and if they are altered by cultural negotiation, then we have a responsibility to be aware when we are negotiating and a responsibility to figure out how to negotiate with integrity. And that requires answering the slippery *ivri* questions I have posed.

## Opportunities for Growth

The *nehemta* (consolation) is that along with dilemmas posed by cultural and religious diversity come enriched opportunities for spiritual and moral growth. When religions and cultures are imaged as shifting territories whose boundaries are constantly in flux, culture becomes more than a medium through which revelation is mediated. Cultures themselves are sources of revelation; new truths are born out of their struggles and dilemmas.

For pluralistic societies where people of many races and ethnicities share citizenship, the relationship between justice and an ethics of difference is newly illuminated. Post-industrial societies, where rigid distinctions between gender roles are eroding, offer unprecedented opportunities to accord full humanity to women. A culture's creativity in shaping and describing its world can offer new insights into the

complexities of our humanity and glimpses of the intricate universe of which we are a part. These discoveries can move us to reevaluate our obligations to one another and to the rest of creation and to rekindle our sense of awe. Opportunities like these are worth a risk.

I do not mean to suggest that boundary negotiation should be an easy or painless process. That would be true only if what we were negotiating did not matter to us very much. I am only suggesting that if we were able to see religious cultures and the cultures in which they are embedded as contiguous rather than as antipodal, and if we were able to see ourselves as conscious and competent negotiators rather than as defenders of the Alamo, we would be more responsible participants in the ongoing recreation of *nomos*, universes of meaning to be inhabited.

## “A Leaky Community”

This is not to minimize the anxieties of American Jews about boundary relations with other religious and ethnic groups and with an imperialistic popular culture. In her path-breaking study, *Prayer & Community*, Riv-Ellen Prell describes American Judaism as a “leaky community,” one whose boundaries are so porous that there is some risk of inundation.<sup>8</sup> Because there is no total Jewish experience differentiating Jewish American cultures from the cultures around them, American Jews make their chief concern the preservation of Jewish identity.

Not surprisingly, many Jews tend to

regard the Jewish enterprise as a fragile one. Suspicious, they patrol Judaism's leaky boundaries, sounding the alarm. Every innovation is a potential Armageddon in which Judaism's ultimate redemption is at stake. Each intermarriage is a nail in the communal coffin. Every outside influence is a hole in the dike through which the surrounding cultures may pour in as an annihilating flood. Not so long ago, feminism was accused of being just such an influence. In some Orthodox circles, the accusation is still current. Yet the transformation of gender boundaries has been the most successful cultural renegotiation to occur in American Judaism.

A little more than thirty years ago, in no form of Judaism did women have equal access to communal participation, leadership, or religious education. In no branch of Judaism could women be rabbis or cantors. There were no women Judaica scholars teaching at seminaries or universities. No women were high officials in Jewish communal organizations, although women were their largest source of volunteer labor. Jewish law was invoked not only in Orthodoxy, but also in other branches of Judaism to exclude women from the *minyan*, and hence from leading worship services. Most women had never been near a Torah scroll. They were usually told (contrary to *halakha*) that because women menstruate, they would defile the sacred object.

Today, women are represented in all the structures and institutions that sustain and reproduce American Judaism. They are ordained as rabbis in Reform,

Reconstructionist, Conservative and Renewal Judaisms, and there are persistent rumors of Orthodox women being secretly ordained. There has been a revolutionary loosening of the boundaries between men's and women's roles in Judaism.

## A Jewish Nun?

The yearnings that drove this revolution came out of confrontations with the gender assumptions of other cultures, religious and secular. A case in point is a story my mother used to tell about me. I was five years old, taking a walk with her, and she said, "So what do you want to be when you grow up?" Without skipping a beat, I said, "A nun." My mother was appalled. "You can't be a nun. You're Jewish. Jews don't have nuns." "Well then," I replied, "I will be the first one."

When I ask myself why I wanted to be a nun, the answer is clear. I lived in a mixed Jewish-Catholic neighborhood, and in that other religious culture, I saw a model I did not see in my own community: a way to be a woman and also be holy. My mother saw me looking across the boundary and, horrified, pulled me back: This isn't what Jews do, she was telling me.

Because our boundaries are permeable, we can be moved by desires or troubled by problems that enter from the outside. Cultural negotiation with integrity demands that instead of uncritically sucking in what is foreign to our Judaisms — founding an order of Jewish nuns, for instance — that we engage thoughtfully with Jewish tradi-

tions and the experiences of concerned Jews about the matter that needs to be addressed. The innovation that emerges from such a process is less likely to be mere bricolage. I did not become the first Jewish nun. I became one of several feminist theologians, which is another kind of “first” for Judaism. And happily, there isn’t even a celibacy requirement!

Jewish feminisms were connected to the larger secular American feminist movement, not only borrowing from its theoretical formulations and benefiting from its social impact, but also benefiting from Christian feminism. Jewish feminists learned new modes of feminist critique and new modes of spiritual expression at interfaith feminist conferences. Thus, Jewish feminisms undermined not only rigid gender boundaries but also rigid boundaries with the non-Jewish world.

## Defending Deviance

I do not mean to suggest that these borrowings were promiscuous or uncritical. As early as 1979, the deviations of Jewish feminists from the categories, methods and concerns of Christian and post-Christian feminists were sufficiently marked to require an explanation from the editors of a pioneering religious feminist anthology, *Woman-spirit Rising*.<sup>9</sup> These deviant concerns included the critique and reconstruction of Jewish law, the interpretation of classical texts, and the creation of new rituals for women’s life cycle.

What is perhaps most distinctive is the emphasis Jewish feminists put on

entering the conversation previously reserved for men about the texts, values, and practices of Judaism. Jewish feminists brought to this conversation a renewed emphasis on the historicist premise that distinguishes all non-fundamentalist Judaisms: that societies and their institutions, including gender, are human constructions, contingent upon specific historical and cultural contexts. Their insistence on the contingency and, hence, alterability of gender arrangements challenged non-fundamentalist Judaisms to act on their historicist principles. In concert with post-modernist Jewish historians and cultural critics, feminists have stressed the fluidity of Judaism and the cultural, ethnic and social diversity of Jews, breaking up the monolithic assumptions of the normative conversation.

The concern with Otherness that feminism brought to Jewish thought has piqued curiosity about Jews who deviate from the popularly assumed norm: non-Ashkenazic, racially mixed, homosexual, working class, disabled, unmarried, intermarried, children of intermarriage, converts to Judaism who for one reason or another do not assimilate fully, converts to other religions who retain some Jewish bonds. Ironically, when added all together, the deviants outnumber the so-called normative, but this is not unusual. How many American families consist of a homemaker mother, a wage-earner father, and two children?

## Borderlands

Some of these Jews inhabit a social

location that, borrowing a term from the Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldua, we might call “the borderlands,” the vague transition points on the margins of the Jewish world where other worlds merge with it or intersect it.<sup>10</sup> Those who view the boundary between Judaism and other worlds as clearly defined and non-porous would deny the very existence of borderlands, while others would deny at least their legitimacy. Indeed, the questions of whether the denizens of the borderlands count as Jews and, if so, how they are to be counted, are controversial among demographers.<sup>11</sup> These borderlands of the Jewish domain, illegitimate, fluid, shifting, fraught with tension and ambivalence, harbor those whose identities are marginal or transgressive.

The existence of borderlands sharpens the questions we posed earlier: In the presence of borderlands that attest to the fuzziness or ambiguity of Jewish boundaries, what does boundary integrity mean and how should we enforce it? When should we guard the boundary? When should we cross the boundary? When should we resituate the boundary or perhaps uproot it altogether?

Boundaries that Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism have already uprooted include those that divide the *mamzer* from other Jews; those that forbid the union of a *kohen* with a divorcee, a convert, or a *hallal*;<sup>12</sup> those that involve the unions of gay or lesbian Jews; and those that distinguish between Jewish women and Jewish men in matters of witnessing and communal prayer. We have only to read the

narratives of lesbian rabbinical students at the Jewish Theological Seminary or see the film *Trembling Before G-d* to be reminded that in Conservative and Orthodox Judaism, gays and lesbians inhabit a particularly brutal borderland.<sup>13</sup> A feminist critique can demonstrate systematically that these interdictions enforce patriarchal hegemony and sexual hierarchies that do not promote justice.<sup>14</sup> An example of a resituated boundary would be the Reform movement’s decision to count as Jews those who claim Jewish descent through their fathers but not their mothers.

## Boundary Integrity

But that leaves us with the paradigmatic case of people who opt for the borderlands: the couples who transgress the most basic of Jewish boundaries, the boundary that encircles the people Israel and distinguishes Jew from non-Jew. If we removed the boundary entirely, we would be inundated; Jews and Judaism would become indistinguishable from the external environment. Even a biological cell has at its perimeter a membrane that keeps the inside and outside from merging and governs exchanges between the two environments.

The late Lionel Trilling once remarked, “Some people are so open-minded that their brains fall out.” The same is true of voluntary organizations. If everyone is already a member, there’s no need to join, much less to meet membership requirements. Boundary integrity would require a definition in which Jewishness has particular con-

tent and substance.

Perhaps the question for the transgressors and those who help them should not be, "How do we avoid the transgression?" but rather, "How do we commit the transgression thoughtfully and in good faith?" That would require acknowledging that intermarriage is a transgressive Jewish union. Any ritual celebrating such a relationship is extralegal. There are Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis who will perform an intermarriage using the classical Jewish wedding liturgy, but is this not a dishonest use of Jewish language to normalize what is in truth not normal? I am talking here of religious norms rather than sociological ones. Intermarriage may be common, but no branch of Judaism embraces it as a positive good. What I would like to argue is that people who are intermarrying can enrich Judaism by modeling how to transgress in a way that retains integrity.

## Case Study

At this point, I would like to offer a case history about some people who chose to settle in the borderlands and the friends who helped them. There is a perfectly clear ruling in classical Jewish law on the case we are about to consider, and this ruling is going to be violated. All of the participants, including the transgressor, have a deep commitment to the study and praxis of Judaism. Rebecca, a member of a Talmud study group to which I belong, announced her upcoming marriage to Jay, her delightful non-Jewish Chinese-American partner. Like the other mem-

bers of the group, Rebecca studies, prays with a community, keeps a kosher home, and, with her partner, celebrates Sabbath and festivals. She and Jay wanted a child, and agreed that the child would be brought up as a Jew. But just as Jay honors Rebecca's Judaism, Rebecca honors Jay's desire to maintain his difference from it. Jay does not have a conflicting faith commitment, but he feels that to become a Jew would be to assume an inauthentic identity, one that does not belong to him.

The question, then, is not whether but how Rebecca and Jay will wed. The corollary questions are both whether and how Rebecca's study community will engage with them in their efforts to find an experimental language for this wedding that is in dialogue with Jewish texts and values. As Bob Dylan sings, "To live outside the law, you must be honest."

Rebecca is not asking for a Jewish ceremony to normalize the difficult choice she has made. She knows her choice to be transgressive. What she is asking for is to be taken seriously in her attempt to articulate a sanctifying language she can bring to the borderland where she is establishing her particular Jewish household. Beyond forbidding her act, Jewish legal tradition is interested neither in the specific character of Rebecca's situation nor in helping her to find a language with which to remain in communication with Judaism. But Rebecca and her study partners groped for such a language.

## Theological Reflection

Meanwhile, I was doing some of my

own boundary crossing. I talked about our dilemma to friends who are Christian educators. They suggested to me a field-education process called “theological reflection,” designed to help seminarians reflect critically and creatively on the connections between text and context.<sup>15</sup> The seminarian brings in a “critical incident” she has experienced. She is encouraged to give the experience a theological name. This theological renaming serves as a bridge back to the appropriate classical texts. In the final stage of the reflective process, the seminarian brings the critical incident into conversation with the texts, determining both what the tradition says to her experience and what her experience speaks back to the tradition.

What is most appealing about this process-model is the way it links sacred text and real-world experience. It bears some resemblance to the case-law process of the Jewish *responsa* literature, which also juxtaposes text and context.<sup>16</sup> The legal process asks how an experience is legally categorized in order to determine how one ought to act in that context. Theological reflection asks what an experience means to a particular person of faith when placed into the theological categories of tradition. Each model locates the experience within traditional categories. Each gives the experience an opportunity to re-evaluate or reshape those categories, although in the legal model this depends more heavily on the authority and the vision of the decisor.

The two models might usefully complement one another. The legal

model needs to ask the broader question, “What does this mean?” while the theological reflection model must also address the question, “Now, what ought I to do?” What I find most useful about the theological-reflection model is its potential for keeping open a conversation with tradition that the legal model closes off. As such, it offers a way of navigating transgressive situations.

## **Covenants with Non-Jews**

In Rebecca’s theological reflection, she focused on the language of covenant and noted that there are biblical covenants with non-Jews. Among the various legal and theological sources the study partners explored, the group directed Rebecca and Jay’s attention to narratives that challenge or destabilize the legal norm regarding marriage with non-Israelites: Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38; Joseph and Asenath in Genesis 41:45; Moses and Zipporah in Exodus 2:21; and, most notably, the book of Ruth, in which Ruth, Naomi and Boaz pass from one to another lovingkindnesses that leap the boundary between stranger and Israelite. Together, they conspire to undermine the legal rules of inheritance and thereby paradoxically bring about the possibility of redemption. Transgression, then, is not always a negative. It is a risk for which the transgressors must assume responsibility, and the motives are important, but it can be a source of blessing. Jay was particularly drawn to this text.

Rebecca said she was searching for a language of dialogic transgression, a language that was both responsible and

responsive. It had to affirm both the pressure she was putting on Judaism's boundaries and the vitality of her engagement with Judaism's content. Within this framework, she and her partner, with the support of her studymates, reconsidered every rite and symbol and weighed every liturgical expression related to wedding ceremonies in their effort to shape an honest trans/action.

That trans/action was clearly acknowledged as a boundary-trans/gressing commitment in their ceremony. Moreover, as Rebecca thankfully observed, neither the process required to formulate the wedding ceremony nor the liturgical results lend themselves to mass production. They can be brought to birth only through a rigorous encounter with tradition within the context of a community.

## Shaping a Ceremony

The ceremony Rebecca and Jay designed was held at a private home.<sup>17</sup> Rabbis were present as friends, but not as leaders. Non-rabbis facilitated the ceremony. Instead of *kiddushin*, Rebecca and Jay used a variant of the *B'rit Ahuvim* legal partnership I propose in *Engendering Judaism*, drawing up a *brit* document that enunciated the specific commitments they were undertaking.<sup>18</sup>

The texts on which Rebecca and Jay had reflected were incorporated into various parts of the ceremony. Representatives from Jay's Chinese family, Rebecca's Jewish family, and friends of both spoke to the couple about their

joy and about the borderland nature of their relationship. The *huppah*, held by families members and friends, was embroidered with the Chinese character for double happiness, and the *kiddush* cup from which they drank was a wedding gift inscribed with the double happiness symbol.

Rebecca and Jay are not a typical intermarrying couple, but they represent a growing number of couples in which one partner has a strong Jewish commitment. The tendency of communal Jewish institutions is to ignore differences between kinds of intermarriages and to lump all of them together as failures and betrayals that threaten to doom the Jewish people to extinction. But drawing the boundaries sharply without allowing for borderlands is simply an attempt to extrude non-conformers rather than to live as a whole community with the ambiguities presented by porous and intersecting social worlds.

When Jews do not live in ghettos or in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, intermarriages will sometimes occur. Same-sex marriages will occur. There will be Jews who do not look or act the way institutional Judaisms expect. They will be transgendered or have black or Asian faces or fierce nostalgic longings for barbecued pork and Christmas trees. They will view with puzzlement the Reconstructionist movement's gift of a recipe for *kugel* in a holiday mailing.

## Guarding and Crossing

And they and all the rest of us with them will face the *ivri* questions again:

When should I guard the boundary?  
When should I cross the boundary?  
When should I resituate the boundary  
or perhaps uproot it altogether? New  
communal consensuses will form  
and the borderlands will shift. But the  
borderlands will not cease to be inhab-  
ited.

While some Jews want boundaries  
without borderlands to exclude all non-  
normative Jewish identities, others  
want to argue that borderlands are un-  
necessary because there are no norma-  
tive Judaisms and no trans/gressions. I  
consider these equally disastrous  
moves. Although Judaism is not mono-  
lithic, and there are now and have been  
many credible or defensible Judaisms,  
I would contend that it is also possible  
for the Judaisms of individuals or com-  
munities to be intellectually and spiri-  
tually impoverished, untenable and  
inauthentic.

And as long as I am being cantan-  
kerous, let me add that not everything  
people do has to be stamped OK (or  
OU) in order for them to have self-es-  
teem and to feel cared about by rabbis  
or Jewish communities. I fear being  
part of a community in which there is  
no way to sin because everything one  
does is just fine. Mindless relativism is  
a great a menace as mindless orthodoxy,  
because it leaves no way for people to  
be reflective about what they believe  
and do and to be responsible for what  
they choose. Rebecca and Jay would  
argue for the recognition of border-  
lands and against patronizing or in-  
dulging the people who choose to dwell  
in them. What is needed, they would  
say, is not automatic affirmation but

serious, thoughtful, respectful dialogue.

## On the Outer Edges

While it is not an easily replicable  
model, Rebecca and Jay's marriage does  
demonstrate a cultural negotiation with  
integrity on the outer edges of the bor-  
derlands, a wild and lawless place. Do  
such trans/gressions threaten religious  
cultures? They do, but they also re-  
vivify, suffusing religious content with  
new perspectives and new urgencies,  
new visions. Jay and Rebecca's son, with  
his Asian face and his happy chatter in  
English, Hebrew and Mandarin, incar-  
nates these hopes.

When we treat religious cultures as  
too fragile to withstand any stress, we  
behave as if they were dead, as if they  
were brittle as dry bones. We can pre-  
serve them as artifacts, shielding them  
from the battles and negotiations that  
compose our real lives. But only if we  
prophesy over them will these bones  
live.<sup>19</sup>

---

1. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, second edition (London:Henley, NY: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976).

2. Jacob Milgrom, ed., *Leviticus 1-16, The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 42-51.

3. Mary Douglas, "The Forbidden Animals in Leviticus," *JSOT* 59 (September 1993), 3-23.

4. Robert Cover, "Nomos and Narrative" *Narrative, Violence and the Law: The Essays of Robert Cover*, edited by Martha Minow, Michael Ruan and Austin Sarat (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press:1993), 95-172.

5. Gerson D. Cohen, "The Blessing of Assimilation in Jewish History," commencement address, June 1966, Hebrew Teachers College, Brookline, MA.
  6. David N. Myers, "The Blessing of Assimilation Reconsidered: An Inquiry into Jewish Cultural Studies," *From Ghetto to Emancipation: Historical and Contemporary Reconsiderations of the Jewish Community*, David N. Myers and William V. Rowe, eds. (Scranton: University of Scranton Press).
  7. Rachel Adler, "A Question of Boundaries: Toward a Jewish Feminist Theology of Self and Other," *Tikkun* 6 (May/June 1991): 43-46, 87. Reprinted in *Tikkun Anthology*, edited by Michael Lerner. (Oakland and Jerusalem: 1992). For a historical discussion of the term *ivri*, see Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary Genesis* (Philadelphia:1989), 102-103, Excursus 4, 377-379.
  8. Riv-Ellen Prell, *Prayer & Community: The Havurah in American Judaism* (Detroit: 1989), 60-65.
  9. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds. *Womanspirit Rising* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), 194.
  10. Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 1-13.
  11. For example, the National Jewish Population Survey of 2000 generated controversy over its criteria for defining categories.
  12. *Hallal(ah)*: the offspring of a forbidden priestly relationship. If a male, he is considered unfit for the priesthood. If a female, she may not marry a priest. Adin Steinsaltz, *The Talmud: A Reference Guide* (New York: Random House, 1989), 92.
  13. *Lesbian Rabbis: The First Generation*, edited by Rebecca T. Alpert, Sue Levi Elwell and Shirley Idelson (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001).
  14. Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), 125-133.
  15. I am indebted to Pia Moriarty for her description of this model and to Emily Click for a workshop on its theory; I am belatedly aware that there is an extensive literature about it. As an example, see Robert L. Kinast, *What Are They Saying About Theological Reflection* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2002).
  16. David Ellenson, "Jewish Legal Interpretation: Literary, Scriptural, Social and Ethical Perspectives," *Biblical Hermeneutics in Jewish Moral Discourse*, Peter J. Haas, ed. Semeia 34 (1985).
  17. On the implications of constructing a rite such as this, see Vincent J. Cheng, *Inauthentic: The Anxiety over Culture and Identity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004).
  18. Adler, *Engendering Judaism*, Chapter 5.
  19. Thanks to the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association for inviting me to deliver the paper on which this article is based (2003). The article also incorporates an earlier presentation, "A Question of Boundaries: Women, Judaism, and the Complexities of Cultural Negotiation," for a conference, "The Changing Face of Jewish Identity," jointly sponsored by the University of Southern California and Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles (2000).
- Many friends helped and taught me while I was preparing this article. Special thanks to Pia Moriarty, Robert Hurd, Maera Shreiber, and David Schulman for much assistance and to David N. Meyers, Isa Aron, Tamara Eskenazi, and Rabbis Laura Geller, Bridget Wynne, Noa Kushner, Catherine Nemerov and Peter Levi for valuable input and critique.

# Israel as “Jewish and Democratic” — Revising the Sacred Formula

BY ILAN PELEG

One of the most significant tensions faced by contemporary Israel is between the commitment of most Israelis to the Jewishness of the state, on the one hand, and their commitment to the democratic principles of the country (as they understand these principles), on the other hand. The legal scholar David Kretzmer summed up this dilemma succinctly: “As a democratic state Israel must serve the needs of all its citizens; as the state of the Jewish people its function is to pursue particularistic goals.”<sup>1</sup>

This tension is at the center of what could be described as a full-fledged *Kulturkampf*, a political struggle about the very essence of the state fought in Israel for the last three decades.<sup>2</sup> In some ways, this tension between loyalty to the demands of universalistic democracy and the tenets of a particularistic nationalism (that is, Zionism), has been present in the Zionist movement from its very beginning.

## Universal and Particular

The contrast between “universalists”

and “particularists” among early and late Zionists has been somewhat over-emphasized by liberal interpreters of Israeli politics. Although this often was part of an effort to demonstrate that their camp was less nationalistic than it actually was, the distinction between the two approaches has at least some merit.

Thus, the dual commitment to the principles of democracy and to the Zionist agenda has been incorporated into official documents forming the Israeli state. The foundational Declaration of Independence of May 1948, for example, asserted that Eretz Yisrael was the birthplace of Jewish people, and declared a Jewish state in Palestine, promising that it would be open to the immigration of Jews from all countries of their dispersion. At the same time, this document promised the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants, and committed the new state to the “full social and political equality of all its citizens.” Several Israeli Basic Laws explicitly enshrined the notion that Israel is “Jewish and democratic,” as did a number of rulings by the Israeli High Court of Justice.

---

Dr. Ilan Peleg is the Dana Professor of Social Science at Lafayette College and on the faculty of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

There is hardly a question that the tension inherent in this dual commitment will continue to dominate Israeli politics for many years to come, and that it will affect the most important questions facing the state. These include the future of the West Bank and Gaza, the relations between Jews and Palestinians inside Israel, and the status of organized religion (particularly Orthodox Judaism) within the Israeli polity.

## The Israeli Duality

The dual commitment inherent in the Israeli political reality has led Israel to adopt, since its establishment, both “Jewish” and “democratic” policies. Such policies, however, have often collided, and are likely to continue to collide even more severely in the future. Acting Jewishly, the state sponsored the immigration of millions of Jews under a controversial Law of Return (1950), acquired lands specifically in order to “Judaize” the country<sup>3</sup> and especially areas inhabited by Arabs (e.g., the Galilee), developed an educational system designed to inculcate Jewish values,<sup>4</sup> adopted Jewish myths and symbols,<sup>5</sup> and granted special status and recognition to Orthodox Judaism.

Acting democratically, the State of Israel established an elected legislature and conducted orderly elections at regular intervals, adopted most (although significantly not all) Western freedoms, enacted Basic Laws (although, significantly again, not a constitution or a bill of rights) to regulate important aspects of public life, recognized an indepen-

dent judiciary, and allowed vibrant and open debate on most political issues.

Despite those significant democratic achievements, recognized by some of the most prominent political analysts,<sup>6</sup> Israel’s democracy has been problematic in several areas, mostly because of its particularistic commitments. The largest minority within the state, Palestinian Arabs who are Israeli citizens (or “Israeli Arabs,” as they are often known), have not been able to achieve full equality, either as individuals or as a group. Systematic discrimination has been noted in numerous areas, including education, employment, housing, land purchasing, immigration and citizenship.<sup>7</sup>

## Civic Equality

Despite some improvements in the conditions of the Arabs,<sup>8</sup> it is hard to maintain that Israel is moving decisively toward civic equality. Although the Supreme Court recently decreed that road signs must also be in Arabic (an official language in Israel, along with Hebrew), and on occasion has taken even more meaningful positions, majority-minority relationships have deteriorated since the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa *intifadah* and the riots that resulted in October 2000.

Israel’s dual commitment to Jewishness and democracy impacts not only on Arab-Jewish relations, but also on relations within the Jewish majority. Many so-called secular, non-religious or non-observant Jews deeply resent the continuous interference of the Orthodox establishment in their

lives, interference rooted in the so-called Status Quo Agreement of 1947 and enshrined in several pieces of Israeli law. In terms of Western standards and, increasingly, worldwide standards, religion is unusually intrusive in Israel. If freedom from religion, along with freedom of religion, is one of the fundamental values of modern democracy, Israel's democracy is flawed indeed.

Moreover, since the establishment of the state, some ultra-Orthodox groups have enjoyed special privileges in violation of democratic principles, particularly equality before the law (see below). Thus, not only have *yeshivot* received generous financial allocations of public funds, but in 2002 the Knesset approved, officially and legally, the exemption of their students from military service.

## Critical Questions

The frequent, ongoing collision between the state's commitment to democracy and the Jewishness of the majority — defined religiously, ethnically or ideologically — raises several critical questions as to the relationships between the two:

- Is the dual commitment itself oxymoronic in the sense that Israel cannot possibly be truly democratic while its majority is loyal to its Jewish agenda, especially in view of the existence of a large non-Jewish minority?
- If we reject the proposition that Israel cannot be both democratic and Jewish, the question is, how can it achieve both goals? If we assume that not every mix of “Jewish and demo-

cratic” meets the minimal requirements of democracy, we need to identify an acceptable balance between these two value systems.

- Is the real choice for Israel between being a fully democratic Western state, where religion and ethnicity are privatized and all citizens are treated equally (both as individuals and as groups) and being an ethnonational polity or, under the best of circumstances, “ethnic democracy”?<sup>9</sup>
- If religion is not privatized, as it is in democracies that have not established state-religion separation, how can it be “contained” in a manner that guarantees equality to those citizens who do not belong to the majority?

## Political and Scholarly Camps

Insofar as the Israeli public is concerned, three major camps are discernable in relation to the “Jewish and democratic formula.” The first camp, on the particularistic end of the spectrum, believes that Israel ought to be committed primarily or even exclusively to its Jewishness. While it generally recognizes democracy as a desirable common good, it views it as secondary.<sup>10</sup>

This position is common among nationalists, and especially in religious circles. The position of the particularists can be summed up by two propositions: a) the requirements of democracy and the interests of the Jewish people are sometimes incompatible; b) if and when such incompatibility occurs, the interests of the Jewish people and their state (Israel) should prevail.

While the State of Israel has never formally accepted this position — in fact, it denied it by consistently maintaining its equal commitment to both Jewishness and democracy — most Israeli governments to date have arguably adopted this position, most of the time. Steps toward a more balanced approach have been hesitant at best, although the Supreme Court’s March 2000 ruling on the equal rights of land-purchasing by Arabs in Israel constitutes a significant move toward a more balanced approach.

### **Either/Or?**

The second camp among Israelis argues that Israel must decisively and openly choose democracy over Jewishness. While people who belong to this camp agree with their right-wing opponents that democracy and Jewishness constitute often incompatible value systems, they prefer democracy to Jewishness on the grounds of universalism.

Within the second camp, we find, in fact, two political solutions to the Jewishness-democracy tension. Some analysts support the transformation of the “Jewish and democratic” state into “a state of all its citizens,” a formula that would presumably turn Israel into a typical Western liberal democracy, with equality of all citizens as individuals and state neutrality toward all of its ethnic and religious groups. Other analysts within the second camp would support full equality of individuals (“liberalism”) but insist that, in addition, the state must become an Arab-Jewish binational entity, where power

is shared by the two national groups. This camp includes Arab intellectuals such as Azmi Bishara, Asad Ghanem, and Nadim Rouhana, but also Jewish analysts such as Baruch Kimmerling, Ilan Pappé, Yoav Peled, and Oren Yiftachel.<sup>11</sup>

The largest camp in Israel endorses the definition of the state as “Jewish and democratic” on the basis of three main arguments: a) Israel’s commitments to Jewishness and democracy are fundamentally compatible; b) Israel has, in fact, kept both of its commitments; c) the “formula” is a reasonable compromise between two competing forces.<sup>12</sup>

### **Necessary Conditions**

My thesis is that while historically Israel’s democratic record has not been particularly good,<sup>13</sup> especially in regard to the broad and substantive requirements of modern, Western, liberal democracy (see below), in principle, “Jewishness” and democracy might be compatible — but only if the ethnonational nature of the Israeli state is significantly curtailed, and the democratic requirements are maximized and enhanced even more fundamentally.

My inclination is to endorse a solution by which the old formula of the Israeli state — often called “ethnic democracy” — is completely discarded and replaced by a new formula based on symbolic attachment to the state’s Jewishness, but with the elimination of all material manifestations of ethnic discrimination. Put differently, only substantive equality of all citizens as

individuals and groups can guarantee Israel's future as a genuine democracy, a condition that has not been achieved to date.

I believe that my proposal for change is required in view of the fact that the old formula has demonstrably failed, and that it is even less likely to maintain stability and enhance justice in the future. The violent clashes between Arabs and Jews in October 2000 are, possibly, a sign of things to come. Moreover, intellectual and liberal circles in Israel (including the state's Supreme Court in its Katzir decision of March 2000 and other rulings) have now come to recognize that new ideas for strengthening Israel's democracy are needed.

## Defining Democracy

All arguments about the compatibility of Israel's Jewishness and its democracy depend, to a large extent, on what precisely one means by "democracy." As "an essentially contested concept,"<sup>14</sup> "democracy" is open to numerous definitions. A particular problem in regard to Israel's democracy is that many analysts do not define precisely what they mean by democracy. The discussion on how democratic Israel can be despite its Jewish commitment is not very fruitful unless we are clearer as to the requirements of democracy and apply those requirements rigorously to the Israeli case.

First, it is important to view democracy not as an absolute (that is, a polity either has it or not), but as a continuum. The question is, how much de-

mocracy does a polity have? Secondly, we should adopt a broader position on what constitutes democracy. Thus, I am uncomfortable with approaches that identify democracy with a set of "liberties" that are guaranteed through formal procedures and institutions, despite the fact that this is the essence of the position taken by some prominent analysts.<sup>15</sup> Third, my approach to democracy is hierarchical: it identifies the requirements for democracy by going from lower (that is, less demanding) requirements to higher (more demanding) levels. Such an approach allows one to deal not merely with the issue of whether a country is or is not democratic, but to what extent it is democratic. It thus facilitates a discussion of the quality of a country's democracy.

This three-pronged approach leads me to offer this definition of democracy: A fully-fledged democracy must meet the following progressively tougher requirements:

- a. Conduct regular, fair and free elections in order to establish the rule of the majority (a minimalist requirement);
- b. Legally protect the fundamental freedoms of all citizens, including speech and assembly, as well as freedom of and from religion (a mid-range requirement);
- c. Guarantee equality of all individual citizens and social groups before the law, as well as in practice (a maximalist requirement).

## Mixed Record

In the case of Israel, the record has been rather mixed. Moreover, most of

the problems in terms of the quality of Israel's democracy stem directly from the country's adherence to its "Jewishness." In terms of the first requirement, since its establishment, Israel has conducted, on the whole, regular elections freely and fairly. Nevertheless, the tension between Jewishness and democracy has been manifested when parties judged to be running against the Jewish or democratic nature of the state were banned by the Supreme Court, by the Knesset, or by the Central Election Committee. A recent decision by the Supreme Court allowing two Arab parties to run in the 2003 elections despite allegations that they have challenged Israel's "Jewishness" suggests that Israel might be liberalizing in regard to the first requirement of democracy.

In regard to the second requirement of democracy, the Israeli record is significantly weaker. First, the various freedoms and liberties given to Israeli citizens are yet to be codified in a constitution, a bill of rights, or any other such comprehensive and protected document. Secondly, while the state has progressed enormously since 1948 in terms of certain freedoms (e.g., freedom of speech, enshrined in the Supreme Court decision known as *Kol Ha'am*), in regard to freedoms related to the state's Jewishness, as perceived by Israel's Founding Fathers and ever since, the democratic record has not been satisfactory. Thus, the State of Israel is today extraordinarily intrusive in regard to issues defined by it as "religious" but viewed in most other countries as matters belonging to a citizen's

"private sphere." The requirement for Orthodox marriage under the supervision of the state-supported rabbinate, for example, violates the worldwide acceptance today of civil marriage.

## Seeking Full Equality

The most difficult situation, however, arises in regard to the third requirement of democracy, equality of all citizens before the law and in practice. In terms of equality, particularly between national groups and their members (that is, between Arabs and Jews), the Israeli democracy has proven to be flawed indeed. The main forms of legal discrimination are to be found in regard to the acquisition of citizenship (where Jews are given an advantage through the Law of Return) and the acquisition of land, where non-Jews are prevented from purchasing land held by the state, roughly 93 percent of the total area.<sup>16</sup> The lack of full collective rights to minority groups impacts negatively on the individual rights of their members,<sup>17</sup> as shown in detail in several books.[18] Chief Justice Aharon Barak has called publicly for full equality for Arabs, stating that there can be no true democracy in Israel without it.<sup>19</sup>

The lack of equality stemming from the state commitment to "Jewishness" is, however, not limited to Arab-Jewish issues. Thus, the imposition of Orthodox halakhic law in Israel leads also to the discrimination of women as a group and as individuals, and the state has systematically privileged the Orthodox population, a discriminatory prac-

tice toward the secular population (e.g., special exemption from military service, autonomous educational system, generous allocations to *yeshivot*, etc.).

## **Moving Toward Democratic Inclusion**

If, in its best interests, and in order to enhance long-term stability and democratic justice, Israel must change, how could this change be achieved? Can the traditionally sacred formula “Jewish and democratic” be salvaged, or does it have to be completely discarded as inevitably undemocratic?

In principle, if the Jewish majority decides to create a more inclusive Israel, it can move in two distinct but practically linked directions. First, Israel can move in what might be called an integrative-liberal direction, dismantling all discriminatory policies toward the Arabs as individuals and establishing a genuine liberal democracy. Under this formula, Arab citizens would be able to buy land anywhere in the state, obtain jobs (including governmental positions) in accordance with their skills, and so forth. Moreover, discriminatory practices directed against Arabs, such as organized campaigns against selling them apartments, would be eliminated.

Second, Israel could move toward a more inclusive democracy by going in a “consociational direction,” which would involve enhancing the recognition and the protection given to the Arab minority as a distinct national group. Consociational arrangements and public recognition already exist

within the highly diverse Jewish majority and they could be expanded to the Arab minority.

## **Autonomy and Stability**

Thus, Arabs could be given full-fledged personal autonomy,[20] granting them direct control over the most important aspects of their communal lives (e.g., education). In fact, in the interest of political stability in Israel, “functional autonomy . . . may be necessary to counter . . . support for territorial autonomy or total separation.”<sup>21</sup> Arabs should also be given a proportional share of the national wealth; their more moderate parties could be invited to serve in the government; and their symbols might be incorporated into the country’s civil religion, so as to create a common Israeli identity that is civic and overarching.

While liberal and consociational changes could ease the interethnic clash within Israel, they are unlikely to turn Israel into a binational project, a result that the Jewish majority would never accept. Such changes will merely recognize the already existing binational reality of contemporary Israel and incorporate it into the country’s governmental structure, thus increasing congruence between society and polity for the benefit of long-term stability.

A decisive action of the type discussed here could possibly give Israeli Arabs a reason to identify with the state. The continuation of a policy of discrimination and exclusion would negate such a possibility. The role of the Israeli leadership in bringing about

such a change is crucial. To date, we have witnessed insufficient attention to this problem.

### Prospects for Change

The definition of Israel as “Jewish and democratic,” heavily used by Israel’s political institutions and accepted by the majority, has not worked well over the first 56 years of the state. The term “Jewish” has been translated into exclusivist, hegemonic control of the majority in all areas. Short of declaring Israel a halakhic state, the term “Jewish” has been interpreted as broadly as possible. The term “democratic,” on the other hand, has been applied rather narrowly: majority rule and fundamental liberal freedoms to all citizens, but pointedly not political equality for minorities in what has become, in effect, a “Jewish Republic.” There is still no full recognition or protection of minorities, and lack of equality on either an individual or a group basis persists.

If the Israeli majority is determined to maintain an Israel that is both Jewish and democratic, the existing balance between those two components might have to change so as to increase decisively the weight of the state’s democratic qualities, and proportionately decrease the state’s “Jewishness,” especially in areas where such an overtly particularistic definition is injurious to the democratic quality of the state. Such a transformation could be implemented in a balanced and measured manner, so as to maintain some, but by no means all, of the traditional formula’s components.

### The Material and the Symbolic

On the basis of what principle could such a transformation be effected? I would argue that a polity might define itself particularistically (as many polities indeed do) only insofar as such definition does not result in the substantive and material discrimination of members of the polity (that is, its citizens). Self-definition that results in systematic discrimination is, by definition, democratically unacceptable.

Inherent in my position is the argument that in the case of Israel, as in numerous other cases, we need to maintain a distinction between the symbolic level (where the majority’s particularism may prevail without serious injury to democracy) and the material level, where particularist features of a regime result in real discrimination.

An Israel that eliminates all the particularist features that result in the discrimination of non-Jews would still be “Jewish” in several important ways. The Jewish majority would be sustained, the dominant language would remain Hebrew and the culture Hebraic and Jewish, and most of the symbols accepted within the Israeli society would continue to be rooted in the Jewish tradition.

Even the controversial Law of Return could survive the type of reconstruction suggested here, especially if a Palestinian state with its own law of return is established side-by-side with Israel. Not only could the Law of Return be defended as a historical, collective act of affirmative action taken

by the international system toward the Jewish people, but on the level of principle, one can defend discrimination in admitting people to the polity (a practice used by many nations). It is impossible, on the other hand, to defend discrimination against individuals or groups once they are already citizens: Such discrimination negates the most important principle of democracy.

The transformation of Israel into a genuine liberal democracy via the elimination of all forms of material discrimination could be achieved without endangering the overall Jewish character of the state. Numerous countries all over the world, after all, have an established dominant culture, side-by-side with minority cultures, but with no substantive (let alone formal) discrimination against minorities or their members. If the reform offered here is implemented, the sacred formula "Jewish and democratic" could survive, a reminder of an archaic, ethnically based discrimination that has been passed on Israel's way toward genuine democracy.

---

1. David Kretzmer, *The Legal Status of the Arabs in Israel* (Boulder: Westview, 1990), 176.

2. Ilan Peleg, "Epilogue: The Peace Process and Israel's Political Kulturkampf," in Ilan Peleg, editor, *The Middle East Peace Process: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (New York: SUNY Press, 1998), 237-263; Ilan Peleg, "Israel's Constitutional Order and Kulturkampf: The Role of Ben-Gurion," *Israel Studies* 3(1), 1998, 230-250.

3. Oren Yiftachel, "Ethnocracy, Geography and Democracy: Comments on the Politics of the Judaization of Israel,"

*Alpaim* 19, 2000, 78-105; Oren Yiftachel, "The Concept of 'Ethnic Democracy' and Its Applicability to the Case of Israel," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 15, January 1992, 125-136.

4. Yuval Dror, "From 'Negation of the Diaspora' to 'Jewish Consciousness': The Israeli Educational System, 1920-2000," *Israel Studies Forum* 18(1), Spring 2003, 58-82.

5. Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

6. Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy, Participation and Observation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971); Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Arend Lijphart, *Democracies: Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

7. Kretzmer, *op.cit.*; Nadim Rouhana, *Palestinian Citizens in an Ethnic Jewish State: Identities in Conflict* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). Discrimination toward and neglect of the minority have been recently noted by the Orr Commission, appointed to investigate the violent events of October 2000, as well as by other official Israeli bodies.

8. Sammy Smooha, "Types of Democracy and Modes of Conflict Management in Ethnically Divided Societies," *Nations and Nationalism* 8(4), 2002, 423-431.

9. Sammy Smooha "Minority Status in Ethnic Democracy: The Status of the Arab Minority in Israel," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 13(2), July 1990, 389-413; Sammy Smooha, "Ethnic Democracy: Israel as a Archetype," *Israel Studies* 2, Fall 1997, 198-241; Sammy Smooha, "The Models of Ethnic Democracy: Israel as a Jewish and Democratic State," *Nations and Nationalism* 8(4), 2002, 475-503.

10. Yehuda Cohen, *Who's Afraid of a Jewish State? A Constitutional and Ideological Perspective* (Tel Aviv: Lishkat Orchei Ha'din, 2001 [Hebrew]). Representing this line, the late Chief Rabbi, Sholomo Goren, used to remind his listeners that "democracy is not mentioned in the Torah even once!"
11. Gahnem, Asad, Nadim Rouhana and Oren Yiftachel, "Questioning 'Ethnic Democracy': A Response to Sammy Smooha," *Israel Studies* 3(2), 1998, 253-267.
12. Ruth Gavison, "Jewish and Democratic? A Rejoinder to the 'Ethnic Democracy' Debate," *Israel Studies* 4(1), 1999, 44-72; Ruth Gavison, *Israel as a Jewish and Democratic State: Tensions and Chances* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Ha'meuchad, 1999 [Hebrew]); Ruth Gavison, "A Jewish and Democratic State: Political Identity, Ideology and Law," in *Barak-Erez*, ed., 1996, 169-222.
13. Ian Lustick, *Arabs in the Jewish State: Israel's Control of a National Minority* (University of Texas Press, 1980); Kretzmer, 1990; Rouhana, 1997.
14. W.B. Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," in *The Importance of Language*, Max Black, ed., Prentice-Hall, 1962, 121-146.
15. Dahl, *op.cit.*, 1971.
16. Baruch Kimmerling, "Jurisdiction in an Immigrant-Settler Society: The 'Jewish and Democratic State,'" *Comparative Political Studies* 35, December 2002, 1120.
17. *Ibid.*, 1124.
18. Lustick, 1980; Kretzmer, 1990; Rouhana, 1997.
19. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties*, New York, annual. Also: Freedom House Country Ratings at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/ratings>.
20. Sammy Smooha, *Autonomy for Arabs in Israel?* (Givat Haviva: The Institute for Israeli Arab Studies, 1999 [Hebrew]).
21. Alan Dowty, "Is Israel Democratic? Substance and Semantics in the 'Ethnic Democracy' Debate," *Israel Studies* 4(2), Fall 1999, 1-14, 12.

# Who Is Israel?

BY DAVID FOX SANDMEL

**T**raditionally, both Jews and Christians have considered themselves to be the heirs of biblical Israel, God's chosen people. Perhaps more than any other difference between Judaism and Christianity, this claim to be God's covenantal partner has defined the tragic history of relations between Jews and Christians. It is also the single aspect of Christian theology that has changed most radically since the Shoah, as a result of the process of Christian self-examination, of the dialogue between Jews and Christians, and of advances in critical scholarship concerning religion in the Greco-Roman world.

After a brief look at the meaning of "Israel" for Jews, I will examine some classical and contemporary Christian understandings of what it means for Christians to be Israel.

## Jews as Israel

For Jews, the word "Israel" has three interrelated meanings. First, it refers to a people descended from the patriarchs and matriarchs. Second, this people Israel has a special covenant with God, first established with Abraham and subsequently renewed at Sinai. Third, ac-

ording to our tradition, God has given us a specific land, the land of Israel.

In English and in most other modern languages, we refer to ourselves as "Jews" (French, *Juifs*; German, *Juden*). The word "Jew," however, is not the original name. "Jew" occurs rarely in the *Tanach* or in the *siddur*.<sup>1</sup> Our oldest name is *Yisrael*, Israel; we call ourselves *am Yisrael*, "the people of Israel," and *benei Yisrael*, "the children of Israel."

In non-Orthodox prayer books, one of the first benedictions to be recited in the morning is "Praised are You our Eternal God, Sovereign of the Universe who has made me *Yisrael* (an Israelite)."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in the Talmud we find, "a *Yisrael*, even though he [or she] sins is still a *Yisrael*."<sup>3</sup> The fact that most translators render *Yisrael* in both the morning benediction and the talmudic dictum as "Jew" underscores the point. Indeed, the *Shema* doesn't make sense to some Jews until it is rephrased as "Hear, O Jews! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone." We, and others, may use the word "Jew," but our name is Israel.

## An Open Family

As the children of Israel, we are the

---

David Fox Sandmel is the rabbi of K.A.M. Isaiah Israel Congregation in Chicago. This essay is adapted with permission from *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, edited by Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, David Novak, Peter Ochs, David Fox Sandmel and Michael A. Signer (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000).

descendants of our ancestors: Abraham and Sarah; Isaac and Rebecca; and Jacob, Leah, and Rachel. Jacob was given the name Israel during his encounter with God described in Genesis 32. And Jacob had twelve sons who, in turn, became the twelve tribes of Israel. Thus, Israel is a people, an extended family in which all Jews are related. But the family is open. Those who become “Jews by choice” are adopted into the Jewish people and become indistinguishable members of the family.<sup>4</sup>

“Israel” also refers to a particular event, since we are the people who entered into the covenant with God at Mount Sinai:

Israel encamped there in front of the mountain, and Moses went up to God. YHVH called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel: ‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Me. Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples.’” (Exodus 19: 2-5).

Finally, as Israel we have a deep emotional attachment to a particular place that we also call Israel. The phrase “land of Israel” is much older than the modern State of Israel; it is found in the book of Samuel, and is used regularly by Ezekiel. In the light of a history marked by persecution and genocide, the existence of an independent Jew-

ish state, also called Israel, has made the connection to both the land and the state an integral part of what it means for contemporary Jews to be Israel.

## **Christians as Israel**

The Christian understanding that the church has become God’s covenantal partner — has become Israel — can be divided into three stages. The first stage was quite short, lasting only a generation or two after Jesus’ execution, and can be found in the writings of Paul. During this stage, the earliest followers of Jesus, both Jewish and Gentile, saw themselves as part of, or at least in relationship to, the Jewish people and the Jewish tradition.

The second stage began as Christianity started to develop an identity independent of Judaism, as early as the composition of the Gospels, and continued into the modern period. In this stage, Christianity came to view itself as the “new Israel.” Christians are partners with God in a “new” covenant through Christ, and God’s covenant with old Israel, with the Jews, is no longer in effect.

As a result of their unfaithfulness to God, as recorded in the Tanach itself, and culminating in their rejection of Jesus Christ, the Jews are disqualified from continuing as God’s covenantal partners. In its extreme and most dangerous forms, the church as “spiritual Israel” is diametrically opposed to the Jews as “carnal Israel”; the church is the “true Israel” and represents God and good; the Jews are the “false Israel” and represent Satan and evil.

During the third stage, in the years since the Shoah, official church bodies and Christian theologians have been reconsidering what it means for both Christians and Jews to be “Israel.” I will now briefly examine each of these stages.

### **Paul’s Perspective**

Christianity began as one of many groups within the complex religious world of Second Temple Judaism. As the movement that evolved from the followers of Jesus grew, it attracted relatively few Jews, but was taken up by many Gentiles. By the middle of the second century of the common era, Christianity and rabbinic Judaism were well on the way to becoming separate religions.

One of the challenges for emerging Christianity was defining the relationship between an increasingly Gentile church and Christianity’s Jewish roots. What did it mean to be a Gentile who believed that Jesus as the risen Christ was the Messiah promised to Israel by the God of Israel, especially when most Jews — Jesus’ own people — did not accept Jesus? How could Gentiles share in God’s promise to Israel and worship the God of Israel without being Israel?

Whereas the Gospels portray the tension between Judaism and emerging Christianity in the harsh rhetoric of religious polemic, it is the apostle Paul who first tries to provide a theological resolution for the question of the relationship of Christianity to the God of Israel. This attempted resolution is found most succinctly in Romans 9-11.

### **Covenant and Choice**

Paul begins by affirming God’s covenants with the people Israel. He then suggests that God’s promise is not limited to the physical descendants of Abraham, that is, to the Jews. Rather, the essential aspect of God’s covenant with the Jews is not the Jews per se but the fact that God made a choice and that God continues to have the power to choose whomever God wants. Paul states, citing Exodus 33:19, that it is God’s choice, or God’s grace, that ultimately determines whether mercy is bestowed upon a person or not. Likewise, and here Paul cites Hosea 2:23, God can choose other covenantal partners if that is God’s will.

In this section of Romans, Paul also discusses the place of Jewish law in the new covenant. Paul believed that the law by itself was insufficient to ensure redemption or salvation. Faith in the risen Christ is essential: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9).

Thus for Paul, although God’s choice of Israel is a historical fact and remains valid, God retains the freedom to choose whomever God wills; God’s salvation is not restricted to Israel simply because God has a covenant with it. “There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him” (Romans 10:13).

### **Continuing Covenant**

As a Jew, Paul was greatly distressed

that Israel had not heeded God's message of salvation brought through Jesus (Romans 10:14-21). Nonetheless, Paul steadfastly proclaims God's continued covenant with the people of Israel as well as his own allegiance to them.

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew (Romans 11:1-2).

Indeed, Paul's mission to the Gentiles is, in part, an effort to bring Israel to faith in Christ by provoking their jealousy (Romans 11:13)!

At this point, Paul invokes the famous metaphor of the olive tree from which some branches have been broken and onto which other branches have been grafted (Romans 11:16-24). The tree, both roots and branches, is Israel, the people with whom God made an everlasting covenant. The broken branches are those of Israel, the nation that has rejected the gospel of Jesus Christ. The grafted branches are those of the nations who have accepted the gospel.

## **Old and New Israel**

Gentiles who believe in Jesus become part of Israel — that is, God's covenantal partners — and are able to share in the salvation brought by the Savior who comes from Israel. In Paul's view, it is Israel's rejection of Jesus that has made possible the election of the Gentiles, and the faith of the Gentiles

is an essential part of God's plan for Israel.

Paul has described a "new" or, more accurately, "true" Israel consisting of those who have faith in Jesus Christ. This true Israel is not made up of the descendants of Jacob/Israel (though they are not necessarily excluded from it); rather it is the community of both Jewish and Gentile believers, that is, the church.<sup>6</sup>

Paul understood the relationship between the old Israel (the descendants of Jacob) and the new Israel (the church) to be reciprocal; each needed the other in order to achieve final salvation. At the same time, Paul believed that God's promises to the old Israel were irrevocable and would be fulfilled, although admittedly, his understanding of that fulfillment — inasmuch as it required faith in Jesus as Christ — was not one that his contemporaries among the Jews would have accepted.

## **The Church as the True Israel**

The first and second centuries were years of self-definition for both Judaism and Christianity. As Christianity grew and spread through the ancient world, it had to assert its own identity. As part of this process of self-definition and differentiation, each tradition drew distinct boundaries that excluded the other, and each claimed to be the exclusive heir of biblical Israel.

The Christian understanding of the church as the "new" Israel came more and more to exclude the "old" Israel. This exclusion is found even in Gospel documents, which often portray the

Jews rejecting Jesus and Jesus (and/or God), in turn, rejecting the Jews and turning to the Gentiles.<sup>7</sup> Whereas Paul saw a new Israel that included both “Jew and Greek,” later Christianity saw (and some Christians today continue to see) the new Israel (Christianity) superseding the old Israel (Judaism).

Justin Martyr (c.165 CE), an important early church father, uses the term “true spiritual Israel” in referring to the church in his *Dialogue with Trypho*. Justin argues that since the God of Israel acted in Jesus Christ, it is in the church rather than in Israel that the God of Israel is now found.

An important difference between the position of Justin and the one articulated by Paul in Romans 9-11 is that Paul affirmed the irrevocable nature of God’s promise to the people of Israel. Justin, and thereafter most of Christianity into the modern era, viewed God’s relationship with “Abraham’s physical descendants” as transient, at best.<sup>8</sup> The historical consequence of this theology was a growing antipathy to Jews and to Judaism in most of the Christian world.

## **Christianity Reconsiders Israel**

We now come to the third stage in the development of Christian identity as Israel, in which the Shoah becomes a defining moment for Christianity. The long tradition of Christian anti-Semitism made the Shoah possible.<sup>9</sup> Many of the people who carried out Hitler’s Final Solution considered themselves Christians.

In confronting this stark reality,

some post-Holocaust Christians have reexamined aspects of traditional Christian teaching, especially the concept of the church as the “true Israel,” and have offered new definitions that differ from those of Paul and classical Christianity. Among the fundamental questions probed by theologians such as Paul van Buren, Rosemary Radford Reuther, George Lindbeck, and Franklin Littell are:

- What are Christians to make of the persistence of the Jewish people?
- Is the church the new Israel? If so, who are these people? If not, what happens to the doctrines of promise and fulfillment, law and grace?
- Is Jesus of the people Israel? For whom is he the Messiah?
- What of Israel’s land and state?

In addition, many official church bodies have issued public statements that reflect these concerns. In the documents of Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church reassessed its teachings about Jews and Judaism; it has continued this reassessment in subsequent documents.

Protestant churches have made similar pronouncements. For example, in 1987, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ adopted a resolution titled “The Relationship Between the United Church of Christ and the Jewish Community.” It stated:

The United Church of Christ affirms its recognition that God’s covenant with the Jewish people has not been rescinded or abrogated by God, but remains in full force, inasmuch as “the gifts and the call of

God are irrevocable” (Romans 11: 29).<sup>11</sup>

## Rejecting Triumphalism

The moral imperative to disavow triumphalist teachings that have led to atrocities in the past is the driving force behind the Christian theological re-evaluation of Jews and Judaism. Hans Kung, a Roman Catholic theologian, examines the history of Jewish-Christian relations and states:

Only one thing is of any use now: a radical metanoia [reorientation], repentance and re-thinking; we must start on a new road, no longer leading away from the Jew, but toward them.<sup>12</sup>

Kung concludes that the church’s opposition to the Jews is tantamount to opposition to God. Furthermore, the church “must seek in every way to enter into sympathetic dialogue with the ancient people of God.” Kung also argues that the church and Israel are two distinct peoples of God:

Like Israel and following Israel, the Church sees itself as the journeying people of God, constantly being delivered from bondage, constantly wandering through the wilderness of this age, constantly maintaining the tension between thankful commemoration and hopeful expectation and preparing itself for its entry into the promised land, the messianic kingdom, the goal that always lies in the future.<sup>13</sup>

## The Place of Jewish History

The realities of history are also the starting point for Kendall Soulen’s book, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*. In his critique of traditional Christian theology, Soulen argues that it has essentially omitted the history of Israel/Jews from its telling of its own story. In his reconstruction of what he calls “the standard canonical framework,” there are four stages of history. First, God creates the world and humanity. Second, humanity, through the sin of Adam and Eve, disobeys and falls. Third, “lost humanity” is redeemed in Christ. Fourth, God brings the final redemption of the world at the “end of time.”

The church (that is, those who believe in Jesus as Christ) is Israel inasmuch as it has become the people of God through its fidelity to Jesus Christ, not because it is descended from a single ancestor. Its status as a people is not defined solely by the promises of Sinai, nor does it necessarily entail a connection to any particular land. Noticeably missing from this rehearsal of the Christian sacred story is any mention of what we Jews would consider the core of our history. In this view, the Jews and their story are irrelevant to the story of the new, true Israel, Christianity.

Soulen notes, however, that significant parts of the Christian church today reject supersessionism and affirm God’s fidelity to the Jewish people. From there we ask: What are the implications of this new development for the rest of Christian theology?<sup>14</sup>

Soulen offers his own answer:

Christians should acknowledge that God's history with Israel and the nations is the permanent and enduring medium of God's work as the Consummator of human creation, and therefore it is also the permanent and enduring context of the gospel about Jesus.<sup>15</sup>

Rather than viewing the history of Israel and the nations as preparation for the gospel, Soulen argues that this history "surrounds the gospel as its constant horizon, context, and goal."<sup>16</sup> He suggests that Christianity cannot understand itself unless it posits an Israel whose covenant with God coexists with and informs the new covenant.

Scott Bader-Saye, another Christian theologian who has considered the meaning of election for contemporary Christianity, refers to the church as "God's chosen people with Israel."<sup>17</sup>

### **Along with/Instead of**

The concept of the church as the people of God along with the Jews, a concept that does not depend on denying Jews our identity and covenantal legitimacy, is a radical shift in Christian thinking. This step has required painful soul-searching and theological courage on the part of those Christians who have taken it. The Jewish community should view this shift positively; it signifies a real change in Christian understandings of Jews and Judaism and creates a profound basis for cooperation and exchange.

Above and beyond this basis for exchange, however, we ought to ask another question: Does this new shift among Christians have theological implications for Jews? Does the recognition on the part of some Christians that we Jews continue to be Israel in covenant with God require that, in turn, we must acknowledge the legitimacy of the church's claim to identify with the name "Israel"?

As I have tried to show in this brief essay, Jewish and Christian definitions of what it means to be Israel are quite different from one another. Jewish tradition already recognizes and affirms Gentiles who acknowledge the oneness of God. Jews can recognize Christians as people who believe in the God of Israel. From a Jewish perspective, however, that belief, in and of itself, does not make Christianity part of Israel, as we understand Israel, that is, a people that has a special covenant with God who has given us a specific land.

Although Christians can acknowledge that Israel's covenant with God is eternal, fidelity to Jewish tradition precludes our recognition as Israel of those who do not meet our definitional criteria. This is but one of the enduring differences between Jews and Christians, and we must not only accept but also affirm this difference if we are truly committed to supporting each other's integrity.

Changes in Christian theology regarding Jews and Judaism, however, do challenge us to find new ways to relate to Christians and Christianity. Now that some in the Christian world affirm God's continuing covenant with

the Jews, we need to consider the theological implications of their claim to be in covenant with that same God.

---

1. The Hebrew word *yehudi* in its various forms appears twenty-four times outside the book of Esther, where it is used regularly. Though most often translated into English as “Jew,” in context the best translation may be “Judean.”

2. In the Orthodox prayer book, the same benediction is found in a negative formulation: “who has not made me a Gentile.”

3. See B.T. *Sanhedrin* 22a.

4. Thus a Jew-by-choice is given a Hebrew name reflecting the family relationship — X the son/daughter of Abraham and Sarah.

5. Paul uses the plural “covenants,” probably a reference to successive covenants with Abraham as well as to the covenant at Sinai. It should be remembered that what we have of Paul’s writings is a collection of occasional letters, not an organized, worked-out theology. All interpretations of Paul are, by necessity, constructions.

6. Cf. Galatians 3:7, 9, 14, 29; 6:19.

7. See, for but one example, Matthew 22:33–41.

8. Much of Christian anti-Semitism can be traced to the view that the Jews (“carnal Israel”) had rejected Jesus, indeed, had crucified him.

9. The term “anti-Semitism” is problematic. It is important to differentiate between religiously based and racially based prejudice against Jews. Some consider only the latter to be “anti-Semitism.” Nonetheless, although it is important to distinguish different types of “Jew-hatred,” it seems to me that the term

“anti-Semitism,” despite its shortcomings, is now understood to encompass both “religious” and “racial” Jew-hatred.

It is also important to stress that although Christian anti-Semitism made the Shoah possible, “Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon,” to quote “*Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity*,” in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, edited by Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, David Novak, Peter Ochs, David Fox Sandmel, and Michael A. Signer (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), xix.

10. See Peter Ochs, “Jewish and Christian Theology,” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, second edition, edited by David Ford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 607. Ochs’ article provides a good synopsis of this trend in contemporary Christian theology.

11. For more on this resolution and its implications, see Denise Dombkowski Hopkins, “God’s Continuing Covenant with the Jews and the Christian Reading of the Bible,” in *Prism: A Theological Forum for the UCC* 3, no. 2 (Fall 1988), 60–75.

12. Hans Kung, *The Church*, translated by Ray and Rosaleen Oekenden (London: Burns and Oates, 1967), 138.

13. *Ibid.*, 148.

14. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 3.

15. *Ibid.*, 110.

16. *Ibid.*, 176.

17. Scott Bader-Saye, *Church and Israel After Christendom: The Politics of Election* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999), 148.

# Rainbow Hasidism in America — The Maturation of Jewish Renewal

A Review Essay of  
*Wrapped in a Holy Flame: Teachings and Tales of the Hasidic Masters*  
by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi  
(San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003)

BY SHAUL MAGID

“Sometimes legends make reality, and become more useful than the facts.”

— Salman Rushdie,  
*Midnight's Children*

“When Kabbalah came, it made of God a human; when Hasidism came, it made of the human, a God.”

—Rashbatz

“The primal danger of man is ‘religion.’”

—Martin Buber, “Spinoza, Sabbatai Zevi, and the Baal-Shem Tov”

Over the last 35 years, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (Reb Zalman) has developed what is arguably one of the most creative and influential movements in American Judaism in the past half century. Now known as Jewish Renewal, this movement has made an impact on all existing Jewish denominations. Beginning

with Havurat Shalom in Somerville, MA and continuing with B’nai Or (later changed to P’nai Or) in Philadelphia, PA, Reb Zalman’s vision of creating a modern and countercultural American “post-Hasidic” Hasidism has expanded into a national and international phenomenon. Annual conferences and *kallot* (gatherings) are commonplace, and scholars of religion are beginning to take an interest in Jewish Renewal as a unique dimension of American religion.

This essay is not only a review of a new book by Reb Zalman, *Wrapped in a Holy Flame: Teachings and Tales of the Hasidic Masters*. More specifically, it is about the way *Wrapped in a Holy Flame* is a lens through which one can view the maturation of Jewish Renewal. As is well known, the organizational, communal, and ideational vision of Reb Zalman’s Jewish Renewal arises out of

---

Dr. Shaul Magid holds the the Jay and Jeanie Schottenstein Chair in Jewish Studies at Indiana University in Bloomington, where he is associate professor of Jewish studies.

the Hasidic movement in Eastern Europe and its transplantation to America initiated by Habad Hasidism in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hasidic teachings, devotional practices and lifestyle (tapered to fit the particular needs and values of countercultural America) are the foundation of Reb Zalman's ongoing project. Practical guidebooks, such as the *The First Jewish Catalogue* in the early 1970s were the first popular manifestations of his new approach to Hasidism.<sup>1</sup>

## Writing and Teaching

Reb Zalman's writings were not as widely influential as his public teaching and mentoring. Although he served as a professor of Judaism at several universities (University of Winnipeg, Temple University, and now at the Naropa University in Boulder, CO), he rarely chose academic venues for his publications. In the spirit of Habad Hasidism, the source of his own Hasidic training, Reb Zalman's early works were intended for a young, estranged Jewish audience, many of whom were traveling the country and globe in search of an alternative lifestyle that was organic, joyful, non-materialistic and spiritual. His later work widened this narrow lens and contributed to the burgeoning new-age religiosity of contemporary America.

Reb Zalman is a master organizer, creating a network of Renewal groups that have started to become part of the existing American synagogue structure, as well as creating their own grass-roots prayer and ritual centers. In some way,

Jewish Renewal has become the pan-denomination of contemporary Judaism, recently adding to its organizational structure a decentered course of study toward rabbinical ordination mediated through the Internet and a network of devoted mentors around the country.

## Trilogy of Major Works

Although Reb Zalman has been quite prolific (his works include translations of Yiddish poetry as well as of Hasidic literature, theology and spirituality), to date two main works stand out: *Fragments of a Future Scroll* (1975) and *Paradigm Shift* (1993).<sup>2</sup> The first is largely selected translations of Hasidic texts accompanied by Reb Zalman's modest commentary. It is a work that breaks the ground for what will become a more mature statement of Jewish Renewal in *Paradigm Shift* almost 20 years later.<sup>3</sup>

Before *Wrapped in a Holy Flame*, *Paradigm Shift* was the most comprehensive statement of Jewish Renewal. In it, Reb Zalman addresses the major themes of his humanistic, universal, ecumenical, yet deeply ritualistic Judaism. *Paradigm Shift* is a collection of previously written essays, interviews, meditations, theology, practical advice (e.g., "transcending the Sefer Barrier") and even politics (e.g., "An Open Letter to the Honorable Teddy Kolleck").

The book has a stream-of-consciousness (some would say disorganized) feel, but I have always thought at least part of this was intentional. Reb Zalman's Judaism is one that seeks to chal-

lence the linear and scholastic way of thinking about religion. In this sense, the literary style of *Paradigm Shift* accurately reflects the literary style of many Hasidic works, although many Hasidic texts import the order of the Hebrew Bible or the yearly cycle as a structure.<sup>4</sup> *Paradigm Shift's* non-linear trajectory moves from theology to prayer to ritual to politics to the Holocaust almost inadvertently. It does not seem to be a book that is intended to be read cover to cover.

## Hasidic Spirituality

The final piece to Reb Zalman's trilogy is *Wrapped in a Holy Flame*. This book is much better organized, structured as a collection of Hasidic teachings and stories according to Hasidic masters. However, underlying this seemingly non-ideological guise, it is a radical reconstruction of Hasidic spirituality. It seeks to do what *Paradigm Shift* and his other works do not — it is Reb Zalman's attempt to place himself in a particular modern trajectory as a Jewish theologian of Hasidism. In short, it is his personal summa of Jewish Renewal. In this work, one can most readily discover Reb Zalman's "project," although it is easily missed if one reads it only for the retelling of Hasidic teachings.

Reading this book, one can understand how Jewish Renewal is both an outgrowth of, and also an impetus for, a radical reconstruction of Hasidism. That is, Jewish Renewal's success beyond its own cultural context requires an unambiguous reevaluation of Hasid-

ism. This work moves far beyond previous similar exercises (for example, in the works of Aryeh Kaplan or Adin Steinsaltz)<sup>5</sup> because there is no resonance of apologetic thinking.

Reb Zalman is not trying to present Hasidism, and by doing so, to defend it. As he puts it, "Jewish Renewal differs from Restoration, which seeks to hold on to a dying or former paradigm."<sup>11</sup> In fact, at moments he is quite critical of Hasidism and is quick to point out areas where a particular Hasidic value or teaching simply cannot be salvaged. It is in this sense that it is post-Hasidic and neo-Reconstructionist. (A chapter in *Paradigm Shift* entitled, "Reconstructionism and Neo-Hasidism: A Not-So-Imaginary Dialogue" addresses this issue directly.)

## Creative Reconstruction

For readers interested mainly in the tales and teachings of the Hasidic masters as retold by Reb Zalman, the first chapter, "A Renaissance of Piety," might seem merely prefatory. However, this chapter is one of the most important in the book. Without it, one can easily overlook the underlying purpose of Reb Zalman's retelling and reconstructing these Hasidic teachings into something useful for the new age. This creative reconstruction is scattered throughout the book, and is largely an extension of this chapter, where Reb Zalman reflects on the trajectory of modern interpreters of Hasidism and finds his place among them. The chapter also contains some important au-

tobiographical material in that it traces Reb Zalman's thinking over 30 years on the two fundamental questions that this book attempts to answer: "What is Hasidism?" and "How can one be a Hasid?"

In order to analyze this important chapter, I have taken the interpretive license of dividing it into four distinct parts: the situational, the psychological, the theological and the methodological. In each part, Reb Zalman demonstrates how Hasidism has and can continue to survive the test of time, as well as create and carry us to a new paradigm.

## **Reb Zalman and Buber**

Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel are the two most influential figures who introduced Hasidism to a modern, North American audience. Reb Zalman engages both thinkers in a way that resembles Buber's analysis in his essay, "Spinoza, Sabbatai Zevi and the Baal Shem Tov."<sup>6</sup> There, Buber argues that Spinoza and Sabbatai Zevi, both of whom waged their critique of normative Judaism in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, each had the right idea (albeit manifest differently). Yet each lacked something to enable that idea to mature and blossom — more specifically, to become a full-blown devotional life.

The Baal Shem Tov came along in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century and served as a corrective — not that the others were "wrong" in principle (in fact, Buber argues, both offered accurate critiques of Judaism), but they simply did not go far enough in what was right about

their respective theories. And, Buber adds, each failed by overextending his respective critique: Spinoza by eliminating the personal God completely, and Sabbatai Zevi by overextending the universality of Jewish messianism by converting to Islam.

The historical, or theological, accuracy of Buber's argument is not at issue here. What is relevant is that Reb Zalman claims that, in a similar way, both Buber and Heschel paved the way for Jewish Renewal, but could not take their theological observations into the realm of a devotional life. Each contributed to a reevaluation of Hasidism, but neither answered the fundamental question, "How can one be a Hasid?"

Reb Zalman understands Buber's neo-Hasidic project and agrees with it up to a point. Yet for Reb Zalman (and this is still his early thinking, c. 1960), Buber gives us the individual "I," and even gives us a systematic philosophy/theology of the "Thou," but he doesn't give us a human other who can point the way. For Buber, at least as Reb Zalman reads him, the Rebbe is not an integral part of the Hasidic experience. And Buber would agree with this — as an existentialist, it is the individual who points the way; it is subjectivity that creates the possibility of living authentically.

For Reb Zalman, Buber got it right about the subject, but he was afraid "that the word would become flesh," that dialogue would yield to obligation. Buber's fear of "objectivity" made "becoming a Hasid" impossible. He could not submit to a devotional life (even in the non-Orthodox way Reb Zalman constructs it), because his commitment

was principally to the moment alone. And he could not commit to the centrality of the *Tzaddik* or Rebbe, because, for Buber, the individual was the ultimate authority.

## Reb Zalman and Heschel

For Reb Zalman, Heschel comes closer, but he still does not give us what we need for a new paradigm. He gives us a theory of “radical amazement” and “divine pathos,” models whereby *halakha* can survive, where we no longer need to respond to Buber’s fear of incarnation as the destruction of the subject. Heschel gives us a Judaism that can be lived, an alternative piety that will not submit the subject to the heteronymous dictates of the law, but neither will it make the law inoperative. Heschel can teach us a lot about Hasidism, suggests Reb Zalman, but his theology is just that — a theology of Hasidism. It cannot teach one how to become a Hasid.<sup>7</sup>

Reb Zalman’s critique of Heschel is quite undeveloped, even transparent. He never explains what he means by Heschel’s limitations, implying only that for Heschel, like Buber, God is mediated through the experience of the individual alone. In short, Reb Zalman ends his “old thinking” (here refracted through an abbreviated critique of Buber and Heschel) with the proclamation that to be a Hasid, one needs a Rebbe.

## Renewing the “Rebbe”

With *Wrapped in a Holy Flame*, we

pick up again some 25 years later. Much has happened: the ’60s, the Vietnam War, psychedelic drugs. Reb Zalman has left the Lubavitch movement and Orthodoxy; Far Eastern religions have saturated the American landscape and Reb Zalman’s imagination. If Judaism can survive these seismic changes, Reb Zalman believes, it will be because of Hasidism.

But what about Hasidism? What about the Rebbe? The Rebbe model, he concludes, must stay, since being a Hasid necessitates having a Rebbe. But the old hierarchical model of rebbehood, one person around whom a community gathers and submits itself, cannot and should not survive — it must undergo a transformation. The Rebbe can no longer be a specific person. The hierarchical nature of community that this requires has not survived the progressive movement of contemporary culture.

Yet relation, what used to be the relation between the Rebbe and the Hasid, must survive. “Relation is filling the space between a subject and an object. It is the process bridging the two. Renewal is always a process of ‘togetherness,’ of partnering with something else. For in truth there is nothing in the physical world that is not of a dependent nature” (85). Re-envisioning the Rebbe is perhaps the first seismic move Reb Zalman makes from Hasidism to Renewal.

If the Rebbe does not survive in some manner, all we are left with is a “theology of Hasidism,” but not a lived devotional practice. That is, we are left with Buber and Heschel. Part of being

a Hasid is an act of submission, the feeling of being less rather than more, in need rather than in command. And here we are introduced to Reb Zalman's "organismic" model of rebbe-ing (13). Rebbe-ing is a function whereby we all serve each other at different times and for different purposes. "The Rebbe" is no longer a title but a station; I can serve the community as a Rebbe and then walk away and resume my ordinary life. It is a type of "playing Rebbe" (Reb Zalman even uses that language, 14). "So I've come understand that the Rebbe of the future is not going to be 'the Rebbe' we knew in the past. For some time, the Rebbe will serve as the Rebbe, and when that's done, the person will have dinner and go to see a movie and not necessarily be a Rebbe" (14).

### **Becoming Expansive Hasidim**

In other words, we teach one another to be Hasidim, not Hasidim of one person, but Hasidim in the wide sense, that is, living Judaism, or simply living, in an expansive way (24). "So, to be open and fluid, 'walking' is the way of the Hasid. When one is static and certain of life's limits, when one stands still, one is closed to the joy of endless possibilities, even on a spiritual path" (31).

Reb Zalman attempts to substantiate this claim — that Hasidism's original intent was not about the Rebbe per se — in portraits of Hasidic masters. The Rebbe/*Tzaddik* model was a particular, and necessary, instantiation, given the religious and cultural climate of the time. Thus, this book makes a

quasi-apostolic claim, a reconstruction of origins, attempting to revive a genealogy of the internality (*penimiut*) of Hasidism as expressed by its great masters. And yet, its apostolic claim is buttressed by a positivistic claim of creative progress.

Reb Zalman does not claim to have rediscovered the past, but only to have viewed a dimension of the past through the lens of a new future, making extraneous all that does not cohere to the internal message of Hasidism as he sees it through his contemporary eyes. This new vision of the Hasid directly connects to the second theological piece of his introduction, the new theological paradigm.

### **From Deism to Pantheism**

One of the advantages of being trained in, or at least conversant with, the study of religion more generally is the ability to employ categories in order to explain the internal movements of specific traditions. Reb Zalman employs the language of the study of religion (albeit a language that is now somewhat dated in the academy) to place Hasidism within a certain spiritual trajectory.

The theological component of this prelude is to view Hasidism as moving from deism (the old paradigm) to pantheism (the new paradigm), using biblical and post-biblical characters. In this reading, biblical and rabbinic figures embody or represent world views expressing certain theological positions. Again, the historical accuracy of this exercise is not an issue, as it wasn't for

Hasidic masters who thought similarly, albeit without Western theological categories. When we no longer look at Jewish tradition as a seamless tapestry where there is essentially no theological difference between Abraham, Moses or Rabbi Akiva (and here the historical method does play an important role in Reb Zalman's thinking), we can posit how different epochs (the biblical period, the talmudic period, the Middle Ages) offer different and contesting world views.<sup>8</sup>

Historical events (the destruction of the Temple or the Holocaust, for example) also serve as markers for paradigm shifts, making the God of the old paradigm (or the particular way God is envisioned and served) obsolete.<sup>9</sup> In some way, the success of a new paradigm is the extent to which it can read itself back into the old paradigm without succumbing to the theological limitations of that paradigm. That is, to transform the old into the new without detection.<sup>10</sup>

Without giving us a detailed account of "why" (this can be found in *Paradigm Shift*), Reb Zalman suggests that the new theological paradigm of our age is pantheism, that is, that everything is God. He rightfully discounts panentheism (God is in everything) as basically meaningless and, I would add, a kind of uncourageous pantheism (20). Pantheism undermines the hierarchical structure of classic theism and, by extension, threatens the theological suppositions of classical Judaism.<sup>11</sup> For Reb Zalman, pantheism's most useful dimension is the notion of the divine in the person, something that he ar-

gues stands at the center of Beshtean Hasidism.<sup>12</sup> This suggests a new model of leadership whereby we all contain within us both the Rebbe and the Hasid, depending upon the situation. Each person contains a manifestation of the divine that can serve another, whose divine nature lies elsewhere.

## Seeking God

For Reb Zalman, his new-fangled Hasidism is the Jewish "philosophy" of this new pantheistic age. The Baal Shem Tov already did much of the work by chipping away at the hierarchical structure of classic theism (here Reb Zalman is in full agreement with Buber). "Where may God be found, if not in space or time? In person, because it turns out we are not doing so well with time today; time is not shared as much as it used to be. . . . First we sought God in space, in *olam*. The new started to look for God in time. And now we are looking for God more in person" (21).<sup>13</sup>

This, of course, is Reb Zalman's take on the triadic division of worldly existence in *Sefer Yetzira*; *olam* (space), *shana* (time), *nefesh* (person). Instead of a description of existence more generally, Reb Zalman presents this triad as a developmental description of how human beings envision God ("where we find God"). Taking Hasidism's redirection of kabbalistic metaphysics to the person, Reb Zalman offers us a model tracing God-consciousness from classical theism to pantheism.<sup>14</sup>

New theological epochs, as it were, are never clean. "Primitive" polytheis-

tic elements remain in all religions as civilization moves to different theological positions. To soften apologetically the edge of these polytheistic-like rituals in Judaism is not aligned with paradigm-thinking. Rather, Reb Zalman acknowledges that these rituals emerged during a different theological epoch and thus they are seen for what they, in all their limitations, are, and not viewed negatively.

## Abandoning Old Paradigms

This does not mean that everything in the past, practically and theologically, must remain. What can be salvaged should be, and what is too deeply rooted in the old paradigm should be abandoned.<sup>15</sup> It was Hasidism, after all, that took us away from the more dualistic constructs of good and evil that dominated classical Kabbala and offered a more dialectical model of the good in the evil (Buber's "hallowing the mundane"). While this surely existed in earlier Kabbala (e.g., in Moshe Cordovero and Isaac Luria and even the *Zohar*), what Hasidism added was the centrality of the person, the *nefesh*, as the new paradigm where God is most readily found.<sup>16</sup> Implied here is that apologetic thinking, a part of the old paradigm, impedes theological progress. For Reb Zalman, to reconstruct unapologetically Hasidism is both to bind us to it and liberate us from it. Or, perhaps, to make it useful by freeing us from having to defend some of its outdated values.

Accompanying this, Reb Zalman readily admits the fissures and the en-

demic weakness that lie at the heart of monotheism — the tendency toward irreconcilable divisions between good and evil, yielding fundamentalist theories that are presently threatening our civilization. This is manifest in many ways, including patriarchal language, intolerance toward the other, hatred of nature and human desire, and "ethnic cleansing" as a religious precept. "One thing people don't like about religion is the hierarchical and patriarchal language, the antifeminist sentiment that goes all the way through the Vatican to the Taliban, Meah Shearim to the Laws of Manu, and that is a big part of the problem" (293).

The equating of Meah Shearim with the Taliban is intentional — it is to state that, rooted in monotheism, both paths are susceptible to the same dangers. To argue for a disanalogy between the two, arguing that one is more susceptible to distortion than the other, is simply to misunderstand the problem.<sup>17</sup> The problem of the Taliban isn't Islam per se (although it surely manifests there); it is a corrupted deism endemic to all monotheistic religions.<sup>18</sup>

The rise of Far Eastern religions (e.g., Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism) in the West plays a positive role in the correction of corrupt versions of monotheism. These non-monotheistic religions do not share the particular dangers of monotheism (although they have their own vulnerabilities). For Reb Zalman, the appearance of these atheistic or non-monotheistic religions is a sign that Western civilization has entered a new paradigm, a more "organismic way of looking at the universe."

## Hasidism Anticipates New Paradigms

Those committed to a particular monotheistic faith (and Reb Zalman is, in the end, deeply committed to Judaism) are challenged to search out dimensions of the old paradigm that can be reformatted, transformed, even reconstructed, to fit this new organic model.<sup>19</sup> He views Hasidism as a movement that contained fundamental components of this new paradigm. Here, he is in full agreement with Buber's assessment of Hasidism as a "Jewish Orientalism." The problem with traditional Hasidism is that, given the fact that it was living in a world still wed to the old paradigm, it oftentimes lacked the courage of its convictions.

Among the last great religious movements in that second religious age — and not only for Judaism — was Hasidism. Coming on the very eve of modernity, it represents the second age of religion trying to transcend itself; it steps forward and peers beyond the blinders of its age, but then moves back again out of understandable fear or hesitation. Its original claim, that *kavannah* (inwardness) is what true religion is all about, was still too revolutionary for its day (213).

Hasidism thus becomes the model, but cannot be the solution to Reb Zalman's project. Without significant reformation, Hasidism remains stuck in cultural, ideological and even spiritual values of an old paradigm, even as it may have felt the confines of its own world and, at moments, tried to expand beyond its own limitations. To employ

computer terminology so common in Reb Zalman's later writings, Hasidism needs to be reformatted. That is what *Wrapped in a Holy Flame* attempts to do.

## History and "How to Read"

In order to contextualize what I understand has happened in this new book, I want to suggest four major trends in reading Hasidic texts in the modern period: the traditional, the quasi-scholarly, the scholarly and reading for renewal. The traditional reader studies these texts as sacred canon. Their sacrality prevents historical or critical analysis and denies, or at least ignores, contextualization or the impact of foreign influences. The texts are read solely for inspirational purposes, that is, to understand "how to be a Hasid." (As stated above, this is also Reb Zalman's concern, which is why reading for renewal is, in a sense, closing a circle.)

The quasi-scholarly has two subgroups. The work of the first subgroup constitutes a kind of scholarly apologetics, presenting Hasidic material to a wider audience, not necessarily Jewish, applying a critical and historical method but still viewing the texts as sacred, although the intent of their presentation is not purely devotional. Buber falls into this camp, although his interests were more philosophical, as does Samuel Abba Hordetzky, Zalman Shargai, and, to a certain extent, Hillel Zeitlin (who, interestingly, Reb Zalman includes as a Hasidic master). This group was popular in Europe in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but has not

really reproduced itself either in Israel or the Diaspora.<sup>20</sup>

## Making Hasidism Accessible

The second subgroup is more openly apologetic and less wed to scholarly discourse. This group has flourished in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, consisting largely of Orthodox thinkers who translate and comment on Hasidic texts as a way of making them more accessible to a wider Jewish audience. The purpose of this group is largely inspirational (*kiruv*), geared toward fostering the religious life, but it is more knowledgeable of scholarly method than the first traditional model, although scholarly method is only superficially deployed. Examples include Aryeh Kaplan (although I think his agenda is a bit more complicated), Adin Steinsaltz, Nissen Mindel, and Jacob Immanuel Schochet of Lubavitch, and Chaim Kramer and Avraham Greenbaum of the Breslov Research Institute. In many ways, this group is a direct outgrowth of the *kiruv* movement in North America.

The third group consists largely of academics whose interests are more critical and less theological, reading Hasidic literature in order to understand how and why it emerges when it does. Many are historians interested in Eastern European Jewish culture more generally, and some are scholars of Jewish mysticism who view Hasidism as the “latest phase” (to borrow Gershom Scholem’s phrase from *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*) of this genre. These individuals are not necessarily Jewishly

affiliated, some are not even Jews, and their intended audience is primarily academe and not religious communities.

## Reading for Renewal

These three groups all have permeable boundaries, especially the latter two. Many academics also have more theological interests, just as some in the second group live and write in the academy. Many write for multiple audiences, either simultaneously or via different venues of publication. My point is simply to present a map of Hasidic readers in order better to situate where Reb Zalman, his literary oeuvre, and his emerging school fit.

Reb Zalman’s reading of Hasidism exhibited in this book constitutes the fourth group — reading for renewal. His intended audience is both Jews and non-Jews (the distinction is, in fact, irrelevant, as Reb Zalman’s quasi-syncretistic theology makes all spiritual literature useful for all traditions). He writes with the hope that the reader will be inspired but not necessarily return to tradition (i.e., Hasidism or conventional Orthodoxy).<sup>21</sup> He does not read Hasidic texts as an academic, yet freely employs scholarly terminology and categories when it suits him. The reading is not historical in any conventional way, but utilizes, and even needs, a historical/critical approach. He does not read apologetically, but does read theologically.

More crucially, I suggest that Reb Zalman reads “paradigmatically.” That is, he assumes that Hasidism was the last

vestige of an old paradigm and sometimes touched on the first stage of a new one. Reading for renewal looks for the paradigm shift in these texts. He also readily acknowledges that Hasidism's paradigm has progressed and therefore the contemporary world cannot use all of what Hasidism has to offer.

## Finding the Fissures

In some way, Reb Zalman's reading is always looking for the fissure, the break — not to exploit it but to show how these fissures serve constructive purposes and productive ends toward serving God. He bridges the historical and the ahistorical. "If I try to judge the paradigm of the past with my understanding of the present, I am going to find myself in trouble." And, ". . . I believe that we still need to understand how to learn what they were saying, to look at things through their eyes and to apply their method" (23). Our need to understand their world (the historical) is not because that is the best or most accurate way to read (the academic approach) or because we need to mirror their world in our world (the traditional approach), but simply because "theirs was a unique approach to God and to life" (23). While it is often correctly argued that historical reconstruction can weaken a text's inspirational potential, Reb Zalman holds that while it does reveal the weaknesses of the theological position, it also provides the necessary material to reenvision what is valuable for a future paradigm.

An example Reb Zalman gives of how reading for renewal is a departure

from the old paradigm is the abandonment or at least attenuation of the proof-text. "We don't treat proof-texts the same way nowadays. What does a proof-text mean to us? If I want to say something is really so, we mean that it corresponds to a pattern that sits very deep in the reality map. So by referring to scripture, we want to say, this is a very strongly shared thing" (121).<sup>22</sup>

When scripture was the fundamental reality map of a community and truth was determined solely through it, the proof-text was the strongest case one could make for truth. This is common in pre-modern Judaism.<sup>23</sup> When other reality maps emerged in the Middle Ages (e.g., philosophy), the use of proof-texts began to change. Taking Maimonides as an example, both sources (philosophy and scripture) are used to argue for truth, but the underlying assumption was that both were essentially expressing the same truth.<sup>24</sup> Maimonides would sometimes use a proof-text to illustrate a philosophical point in his *Guide for the Perplexed* and other times he would not. In fact, there are cases (e.g., *Guide* II: 25, on creation) where Maimonides acknowledges that he can make the text (here, Genesis 1:1) support any position he finds philosophically most viable.<sup>25</sup> And, when he does cite a proof-text, it is legitimate to assume that the point in question was not true for Maimonides because of the proof-text but independent of it.

## New Reality Maps

Reb Zalman's point exists along this trajectory; however he takes it one step

further. What happens when there are other reality maps (for example, Freud, neuroscience, other metaphysical systems) that are so far removed from the reality map of scripture that citing a proof-text to justify a point from these reality maps becomes futile?<sup>26</sup> Reb Zalman writes that in the old paradigm (even in its last stages in Hasidism) “the text is proof of what you are saying” (121).

However, today we have accepted things as truth that are not founded in scripture and are often a contradiction to scripture. How do we then read scripture as a reality map; that is, what are we looking for in an era of conflicting reality maps? Or, more strongly, how do we read when the new reality maps upon which we build our lives undermine the reality map that is scripture? Regrettably, Reb Zalman never gives us any detailed discussion on this important matter.

## Hasidism as an Approach

Finally, Reb Zalman concludes this chapter with an important observation. “This book is not a book about Hasidism. I don’t want to talk about Hasidism as a static thing; Hasidism is an approach. It is an approach to Judaism” (24).<sup>27</sup> What Reb Zalman does not tell us explicitly is what exactly this book is really about. My suggestion is that this book is an attempt to create a Hasidic text in English, an example of Hasidic anthology with a very specific agenda. We have numerous examples of this in Polish Hasidism (e.g., Yoakhim Kim Kadish’s three-volume *Siah*

*Sarfei Torah*, Shmuel of Shivaneh’s *Ramatayim Zofim to Tanna d’b’Eliyahu*, and various examples in Bratslav literature). But this book is a kind of radical anthology, one where Reb Zalman’s commentary is not meant to clarify a text or present a coherent statement of a Hasidic school, but to turn, re-shape, in some cases transform the texts being retold from their original paradigm to the present paradigm.<sup>28</sup>

Below, I will discuss what I see as the central method utilized to accomplish this. Here, I just want to point out the way in which Reb Zalman applies the distinction he draws between earlier readers of Hasidism, between theologians of Hasidism (i.e., Buber and Heschel) and himself. The latter two were writing books, Reb Zalman implies, about Hasidism, whereas he is writing a Hasidic text by reading other texts and retelling older stories. Whereas *Paradigm Shift* delineates the architecture of Jewish Renewal, *Wrapped in a Holy Flame* is its applied dimension. It is only here where the genealogy of Renewal is revealed, albeit in a largely implied fashion.

## To Retell and to Interpret

As a Hasidic anthology, *Wrapped in a Holy Flame* is trying to accomplish two things: to retell and to interpret. But what is interpretation? This age-old question stands at the center of this book, but it is never explained in any systematic way. Conventionally, one could say that to interpret is to explain, to explore, or to understand a text. Or, to interpret could be to make a text

one's own, to manipulate or massage a text, to enable it to speak to you. But there are limits; anarchic interpretation will always evoke ire among more conventional readers. The great talmudic scholar Saul Lieberman once warned a student who was offering a far-fetched reading of a talmudic text, "You can seduce a text, but you can't rape it."

Philosophers interested in hermeneutics, such as Martin Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur, Georg Hans Gadamer, E.D. Hirsch, Wolfgang Iser, Jacques Derrida, Stanley Fish, et al., always attempt to navigate between text and reader, between exegesis and eisegesis, between what a text says and what it can say, or, whether a text says anything at all. Reb Zalman offers his understanding of interpretation through the voice of the Baal Shem Tov. "All right, let's take a little detour. I am the Baal Shem Tov, and I am about to interpret Torah. What am I trying to do by interpretation? I am trying to modify reality . . . How we interpret something will make a difference in reality. It is almost as if to say that this interpretation that I am going to give determines how the world will come out" (40).

### **Bringing the Text to Life**

To interpret here is not to understand the text at all — in fact the text (once read) loses all meaning until it is given new meaning by the reader. More importantly, it is not the text here that is ultimately important; it is how the reader brings it to life and, by so doing, changes the life of subsequent readers.<sup>29</sup> The claim made here argues that

the meaning garnered through interpretation changes the way we (the reader and the listener) live in the world. Textual interpretation as reality modification is quite compelling as a Hasidic theory of reading, especially when put in the mouth of the Baal Shem Tov.

The hagiographical literature of the Baal Shem Tov is replete with instances where his "interpretation" of a text changes someone's life, in fact, creates disciples. The most well-known instance is the story (extant in numerous versions) of the Dov Baer of Mezritch's first meeting with the Baal Shem Tov, in which the Baal Shem Tov explained a passage from Isaac Luria's *Etz Hayyim* that transformed Dov Baer's life, instantly making a devoted disciple. There are many similar stories in Hasidic literature related to other masters.

Reb Zalman's notion of interpretation as reality modification suggests that truth is created through reading, not the truth of the text but the truth of reality as lived by the reader.<sup>30</sup> Is this what Reb Zalman is trying to do in this book? That is, instead of showing how Hasidism reflects and serves as a foundation for Jewish Renewal (this would still be a book about Hasidism), he is interpreting Hasidic texts to modify reality, to bring about and not just illustrate a paradigm shift through these texts.

### **Fusion of Soul and Mind**

Our world is no longer the world of miracles or of *tzaddikim* traveling long distances in a matter of seconds. That

is an old paradigm, where fantasy and reality were blurred, a method popular in Yiddish storytelling and also captured in the description of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novels as "magical realism."<sup>31</sup> Our paradigm, teaches Reb Zalman, is more mind-oriented, where spirituality has been psychologized, where miracles are phenomenological and not ontological, where the soul/spirit and the mind have become fused.

Psychology plays an important role in Jewish Renewal. The work of Carl Jung and Viktor Frankl and contemporary figures such as Edward Hoffman and Ken Wilber serve as models for Reb Zalman's theory of reality modification. He takes these new models and applies them to the interpretation of texts in general and Hasidic texts in particular. To read is to create — not only to create meaning in the text but to create worlds into which one can then enter and live. New religious schools and communities begin with reading, and recreating through rereading, old texts. This seems to me Reb Zalman's first lesson for the new paradigm.

## Encounter with Other Religions

Someone comparing this volume as an anthological Hasidic text in English to other classical Hasidic texts will notice that Reb Zalman offers us frequent, in fact almost constant, references to masters and teachings of other religious traditions. While this is not uncommon in classical Jewish literature — for example, in medieval philosophical and pietistic literature, such as Maimonides'

*Guide for the Perplexed*, Bahya ibn Pakuda's *Duties of the Heart*, or Abraham Maimonides *Treatise on Beatitude* — Hasidic literature rarely, if ever, offers a positive assessment of other spiritual paths.<sup>32</sup> The non-Jew is depicted as inferior at best, demonic at worst. Other religions, when not described as idolatrous, are deemed inferior to Judaism in both substance and form.<sup>33</sup>

It is surely the case that contemporary constructive Jewish thinking, even in a more traditional context, employs other religious traditions. However, in most cases, these sources are employed pragmatically, that is, to entice the reader, who has likely been exposed to other traditions, into taking Hasidism, or Judaism, seriously. In other words, it is a tool of *kiruv*.<sup>34</sup> While this may have also been true in Reb Zalman's early writings (he begins his career as an emissary of the Rebbe of Lubavitch in the late 1940s), I think his more mature works, and this work in particular, has a different end in mind.

## Misunderstanding the Other

It is appropriate that Reb Zalman begins his discussion of the other with an admission of guilt. That is, he feels compelled to undermine popular Hasidic apologetics by acknowledging Hasidism's (and Judaism's) past failure in understanding the non-Jewish other, both as person (the Gentile as neighbor) and thought (Gentile religions). The following is another good example of how Reb Zalman expresses his own ideas through the mouth of another, a

tactic that filters through this entire book and is quite common in Hasidic literature more generally. Speaking about Hillel Zeitlin, a fascinating and complex personality from early 20<sup>th</sup> century Eastern Europe who was murdered by the Nazis on the road to Treblinka, wrapped in phylacteries and a prayer shawl, Reb Zalman writes,

For Jews, Christians were expendable. Often they were only seen as useful expedients — *Shabbos Goyim* — and the rest were superfluous. This was the attitude that they took. We are finally emerging from that attitude. But there he was in his time (1930s), and how was he going to say that? Zeitlin reached into what people have called the second Isaiah and that universal vision, and he realized that nobody can be redeemed without everybody else being redeemed. When a person becomes fully aware of that, it ushers in a whole new way of thinking (283).

How bizarre yet powerful to make such an admission of guilt about the Jewish attitude toward the non-Jew through someone who was brutally murdered for no other reason than his own Jewishness! It is true, as Reb Zalman recounts, that Zeitlin saw a deep and corrosive fissure in Judaism's antipathy toward the non-Jew. However, surrounded by the dark cloud of Nazism and baseless anti-Semitism, Zeitlin had no audience, and no program, to correct this.

But this is why Reb Zalman includes

him as a Hasidic master. He is viewed as a proto-advocate of Renewal, a visionary of a new paradigm that would only arise from the ashes of the Holocaust, from his own ashes. Reb Zalman views the lifting of that cloud as an opportunity (one part of a paradigm shift) once again to confront the fissure Zeitlin described, a blemish that prevents us from moving forward and meeting the shifting paradigm of post-war reality. And so the attitude toward the non-Jew must be addressed and the incorporation of non-Jewish religions must be programmatically employed to create a new Hasidism for the future.

## Ending Isolation

Comparisons with other religious traditions serve an essential function in this reconstruction of Hasidism. While the comparisons are not detailed or particularly sophisticated, they function to open the mind of the reader, who may be accustomed to viewing Judaism in isolation. Reb Zalman's comparative exercise is not academic, that is, it is not historical, nor is it polemical in any way. Rather, it implicitly suggests that when one views Judaism refracted through the lenses of the other, even one that is/was your enemy, one's vision of Judaism is both attenuated and deepened. That is, Judaism becomes smaller because it is severed from its myth of exclusive superiority. Yet it becomes deeper because it is now understood as one very creative and often profound way of addressing perennial issues of human existence.

Such comparative analysis also di-

minishes (although it does not erase) the propensity for exclusivist and fundamentalist readings. When these comparative readings of religion are contextualized within the secular via psychology and science, what emerges is a Judaism that is both usable and malleable.

For example, when Reb Zalman explores Shneur Zalman of Liady's theory of the animal soul (*nefesh ha-behamit*), in conjunction with the Sufi concept of *nafs* ("the soul seeking its own pleasure") (119), he is not suggesting any historical confluence. He is also not using Sufism as a foil to show how the "Jewish" idea is superior. He is simply arguing that Shneur Zalman's theory of the animal soul is not original, and its very unoriginality is an indication of Shneur Zalman's deep thinking (the Hebrew saying *barukh sh'kavanti*, "thank God I have independently understood an already existing observation," is quite apt here). That is, by isolating the *nefesh ha-behamit* and trying to understand its place in the human condition, Shneur Zalman enters into one of the great perennial spiritualist struggles.<sup>35</sup> And further, Sufism's long tradition of struggling with the issue of human desire and the human spirit can, and should, be a resource for Jews trying to make sense of Shneur Zalman's thinking.

I would go even further to say that the logic of this argument suggests that utilizing Sufism in this case may enable us, in this new paradigm, to have a broader sense of what the *nefesh ha-behamit* means than Shneur Zalman's own contemporaries. The question is

no longer, "Is it permitted to study other religions?" — a question that reaches back to the Mishna and served as the foundation of many internal medieval Jewish debates. For Reb Zalman, that is a question of the old paradigm. The new question is, "Is it permitted not to?"

## Undermining Tradition

This raises another important dimension of paradigm-shift thinking that needs further exploration. Reb Zalman's broadening of the Jewish discourse through the necessary incorporation of non-Jewish sources and traditions and the implicit belief that these "external sources" (*seforim hizonim*) can deepen one's understanding of Judaism, undermines an important concept in traditional Judaism — "the descent of the generations" (*yeridat ha-dorot*), one fundamental component of rabbinic authority. While it is true that this doctrine does not appear before the geonic period in the work of Sherira Gaon and was, as Menahem Kellner has argued, likely rejected by figures as seminal as Moses Maimonides, it has become a dominant trope in traditional Judaism.<sup>36</sup>

Most non-traditional modern Judaisms, including Zionism, have largely rejected this notion, even as some try to retain it by bifurcating legal (halakhic) and non-legal (aggadic) dimensions of Judaism. However, Reb Zalman is constructing his Judaism from the ultra-traditional sources of Hasidim and Kabbala, traditions that *prima facie* accept this idea. I think

paradigm-shift thinking unapologetically undermines “the descent of the generations,” and it would be a desideratum for Reb Zalman to weigh in on this. It shows, on my reading, an underlying positivism in Reb Zalman’s thinking, a kind of spiritual reconfiguration of Auguste Comte’s foundation for secularism.

Here again, I think there is an interesting, yet still unexplored, correlation between Reb Zalman and Mordecai Kaplan. How does one create a life of devotion and piety wed to a traditional body of classical literature while espousing a positivistic theory of civilization? While Kaplan has much to say about this, it remains largely undeveloped in Reb Zalman’s work, yet constitutes an important part of the Renewal project.

### Stretching the Paradigm

More generally, what this book attempts to do, and I think does so quite successfully, is to rend the veil of the so-called traditionalist mind-set of Hasidism — not by arguing that Hasidic masters were overt heretics, but that they were, in a sense, engaged in stretching their own paradigm to its limit. In some cases, they may have broken momentarily into the next paradigm and then quickly retreated, fearing the sociological consequences of marginalization and exclusion from traditional society.

To illustrate this, Reb Zalman shows both the radical underside of Hasidism as well as the instances where Hasidism fails to remain true to its inner drive and becomes a product of its time and

place. This is exhibited through its inability to engage seriously in, among other things, the question of gender and the truth of non-Jewish religions. By freely exhibiting both, Reb Zalman opens up a treasure chest containing jewels and charcoal and asks his reader not to discard the former for the latter or to deny the existence of the latter in order to salvage the former.

### Creative Act of Translation

In the broadest sense, Reb Zalman’s deconstruction and reevaluation of the Hasidic legacy is enacted through the creative act of translation. By translation, I do not mean simply rendering a word or phrase from one language into another. Rather, I refer to an act whereby a value expressed in a word or phrase is subverted to mean something other than what it has come to mean (what it was intended to mean, no one really knows), yet the initial term remains, albeit in a new state.

This is perhaps captured in the zoharic phrase *milin itin haditin* (new ancient words).<sup>37</sup> If successful, tradition is transformed but not effaced. In many cases, especially in esoteric literature, the transition of translation is not between one term and another, one language and another, even one culture and another — it is between language, any language, and the experience it seeks to express. This is a common theme in translation theory from Dryden to Benjamin and appears in a different form in Gershom Scholem’s attempt to define Jewish mysticism in the beginning of his *Major Trends in*

*Jewish Mysticism*. Reb Zalman is simply applying it to Hasidic teaching.

## Translation and Experience

For example, writing about the Hebrew term *bittul ha-yesh* as “the annihilation of the self,” he notes: “It is not that it is a poor translation of the Hebrew, but the words are a bad translation of the experience” (76). I do not read this claim to be transhistorical. That is, at one time, and under certain historical and ideational circumstances, *bittul ha-yesh* could very well have meant “the annihilation of the self.” That is, at one time this could have been an accurate description of a human experience that was deemed a positive part of the devotional life. In this time, given the paradigm shift of postwar postmodernity, Reb Zalman claims the annihilation of the self is not an experience we deem healthy or useful. (Perhaps the brutal program of annihilation of “the other” in Nazism destroyed any positive value of annihilation more generally?) Hence the translation, once appropriate, now becomes obsolete.

Looking for a concept that better represents what we may be trying to achieve, Reb Zalman suggests “becoming transparent” to express a notion whereby distance between the self and God is narrowed without the effacement of the self in the process:

And so the Hasidic masters are using old language about the body to talk about the ego. If you do *bittul ha-yesh*, if you take your

‘selfness,’ your ego, and you annihilate it, you ‘bash’ it, that is going to take you closer to the love of God. But today I don’t even think it is a good strategy to bash the ego. I think a better strategy is to make the ego transparent(171).

“Transparency” is not set in stone, and Reb Zalman seems open to other possibilities. What is accomplished here is simply that the open engagement with the conscious act of reevaluation creates a new strategy for the aspiring paradigm-thinker.

## Generosity, Not Fear

Hence, while creative translation is a classic exercise of all religious systems, Reb Zalman’s self-conscious and open deployment of this method offers his readers a transparency that is both refreshing and productive. In Reb Zalman’s Hasidic text, the reader is invited to evaluate, accept, expand, or reject a particular translation precisely because she becomes part of the very act of translation. The hidden agenda of creative translation in tradition, often protected through the concealment of its method, is a reflection of the old paradigm. The new paradigm, built on the principle of generosity and not fear, unity and not polarity, pantheism and not deism, can abandon the protective garments of hidden translation, since progress and change become positive values for religion and not ones that threaten to undermine it.

The best way to illustrate Reb Zalman’s tools of translation is through a

series of brief examples. In them, I hope to show that translation is the core to Reb Zalman's thinking. I will begin with a simple list of seven translations and briefly explore how I think these translations function.

1) *olamot* — usually rendered as “worlds”; Reb Zalman suggests “genres” (154).

2) *sinat ra* — usually rendered as “hatred of evil”; Reb Zalman suggests “aversion to evil” (151).

3) *tumah* [related to *niddah*, menstruation] — usually rendered as “spiritual uncleanness”; Reb Zalman suggests “aversion-therapy” (161).

4) *bittul ha-yesh* — usually rendered as “self-nullification”; Reb Zalman suggests “transparency” (172).

5) *aimah* — usually rendered as “fear” or “trepidation”; Reb Zalman suggests “paralyzing anxiety” (166).

6) *kelipot* — usually rendered as “extraneous matter” or “demonic forces”; Reb Zalman suggests “energy systems” (150).

7) *devekut* — usually rendered as “communion with God”; Reb Zalman suggests “One-ing” or “sticking to God” (53).

Reb Zalman never suggests that his new translation is what the term actually means. This would render his project scholastic, even apologetic, but not constructive. In fact, he is often clear that his rendering is not what the term has come to mean or even originally meant. There is rarely any philological basis for his translation (an exception would be *aimah*, 166). There is often a hyperliteralism (e.g., *devekut*

as “One-ing” or “sticking to God”), which is a classic kabbalistic way of translating.

## Saving Torah

On the other hand, one could suggest that what Reb Zalman is doing here is classic Maimonideanism. In the first part of his *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides engages in a lengthy exposition of biblical terms, translating and defining them as a necessary prelude to the remainder of his philosophical treatise. Maimonides, of course, believed he was actually telling us what the term “really” meant; that is, philosophy was employed as the handmaiden of philology, but that is beside the point.

In one sense, there is a Maimonidean strain throughout Reb Zalman's thinking, perhaps in the trajectory of Maimonides' more spiritualistic disciples, his son Abraham and his grandson Obadia. Yet Maimonides was arguably looking for synthesis between philosophy and scripture, whereas Reb Zalman has no such illusion. He is not seeking to merge “reality maps,” but, in fact, to make a new reality map of Torah (here exemplified in Hasidism) by reenvisioning it through a series of new reality maps. In this way, Torah is not coming to save civilization (an older apologetic stance) but, rather, the new paradigm is coming to save Torah through its devoted and creative reader — saving Torah from obsolescence and the dustbin of history.

When he speaks of *olamot* as genres, he views them as “reality systems that

are perpendicular to one another” (154) — that is, a web of different but not mutually exclusive intersecting systems through which and into which we live. *Olamot* ceases to mean something “out there.” They are stripped of their metaphysical characteristics and become modes by which one can ascertain, explain or simply think about the human condition and one’s relationship to others, be they organic or inorganic. If Reb Zalman’s work is successful, the term *olam* will enter into the lexicon of contemporary reality that Reb Zalman is always looking to expand. Once the term enters, its multivalent meanings from the past can impact on the present. In this sense, translation is a vehicle for confluence. We must remember that for Reb Zalman, the new paradigm is not a “Jewish” paradigm, but one of human civilization. Judaism can contribute to this new era to the extent to which it allows (and trains) itself to enter into its emerging and developing discourse.

## Understanding Evil

The translation of *ra*, or evil, as “aversion” is another telling example. Evil is a concept from the old deistic paradigm, a term that thrives on the bifurcation of reality into God and not-God — good and evil. Even if we understand this in terms of negative theology (i.e., evil as the absence of good) or the more modern dialectical approach of classic Beshtean Hasidism, I think Reb Zalman is suggesting that evil is a term that cannot survive the pantheism of the new paradigm. Reb

Zalman’s pantheism is not fully antinomian; that is, all is not permitted. There are things that we should simply avoid for all kind of reasons: They are destructive, unhealthy, corrosive; they take us away from loving God and loving others. In Renewal, prohibitions remain.

Reb Zalman’s question — which is metahalakhic at its core — is not, “What is prohibited?” or even “Why is this or that prohibited?” Rather, the question that concerns him is “How do we succeed in distancing ourselves from that which is prohibited?” Calling it “evil” is one sure way, since it presents the prohibited object or idea as threatening. Evil is a tool used by religious authorities to assure compliance with religious standards. The downside is that evil breeds a desire, even an obligation, to destroy or annihilate. When the object or act is ontologically “evil,” its very presence in the world undermines the religious life. The “sacred” act of killing in a religious war, the enemy being the embodiment of evil, is the obvious example of how evil functions negatively. Sadly, this corrosive language has been revived in a quasi-secular context by the current president of the United States.

Reb Zalman suggests the term “aversion” as an alternative. Healthy aversion (Reb Zalman brings Stanley Kubrick’s film, *A Clockwork Orange*, as an example of unhealthy aversion therapy) is born out of love. “In my life, I’m totally connected with the energy of God, and I so love God that to do anything contrary to God’s will is something I couldn’t handle. If I did

that, my consciousness would be cut off from God. It is an aversion driven by the resultant separation from the Beloved" (153). That which is contrary to God exists, as it always will, but it only threatens me when I give it my attention. When I ignore it, it remains "out there," but it is outside the sphere of how I want to live my life. And, more importantly, when it is ignored, its power is diminished, an interpretation of the classic kabbalistic idea that the life-force of the demonic realm is dependant upon its interaction with the holy.

### **"Paralyzing Anxiety"**

The final example of translation that I will discuss is the term *aimeh*, usually rendered as "fear." Reb Zalman calls it "paralyzing anxiety." To illustrate this example, he retells a teaching he heard from Rabbi Yisrael Jacobson, a teacher of his in the Lubavitch yeshiva, that *aimeh* is a fear that is malevolent, one that is not healthy, but yet many have to overcome to get to the healthy fear of God, or *yeriah*. Reb Zalman uses the example of a peyote ritual and the fear of impending doom that often accompanies a hallucinogenic experience. The heightening of one's senses through these stimulants often brings about a feeling of uncontrolled movement. When this is coupled with fear (as it often is initially) it results in a consciousness of impending doom and the inability to do anything about it — the fear one experiences immediately before one is hit, anticipating the pain.

This experience, he suggests, cap-

tures the Hebrew term *aimeh*. His rendering is based on a loose philological observation. *Ai-mah*, "Where is it?" or "What is it?" That is, "I don't know what it is, I don't know where it is, but I got this uncanny feeling something is impending" (166). Reb Zalman admits, "nobody says that we need to have this kind of fear of God" (166). Yet it is an anxiety that is all too common, even under normal conditions, a fear that can only be overcome by succumbing to it — moving past it and not allowing oneself to get stuck in the paralyzing moment. This kind of fear is natural and, unless one can move beyond it, the true fear of *yeriah* may elude one.

In these brief examples — and there are many more — Reb Zalman builds his theory of reading for renewal: reading as an act of creative reconstruction. His translations are not meant to be scholarly but useful; they serve one who needs and wants Hasidism, but refuses to dwell in the old paradigm where it resides. These terms, this new Hasidic lexicon, are the building blocks of Jewish Renewal. It is only in *Wrapped in a Holy Flame* that Reb Zalman explores this systematically and comprehensively, exposing the reader to his theory of reading for renewal, one that would allow the reader herself to continue his work.

### **Engaging Islam**

There are two brief and interconnected observations that will serve as a conclusion to this essay. First, one of the lesser-known dimensions of Reb Zalman's contribution to contempo-

rarity Judaism is that he was one of the first constructive Jewish theologians seriously to engage Islam as a well-spring for Jewish devotional life. Much of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish theology in America was rooted in the European tradition, where the only serious “other” was Christianity.

A good example of this, in fact the exception that proves the rule, is Franz Rosenzweig’s somewhat pathetic treatment of Islam in his *The Star of Redemption* (and this was likely the product of Hegel’s superficial assessment of Islam and not of any serious engagement with the tradition).<sup>38</sup> American theologians such as Soloveitchik, Heschel, Fackenheim, Kaplan, Herberg, Wyschogrod, Greenberg, et al., almost never deal with Islam in anything more than a perfunctory way.<sup>39</sup> Almost all ecumenical work, until very recently, has been between Jews and Christians.

While 9/11 has changed all that, as early as the 1960s Reb Zalman was seriously reading Muslim literature, dialoging with Muslim contemporaries, and using Islam, mostly Sufism, as a source of his own inspiration. Given the recent turn of events since 9/11, Reb Zalman’s visionary notion that Islam is an important part of this new paradigm has come to fruition. The fact that our world is now confronted with radical Islam, a secular America driven in part by evangelical (radical) Christianity, and an Israeli political environment influenced by religious (radical) messianism, makes Reb Zalman’s work even more pertinent. Most Jews and Americans more generally have a stereotypic and “Orientalist” view of Is-

lam, and much of Islam conflates democracy and freedom with secularism and the Judeo/Christian tradition they view as incompatible with their theological world-view.

## Resisting Change

I do not feel that the political and theological polarization following 9/11 and the collapse of the Oslo accords undermine Reb Zalman’s engagement with Islam – in fact they give it new immediacy. Reb Zalman’s ecumenical (really post-ecumenical) and even syncretistic project is that Islam is not the only thing that needs to be saved – Judaism and Christianity also need to be saved, and perhaps the Muslim struggle to come to terms with modernity is a mirror for our struggle to come to terms with this new paradigm. Islam is not the problem but the symptom of a more global reluctance to move into this new paradigm, manifest in many ways, including post-colonialism, imperialism, military hegemony, unsympathetic capitalism, and the profiteering dimension of globalization. Of course, the problem is more complex, but to place the onus solely on Islam is to ignore a more global crisis that implicates all of us. The solution is not to eradicate the symptom, but to come to understand the underlying cause of the disease.

Reb Zalman, like most of us, knows that Islam is a rich tradition with centuries of enlightened teachings. His global vision of Renewal includes employing these teachings, thereby exposing Jews and Christians to them, as well as

exposing contemporary Muslims to the ways in which Judaism was positively influenced by the golden age of Islam. There would not have been a rich medieval Judaism without Islam — no Saadia Gaon, Moses Maimonides, Bahya ibn Pakuda, or Judah Ha-Levi. Perhaps Reb Zalman believes it is time for us to pay back the Islamic tradition. I would love to hear a more detailed discussion about the place of Islam in Renewal, given the present state of world.

### **An Unrealistic Vision?**

The second related point is that any reader of this essay, or of Reb Zalman's work more generally, can rightfully respond that his progressive vision of unity, this Aquarian Age of spiritual renewal, seems unrealistic. Religious fundamentalism is on the rise, in Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism. It seems as if we are heading back toward a dangerous old paradigm that preceded modernity, a time when holy wars and accusations of an "axis of evil" were commonplace. Reb Zalman never addresses this issue. Given his predictions of a new paradigm, he never tells us why human civilization seems to be heading in the opposite direction, and what can we do about it. Reb Zalman has given us much, but maybe his work is not yet done. Perhaps he can also offer advice in these most pressing matters in light of his lifelong struggle to explicate and articulate a new paradigm.

Unlike many books, *Wrapped in a Holy Flame* is actually much more than

it claims to be — it is more than a collection of Hasidic teachings and stories. It is an important step in the maturation of Jewish Renewal. In *Wrapped in a Holy Flame*, Reb Zalman has left us a treasure, but one that must be read closely and creatively, not only to enjoy, but more importantly to use.

---

1. Richard Seigel, Michael Strassfeld, Sharon Strassfeld, *The First Jewish Catalogue* (Philadelphia, PA: JPS, 1973).

2. *Fragments of a Future Scroll: Hassidism for the Aquarian Age* (Germantown, PA: Leaves of Grass Press, 1975); *Paradigm Shift* (New York/London: Jason Aronson, 1993). Another short book that continues this trajectory is *The First Step: A Guide for the New Jewish Spirit* (Toronto/New York: Bantam Books, 1983). Reb Zalman's dissertation, written at HUC/Cincinnati, has also been published as *Spiritual Intimacy: A Study of Counseling in Hasidism* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1991). This work explores the relationship between the Rebbe and the Hasid as a relationship of counseling, and thus develops his notion of the Rebbe as an integral part of the Hasid. While playing a role in his Renewal trajectory, its focus is more limited than either *Fragments* or *Paradigm Shift*.

3. Both *Paradigm Shift* and *Wrapped in a Holy Flame* contain chapters that were published previously as essays, some as early as the 1960s.

4. The structure of Hasidic books, that is, how they were composed, collected and published, has been comprehensively studied by Zeev Greis. See his *The Book in Early Hasidism* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 1992).

5. For example, see Aryeh Kaplan, *The Light Beyond: Adventures in Chasidic Thought* (New York: Moznayim, 1981);

and *The Chasidic Masters and Their Teachings* (New York, Moznayim, 1984). For Adin Steinsaltz's writings on Hasidism, see *In the Beginning: Discourses on Hasidic Thought* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1992); and *The Candle of God: Discourse on Chasidic Thought* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998).

6. Martin Buber, "Spinoza, Sabbatai Zevi, and the Baal Shem Tov," in *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1988), 89-112.

7. Here I believe Reb Zalman is hinting at the pedagogical model of R. Kolonymous Kalman Shapira of Piasceno, the rebbe of the Warsaw ghetto, whose trilogy on Hasidic pedagogy was focused on this question (i.e., how does one become a Hasid?). See his *Hakhsharat Arekhim* and *Mevo Shearim* (Jerusalem, 1962).

8. For example, Reb Zalman is quite open about the way he thinks Hasidism rubs against the grain of traditional Judaism. Discussing *Sefer Ha-Tanya*, Reb Zalman writes, "Now, Reb Shneur Zalman makes a very important move from the way of the Talmud. He is not really interested in behavior as much as he is interested in attitude and transformation" (108). This may sound like a benign and obvious point, but what is being suggested here is that *Sefer Ha-Tanya* really takes its reader in a direction away from the basic assumption of Rabbinic Judaism (i.e., that behavior stands at the center of Jewish worship).

9. This theory is developed more comprehensively in *Paradigm Shift*, 247-308. It also has precedent in medieval kabbalistic works, such as *Sefer Temunah*, *Sefer Peliyah* and *Sefer Ha-Kaneh*. This thinking also influenced Sabbateanism. For example, see Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 183-212. Another worthwhile comparison here is between Reb Zalman and Emile Fackenheim.

As far as I know, Reb Zalman never mentions Fackenheim in his writings.

10. In some way, then, Reb Zalman tells us too much; that is, he shows us his hand and thus excludes those whose commitment to tradition is steadfast. His recent works in Hebrew are closer to the older model. I have discussed this in a yet unpublished essay, "Translating into Tradition: Subversion and Constructive Heresy in the Hebrew Writings of Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi," presented at Awakening, Yearning and Renewal: Conference on Neo-Hasidism, New York City, March 26-28, 2003. On this exercise in Kabbala, see Daniel Matt, "New Ancient Words: The Aura of Secrecy in the Zohar," in *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism: Fifty Years After*, P. Schafer and J. Dan, eds. (Tubingen: Mohr, 1993), 181-209.

11. There is an interesting connection here between Reb Zalman's pantheism and Mordecai Kaplan's theological a-theism. A more detailed comparison of Reb Zalman and Kaplan would be useful. One fascinating comparison that touches on the pantheistic components of Kaplan's thinking can be found in Jack Cohen, *Guide for the Age of Confusion: Studies in the Thinking of Avraham Y. Kook and Mordecai Kaplan* (New York: Fordham Press, 1999)

12. I have dealt with the issue of the divine in the human in Hasidism in "Ethics Disentangled from the Law: Hasidism and Dispositional Ethics," in *A Companion to Religious Ethics*, William Schweiker, ed. (England: Blackwell Press) in press. It is also noteworthy that this theological move in Judaism, one that places Judaism in much closer proximity to Christianity, can only be achieved in a climate where Judaism can grow without the fear of seeming too "Christian." So much of modern Jewish thinking has been stunted because it was always concerned with marking how

Judaism was unlike Christianity. See Elliot R. Wolfson, "Judaism and Incarnation: The Imaginal Body of God," *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, Frymer-Kensky, Novak, Ochs, Sandmel, Signer, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 240. Reb Zalman's new paradigm transcends that fear.

13. Here I would say Reb Zalman is gently criticizing Heschel's space-time discussion in *The Sabbath* by arguing that Heschel's notion of Judaism as a religion of time is part of an old paradigm.

14. The argument that this new pantheism, the divinity of the person, takes Judaism closer to Christianity is not lost on Reb Zalman. I will discuss the ecumenical dimensions of this work later in this essay.

15. This appears quite close to Mordecai Kaplan's Reconstructionism and, in a way, it is. However, Reb Zalman is more willing than Kaplan to creatively reinterpret (I call it translate) old paradigm ideas to fit in the new paradigm. This is partly because Kaplan's rationalism and dedication to plain-sense meaning (*p'shat*) made it more difficult for him to engage in the kind of creative reading that Reb Zalman, who was raised in a world of Hasidic exegesis, deploys. Also, coming from mysticism, Reb Zalman is not nearly as put off by the "polytheistic" dimensions of Judaism as Kaplan and does not think they need to be totally purged.

16. Both Yehuda Liebes and Lawrence Fine, in different ways, argue that the person is indeed central to the Lurianic worldview, but I would suggest that what Hasidism does, in effect, is to allow the person to overshadow, and even efface, the metaphysics that still loom large in classical kabbalistic systems. See Liebes, "Two Young Roes of a Doe: The Secret Sermon of Isaac Luria before His Death," [Hebrew] in *Mekharei Yerushalayim* 10 (1992): esp. 114-126; and Fine, *Physician of the Soul*,

*Healer of the Cosmos* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

17. For an argument on the disanalogy between Jewish and the other monotheistic religions on the question of fundamentalism, see Zvi Kurzweil, "Fundamentalism and Judaism," *L'Elyah* 25 (1966), 8-10. Kurzweil argues that the centrality of law and the oral law, in particular, enables Judaism to successfully circumvent many of the problems of fundamentalism. In my view, his argument is weak, never delving into any substance, and traffics largely in stereotypes of all three religion. Reb Zalman is able to acknowledge both the strengths of other monotheisms and the weakness that is endemic to all monotheism. For an example of how fundamentalism plays a central role in the *ba'al teshuva* movement in Judaism, see Janet Aviad, *Return to Judaism: Religious Renewal in Israel* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983). Aviad examines comments by prominent rabbis and newly observant Jews involved with this movement, which exhibits a hatred for secularism, Western civilization and modern values, all quite reminiscent of Christian evangelicalism and militant Islam.

18. Reb Zalman does not use deism in the classic sense of one God who is no longer engaged with the world but rather as a substitute for a monotheism in opposition to pantheism. It is also important to note that Reb Zalman does not equate non-monotheistic religions with idolatry, even from a Jewish perspective. Idolatry can be manifest in both monotheistic and non-monotheistic religions.

19. This book, and Reb Zalman's work more generally, do not address the fact that contemporary Hasidism has become, in some way, more fundamentalist and more intolerant than in the past — in short, that Hasidism may be reinventing an old para-

digm to counter Jewish Renewal's new one. 20. Buber's early work on Hasidism was not intended for a Jewish audience but rather an intellectual/spiritual German audience in search of authentic Orientalism. For example, see Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Fin de Siecle Orientalism: The Ousjuden and the Aesthetics of Jewish Self-Affirmation," in *Divided Passions* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 77-132.

21. Reb Zalman writes, "Some seekers have reacted against all this (i.e., Renewal), as you well know, and have decided to pick another time and place — a medieval Tibet, for example, or 18<sup>th</sup>-century Poland — in which to live. They have constructed small universes for themselves and have paid a dear price personally and intellectually, but in some cases have reached remarkable spiritual attainments. To these people we can only offer our blessings — but it is not with envy that we see them. The life of the spirit must move forward; the God who created those earlier ages made this one and also the ones to come" (*Wrapped in a Holy Flame*, 209).

22. Another example common in the medieval period, especially in Kabbala, is the notion of "proof person." In the words of Eitan Fishbane, "Legitimate meaning ultimately only requires that the source of transmission be considered authoritative within the specific cultural context." See E. Fishbane, "Authority, Tradition, and the Creation of Meaning in Medieval Kabbala: Isaac of Acre's Illumination of the Eyes," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72-1 (March, 2004), 65. This notion, which has its modern correlate in the notion of *daas torah*, would be, for Reb Zalman, an example of old-paradigm thinking.

23. This is not to say that *s'vara*, or rational reasoning, did not also play a role in

the rabbinic mind, but that the proof-text was the most commonly deployed method of making a case for both textual and extra-textual truth.

24. Maimonides' scholarship indicates that this assertion is very complex and not at all as straightforward as it sounds. I simply employ Maimonides here for the sake of argument.

25. Even though in *Guide* II:25 he seems to accept the traditional notion of creation over eternity, he does not do so by using a proof-text (as does, for example, Saadia Gaon in his *Emunot ve De'ot*), but rather because he is not convinced (or so he says) by Aristotle's theory of eternity. However, in *Guide* II:14, he presents a very strong case for Aristotle without asserting his own position.

26. It is Michel Foucault who argues that only in modernity do we find arguments evaluated outside the confines of the authority of the author as normative. See Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Re-Thinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*, C. Mukerji and M. Schudson, eds. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 446-464.

27. This language immediately reminds one of Heschel's essay, "Hasidism as a New Approach to Torah," reprinted in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, Susannah Heschel, ed. (New York: FSG, 1996), 33-39.

28. Anthology is a fascinating and under-examined genre of Jewish literature. For one very insightful analysis, see Eugene Sheppard, "'I am a Memory Come Alive': Nahum Glatzer and the Legacy of German Jewish Thought in America," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 94-1 (Winter, 2004), 123-148.

29. On this reading, Reb Zalman's thinking on interpretation is more aligned with the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricoeur and the reader/response

criticism of Wolfgang Iser and against the belief in the possibility of recovering authorial intent argued in E.D. Hirsch. See Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967). For a discussion of this in Jewish sources, see Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 45-50; and E. Fishbane, "Authority, Tradition, and the Creation of Meaning in Medieval Kabbala: Isaac of Acre's Illumination of the Eyes," 75-78.

30. Buber makes a similar but not identical claim in "Saga and History" in his *Moses* (London: East West Library, 1946), 13-19. Cf. Ahad Ha-Am, *Moses* (Berlin: Juedisch Verlag, 1905).

31. See, for example, David Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), especially pages 1-20. The classic example of "magical realism" is Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

32. See Menahem Mansoor's "Translator's Introduction" to Bahya Ibn Pakuda's *The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart*, M. Mansoor trans. (Routledge & Kegan/Paul: London, 1973), 1-82; and Paul Fenton, *Treatise of the Pool* (London: Octagon Press, 1981), 1-23.

33. This is, of course, true of Kabbala as well. For an interesting series of examples about kabbalistic attitudes toward Judaism and Christianity in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, see Reuven Kimelman, *The Mystical Meaning*

*of Lekha Dodi and Kabbalat Shabbat* [Hebrew] (Los Angeles and Jerusalem: Cherub Press and Magnus Press, 2003), 82-133; and Ronald Keiner, "The Image of Islam in the Zohar," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 8 (1989). 42-65.

34. Aryeh Kaplan's work is a good example of this kind of usage.

35. See, for example, *Wrapped in a Holy Flame*, 126. "The issue here is so clear, and this is what yoga and all these other things are about: to make the body and the Animal Soul, as it were, a more and more transparent and willing subject. To allow them to do what is required."

36. See Menahem Kellner, *Maimonides on the "Decline of the Generations" and the Nature of Rabbinic Authority* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996), esp. 37-54; and *Iggeret of Rav Sherira Gaon*, Nossin Dovid Rabinowich trans. (Jerusalem, Vagshal, 1991).

37. See Daniel Matt, "'New Ancient Words': The Aura of Secrecy in the Zohar," in *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends 50 Years After*, 181-209.

38. On this, see Gil Anidjar, *Arab/Jew: A History of the Enemy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 87-98.

39. One notable exception was Martin Buber, who did engage Islam more than his contemporaries. However, this engagement was largely the product of the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Orientalism practiced by a circle of German intellectuals led by the Hart brothers. On this, see Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Fin de Siecle Orientalism," cited above in note 20.

# Rediscovering Israel

BY ELLEN BERNSTEIN

**I**n *parashat Haazinu*, Moses' beautiful farewell poem, heaven and earth bear witness as he speaks:

May my speech come down as rain and my word distill as the dew, like showers on tender shoots, like drops on the grass. (Deuteronomy 32:2)

That Moses needs to compare his speech to rain, dew and showers may seem rather excessive, but we know it must be essential, because the biblical author does not waste words on anything unnecessary. The references to the elements of nature give Moses' words, which may otherwise be too abstract, form and substance, and roots them in the present reality. This kind of metaphoric language, besides being evocative, speaks to me, not because it is about the natural world per se, but because it grounds Moses' words in the rich, day-to-day experience of nature. And through Moses' attention to that experience, I hear him bidding me to pay attention to my own.

It is not often in my life that I am aware that my experiences can actually change my perception; my mind tends to hold fast to old, petrified beliefs. But this year, that is what happened; I had

an experience that turned my head around about 180 degrees and I am still reeling inside, wondering what it all means.

## Decisions to Go

Last December, in my 49th year, having arrived at a fitting juncture in my life, I decided to go to Israel. I had spent my thirties and forties focused and productive, and was satisfied that I had completed a substantial body of work. But as I was approaching 50, I was not at all sure how I'd be spending the next half century. I had always wanted to learn Hebrew, a prerequisite for the fulfillment of my fantasies of becoming a rabbi, which I entertained like so many who live in my neighborhood.

Even more than that, my Hebrew illiteracy had always weighed on me — I felt like a fake. I was acting out the motions of being Jewish, working as a Jewish professional in the area of Jewish identity, and spending lots of time in shul reading Hebrew texts, yet the fact that I could not translate for myself always gnawed at my sense of integrity. If Judaism was going to continue to be a meaningful part of my life, I needed Hebrew. After all, I

---

Ellen Bernstein is the founder of Shomrei Adamah and editor of *Ecology and the Jewish Spirit*. Her new book, *The Splendor of Genesis: A Biblical Ecology*, will be released on Earth Day, 2005.

thought, isn't Hebrew — the language of Jewish expression — the most elementary part of a Jewish identity?

## Hope and Disappointment

The other thread that is important to my story is that I have never felt any connection to Israel. I had been there twice in my life, most significantly as an eager ideologue in the early '70s, hopeful that the kibbutz experience would fulfill the desperate search for meaning in my 18-year-old soul. However, the dreams I had about kibbutz life and the possibilities for Israel were utterly dashed once I lived there. I had imagined happy *balutzim*, farming a back-to-nature dream — pure, innocent, spiritual — yet what I found was material/*homri* and tarnished. It would take another 30 years before I was open enough to recognize the simplicity and impossibility of my dreams, and able finally to recognize how they sabotaged my reality.

This time I was going to Israel out of pure opportunism. I had no expectation other than to achieve some mastery of *ivrit*. I would learn Hebrew in Israel cheaply and more quickly than I could in America.

Before I went, I never thought for a minute about engaging in Israeli life. I had no interest in secular Judaism and no interest in Zionism. I was an American Jew who had grown up in a completely assimilated family and had rebelled against the empty Judaism of my youth and the puffed-up version of Israel that I was fed. The Judaism I was later to discover and cultivate was a

highly spiritualized variety. And once I found it, I constructed a black-and-white world of good and evil, spiritual and secular. I could not imagine how one could live a real Jewish life without a spiritual, God-centered orientation.

## Reconnecting

Other than this one glaring preconception (!), my general attitude toward my trip was one of openness — I wanted to experience everything this opportunity afforded. I had been feeling somewhat stagnant, and I knew there were horizons for me to discover. In order to enhance and intensify my experience, I had decided that while I was in Israel, I would avoid Americans; after all, this would only deter my Hebrew learning. I also wanted to see how I would fare in an entirely new setting where no one knew me, and where I wasn't bound by cultural crutches, my community and my work. I even decided to avoid reading, a most pleasurable crutch. I would force myself to talk with anyone who had the *savlanut* (patience) to talk with me, in *ivrit*, of course.

Within the first month of my trip, all my frozen preconceptions about secular Israelis and Zionism melted away, undoubtedly because my experience was so vastly different from the twisted ideas I had clung to in my head. All the Israelis I was meeting — and they were for the most part secular — had such an integrated experience of the Bible and Judaism, and such formidable knowledge. They knew the

Bible because they walked it. Shabbat was for *tiyuls* (touring), not shuls. They prayed with their legs on the land, not with their heads in books. But even more than this, it was the secular Israelis, not the religious ones, who befriended me and embraced me and wanted to show me their Israel.

Through my *ulpan* at WUJS (World Union of Jewish Students), I had the unexpected good fortune to visit Israelis from all walks of life, and to hear firsthand stories of the beginnings of the state, adventures in the underground, the polarization of religious and Orthodox, the aspirations of the settlers, the quandary between Israelis and Arabs, and the heartbreak of terror. It was impossible not to be deeply moved by all the people who had come and gone and given their lives to building this place. It was impossible not to feel that this was my place, too.

## Stories and Places

The stories that intrigued me most were those about the *halutzim*, the early pioneers who came to Israel and struggled to eke out a life from the soil in impossible, rocky terrain, malaria-infested swamps, and sandy deserts. I was simultaneously enchanted and horrified by their commitment to live here no matter what, so compelled were they by the power of their ideas. I visited the cemetery by the Kinneret and the gravesites of many idealistic kibbutzniks and heard terrible stories of the ones who came here only to discover that they could not reconcile their dream of the land with the actual, day-

to-day drudgery of the primitive farming life. Their friends found their dead bodies hanging under Rachel's degel tree on the banks of the Kinneret.

Getting in touch with this culture and history was simultaneously enriching, sobering, enlivening and painful. It was obvious why I was so touched by these stories. A connection with the land was something to which I had devoted much of my life. I had worked in a biodynamic French intensive garden, and lived in communes in my late teens, led wilderness river trips in my 20s and started the first Jewish environmental organization in my 30s.

Yet in that whole period, I never had any connection to the land of Israel. It was stunning for me when I finally realized that I was driven by the same formative vision as many of the *halutzim*, but because I had turned off so adamantly to Israel, I never saw them as my mentors or spiritual guides. Yet we were living out the same crazy, inspired dream of the power of a land and a people in different countries in different eras. What a blessing it would have been for me to have looked to them as role models and to have learned from their achievements and their follies, as I struggled through those difficult years of trying to find a place for myself in Judaism.

## Sandstorms and Simplicity

I was also deeply affected just by dwelling in the land itself. I lived first in Arad, a 40-year-old development town plopped in the middle of the Negev. Wherever you walk, you see

extraordinary vistas of vast, rolling brown hills, beautiful, but also empty and terrifying. Sandstorms were not uncommon. During the endless gales, my seemingly secure seven-story apartment building would shake and tremble. Sand blew through the windows and howled through the hallways and caked everything in dust. Invariably, we would lose power and Internet access for days. I rather enjoyed the primitive aspect of this experience. It was a little thrilling to feel afraid to go outside during those whipping storms, for fear of being blown away. It was during those storms that I felt God's presence most acutely — here amid the barren and bleak landscapes, not in the green and tropical paradises, as I might expect. Yet I had the luxury of experiencing all of this indoors and protected. I kept trying to imagine the ancestors accessing God here in this howling waste, in such a seemingly godforsaken place.

My quietest and perhaps most moving experience, however, was the sheer simplicity of my life in Israel and the incredible feeling of living in a place where I was aligned with many of my values. First in Arad, and later in Jerusalem, I felt a momentary respite from America's out-of-control materialism. (Israel's materialism is out of control too, but in Arad and Jerusalem, two of Israel's poorer cities, it is less pronounced.) It was liberating to live in a culture where what you "do" for a living is not particularly significant, where people are driven less by ambition and more by community and caring, where everybody talks to everybody else, re-

gardless of their station in life. The horrors of terror have, of course, only knit people together even more.

And, of course, it was profoundly liberating to live in a culture where everybody, no matter their religious orientation, celebrates Shabbat — a weekly oasis from which the entire country drinks, whether they're *tiyuling* or *shuling*, or just spending the day lingering over beautiful and simple meals in the company of friends.

## Integrating Experiences

In Israel, I was so satisfied with so little. Here I was, in the words of the Torah, "fed honey from the crag and oil from the flinty rock." Happiness comes from just being here in the land, bound together with this place and these people.

Now I am back home and I have not yet figured out how to integrate what happened. I don't know where I really belong, or how exactly my Judaism will manifest itself. What I do know is that my life is profoundly enriched by having had this experience. And along with a sense of both sadness and joy, I have a new sense of freedom, because I succeeded in tearing down one of the empty edifices in my mind, so painstakingly constructed, that cluttered and impaired my vision.

We each have the opportunity to reclaim lost pieces of our identity, including aspects we once may have seen as ugly, unhappy or painful. It is in the integration that we find wholeness. Today, the dream of wholeness seems to me the sweetest thing.

# Once Upon a Time — The Rabbi as Storyteller

BY SANDY EISENBERG SASSO

“**I**n the beginning, when God began to create . . .”

We begin with story, God’s story to the people of Israel and Israel’s story to God. Each week, we stop in our routine, open a book and read the narratives of Torah, prophets and sages, the stories of our people. We begin and conclude our readings with blessings. It is an honor to be called to tell the story; it is a sacred act. We learn who we are and how to live in our story.

The rabbis ask: Why does the Torah begin with stories and not with laws? Rabbi Nathan of Nemirov suggests it is because stories have the power to awaken a person’s heart. Stories speak not to our need for more information, but to our hunger for understanding and affirmation. We see ourselves in the triumphs and failures that beset our less-than-perfect ancestors. Facts, we learn and know; stories involve another way of knowing; stories we retell and we remember.

## A Teller of Tales

If someone would have told me

when I graduated from rabbinical school that my role as rabbi would be that of storyteller, I would have thought them seriously mistaken — teacher, counselor, preacher, community representative, even administrator, politician, diplomat, yes; but not a teller of tales. And yet it was story that moved my soul and made sounds in my heart. I learned to value storytelling as a holy act, a spiritual path, when I began to write for children.

I learned that every child has a spiritual life, an innate religious curiosity. Unfortunately, we have not honored that life. Instead, we have sought to tell our children what God’s voice is, assuming, of course, that we hear it, rather than allowing them to tell us of the voice of God they hear, and assuming, of course, that they really do not. But the opposite is true.

Gerard Pottebaum, a researcher in children’s spirituality, has suggested that if we do not find a comfortable home in God as children, we have a harder time finding God as adults — because there is no home to which to return.

I found that the language of home,

---

Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso serves Congregation Beth-El Zedeck in Indianapolis, IN, and is the author of numerous award-winning children’s books about God, religion and spiritual life.

of soul, is story. As the Haggadah reminds us, “Even if we are all of us wise, all of us understanding, all sages knowledgeable in the Torah, it would still be incumbent upon us to tell the story . . . and the more one elaborates on the story, the more praiseworthy.” The rabbis realized that knowledge (of Torah) was insufficient without the story (the spirit that gave birth to Torah).

## Naming God

For many years, I had tried unsuccessfully to teach about God in my congregation. I taught about Maimonides, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Mordecai Kaplan. I spoke of God as the process that makes for salvation — to no avail. Then one day I shared a children’s story — “In God’s Name” — I had written about God’s name with an adult class that I was teaching. In the story, many people call God by different names, each name borne out of the experience of the people. So the farmer calls God Creator of Life; the woman who nurses her baby calls God Mother; and the little girl who is lonely calls God Friend. The people argue, trying to decide which name for God is best, until they all come together and call God One.

After reading the story, I asked the class to think about a name for God that best reflected the place where they were in their lives. Following a period of silence, names came pouring forth. One woman wanted to call God An Old, Warm Bathrobe. We all acknowledged and affirmed her naming, but

I’ll admit I thought it a little unusual.

One year later, the same woman made a point of telling me how much that story and exercise meant to her. Her mother had died that past year and she took her old warm bathrobe and wrapped it around her. She felt the presence of God. It was only then that teaching about Maimonides, Heschel and Kaplan made sense.

## Ears and Hearts

We are the narrators of the story of our people, and we are also the ears and hearts that listen to the stories of our community at times of celebration and sorrow. A few years ago, I was having lunch with a group of writers. I had thought myself to be the only Jewish participant in the conversation. Then, one of my luncheon companions who was a former city editor of the *Chicago Sun Times* and the *New York Post* began to tell his story. In 1943, when he was 18 and in the military, he was given a three-day pass, which he used to visit his mother’s brother, whom he had never met.

At one point during the visit, my writer friend admired a beautiful candelabrum that sat prominently in the living room. “I’ve never seen anything like it,” he remarked. His uncle was startled, “You mean you don’t know what that is? Come into my study, I need to tell you something.” In that study, for the first time, this 18-year-old young man found out that his mother was Jewish.

The young man had been raised Roman Catholic. He discovered that his

mother had fallen in love with the man who became his Irish Catholic father. Neither family approved, so they eloped and were married by a Protestant minister. When his Jewish maternal grandfather found out, he said the marriage was no marriage, so the new groom had himself circumcised and converted to Judaism. The couple was then married by a rabbi, but still the grandfather did not approve. So the father returned to Catholicism and the couple was married once again, this time by a priest. The story ended.

The lunch ended, and I left, but the story would not leave me. I called my friend and asked if I could tell his story to my congregation. He agreed and then wrote me the following: "I wish I had known about my Jewish heritage early enough to have known more about Jewish beliefs and customs. I still have never been to a Seder . . . I wish there were some organization to which people like me could belong."

## **A Palace with Many Rooms**

With his permission, I told this story on Yom Kippur, and invited my friend to be at the service. I placed his personal story in the midst of the larger contemporary story of Jewish loss through assimilation, indifference and exclusion. I concluded by saying that Judaism is not a burning house about to be destroyed by malevolent forces, but a palace with rooms for all Jews. I said that when I see those rooms being boarded up to exclude others who do not fit into a frozen definition of who is a Jew, I am sick at heart. The Jewish

palace is too grand to be made so small. To my author friend, who wishes there were a place for people like him to belong, I said, there is — the gates are open, consider yourself at home.

That year my friend attended our synagogue Seder. We met more often; he began to read more and more about Judaism, to attend classes, services. He joined the synagogue and chaired our Public Relations committee. After he moved away to be closer to family, we stayed in touch. When he died this year, his family returned to Indianapolis and our congregation, where I led a memorial service in tribute to his extraordinary life.

I am reminded of the Hasidic story of the wealthy man who had agreed to pay in gold for each and every story the *maggid* could tell him. What he had been waiting for years was to hear his own story. For the Baal Shem Tov had told him, "When someone comes and tells you your story, you will be at peace."

There should be classrooms in our synagogues, but the synagogue is not only a classroom, and congregants are not only students. The synagogue is a gateway, and those who enter are seekers yearning for someone to tell them their story.

## **New Stories, Ancient Threads**

Rabbis are the scribes who record the narratives of lives as they pass through the cycle of life, and the creators of new stories woven with ancient threads. Their responsibility is to make private narrative reverberate with the Jewish story and make the story of Judaism

pulsate with personal narrative. They tell people their story, connecting the personal and ephemeral with the communal and eternal, and allowing the communal and eternal to open a window into the personal.

The very acts of storytelling and listening to stories are spiritual exercises. To hear a story, it is necessary to quiet the self, to be fully present, to relinquish control. As much as we would like to withhold Cain's hand, stop Sarah and Abraham from banishing Hagar, keep Moses from striking the rock, we cannot. The characters of a narrative invite the reader into the story not as directors, but as witnesses. But if we are open enough, silent enough, the soul of the characters will touch our own. We learn to empathize with the people whose lives we have entered. An essential dimension of religious life is precisely about quieting the self, being humble in the face of circumstances beyond our control, empathizing with others.

Stories require attention and they give attention to detail. The time of day or night, the desert or the garden, the horse or the donkey, are all important to set the stage for the story to unfold. It matters if the characters shout or whisper, walk or run, eat lentil stew or venison. Stories help us imagine what lies beneath the surface, to wonder at what we might otherwise take for granted.

Stories leave lasting impressions on the brain and heart that influence how we respond to life. They do not proclaim religious truths; they facilitate their discovery. Sometimes, when we

tell stories that do not have an obvious moral, someone will say — okay, fine, good, but what's the point? The story is the point.

## Just One Idea

Consider this story from storyteller Mary Hamilton about a fox and a crane.

The fox is loud and confident. He goes around saying, "I have a thousand ideas, a thousand ideas." The crane never boasts; he says quietly to the fox, "I have one idea." The fox and the crane fall into a pit, in a trap set by a hunter. The fox laughs. "No problem, I have a thousand ideas, a thousand ideas. Which one should I use, which one should I use?" The crane repeats quietly, "I have one idea to get out of this pit." The fox just laughs harder. Then the fox and crane hear the hunter approaching. At that very moment the crane falls over as if dead. The hunter looks into the pit and says, "Oh, you evil fox, you killed the poor crane," and the hunter gently lifts the crane up out of the pit. As soon as the crane is out of the pit and is placed on the ground, it spreads its wings and flies away. The fox, who is now looking into the barrel of the hunter's rifle, hears the crane singing — "I had just one idea."

Rabbis are often expected to have a thousand ideas — one for the preschool, one for the adult education committee, four or five for the fundraising committee, several for *divrei Torah*, several more for engaging in *tikkun olam* and interfaith dialogue. They are frequently expected to juggle all these

ideas at the same time that they are teaching guided meditation and focusing on their breathing. That is the time they need to remember the fox and the crane — one idea at a time, one point of attention.

When I began storytelling I thought it was simply a short detour, something I needed to do to entertain the children at family services. I discovered in the process the pleasures and power of narrative — not simply to entertain, but to transform. Sometimes rabbis are so focused on a goal that we ignore our peripheral vision. Sometimes we are so fixed on a destination that we forget to take pleasure on the journey, to explore the side roads. What we might think is a detour, something necessary but unessential, may just be the very thing that keeps our rabbinate fresh and life interesting. The story is the point.

## **Role or Person**

Tellers of ancient narratives, listeners of modern tales, transmitters of our people's texts, receivers of personal stories — rabbis are all of these. But each of us is also a character in the story of our life that we are telling. One can

always be the rabbi, strong, right and in charge. But one can also be a rabbi who is a spouse and a partner, a parent and a friend, sometimes vulnerable, sometimes mistaken. Rabbis can either play a role or be a person. As persons, they will be better rabbis and enjoy their story more.

Our spiritual and religious lives depend on the stories we choose to tell and how we tell them. We can tell the story of the Exodus as a reminder of the need to be ever vigilant against persecution, or as a catalyst to move us to care for the stranger. We can tell the story of Sinai as an entitlement (we got the covenant before you did) or as a challenge. Rabbis are the keepers and tellers of the stories of our people; we have a tremendous responsibility and opportunity.

Rabbi Menachem Mendl of Kotzk said he became a Hasid, a lover of God, because he met a person who told stories about the righteous. "He told what he knew, and I heard what I needed." If rabbis can tell the story of our people that we have come to know in our hearts, then our communities will hear what they need, and a story that began once upon a time will go on forever.

# Everything I Needed to Know I Learned in the Nursing Home: Torah for Confronting Fragility and Mortality<sup>1</sup>

BY DAYLE A. FRIEDMAN

I spent my formative years in the nursing home. Not what the commercials used to call the “Wonder Years, 1-12,” but my late adolescence, early adulthood and early midlife. I arrived quite by accident. Actually, I was dragged one Saturday morning by a fellow college student seeking an additional volunteer to help make Shabbat services happen in a nursing home his group had taken on. Initially, it was disorienting. What did it mean when Mary invited me back to her house for lunch, when she clearly lived there in the institution? What was I supposed to make of Jenny, who called out every couple of minutes during the service, “WHAT PAGE?” Should I wake Max, who was sleeping so peacefully through the whole service and then woke up and told us how “vonderful” it was at the end?

But mostly, it was simply amazing. Here we were, college kids and octogenarians, praying, singing and celebrating together. The gaps between us melted away when our voices joined in the traditional chants. And the change in the older people was nothing short of miraculous. The sleepy, seemingly indifferent and somewhat confused bunch who greeted us when we came in were suddenly animated, funny, proud and present.

## Sacred Insights

I was intrigued. These old people seemed to know things. By dint of the decades they had lived and the adversity they currently faced, they had gathered Torah, sacred wisdom. They comprised a repository of knowing. Like Torah, their teaching was rich with

---

Rabbi Dayle A. Friedman is the director of Hiddur: The Center for Jewish Aging at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. This article is adapted from a presentation at the EPIC Conference of the Association of Professional Chaplains, the Canadian Association for Pastoral Practice and Education, the National Association of Catholic Chaplains, and the National Association of Jewish Chaplains in February 2003. The names used in this article are pseudonyms.

possibilities for interpretation, explication and practical application. Like Torah, these elders' sagacity needed to be passed on, from generation to generation. I sensed that theirs was the Torah that I needed to learn.

I continued studying that Torah, mining the text of frail elders' lives for wisdom — in my social-work training in senior centers; as a rabbinic student in a large urban home for the aged; and at the Philadelphia Geriatric Center, a community of 1,100 Jewish elders I was privileged to serve as a spiritual caregiver while Director of Chaplaincy Services for twelve years.

In the time that I spent in the nursing home, I found that colleagues, family members and people I met in the community hardly shared my enthusiasm for the riches available in the nursing home. On the contrary, whenever I mentioned where I worked, I was met with expressions of fear and loathing. A neighbor exclaimed, "I've told my family, if I ever need to go to a place like that, they should just shoot me." A rabbinic colleague who asked where my congregation was, and seemed to feel terribly sorry for me once he heard the answer, said: "Was that something you chose?" A friend remarked, "You must find that so depressing." And even a resident of the home said, "You're so young. Why would you want to be here?"

## **Accumulating Wisdom**

All of those folks were not wrong. The nursing home is a terrifying and very sad place, a place everyone dreads,

and almost no one would choose. And yet it is precisely in that place of loss, fragility, indignity and death that elders are living each day, accumulating wisdom and eager to share it, if only someone will listen. These elders, whose bodies and minds are broken, who are discarded, dismissed and discounted, still have intact souls, radiant with light that can illumine a path. Like the burning bush, you have to stop to notice it; or like Jacob after his dream, you have to be prepared to discover that "God is in this place and I, I did not know it" (Genesis 28:16).

What does all of this have to do with spiritual caregivers? Most do not see themselves working in geriatrics (though as an advocate for the elderly, I'm called to point out that a very significant proportion of us encounter older people and issues of aging in our work every day). I want to suggest that the Torah that frail elders embody is precisely what we need to guide and sustain us as we accompany people through the valley of the shadow, through darkness, despair, brokenness and to the very end of life.

When they came to clean out her room after she died, the daughters of a very tough, very cool 94 year-old nursing home resident named Mary gave me a needlepoint she had made. It bore these words: "Old age is not for sissies." It now hangs in my office next to snapshots of my husband and three children.

## **Living in the Face of Death**

I think about Mary's message often.

I used to think I understood it, since I saw how crushing the vicissitudes of late life could be. Lately, it has occurred to me that the challenges faced by Mary and the very old are not so different in kind from those we all face. We spiritual caregivers are called to live in the face of death, to find meaning amid suffering, and to fan the smallest spark of light in the darkest place. Our work is not for sissies, and, I believe, we can take fortitude from the Torah embodied by the elderly sages from whom I've been blessed to learn.

I want to share four pieces of Torah, sacred wisdom, I have learned from frail elders. In Jewish tradition, Torah means literally the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures. It also means the entire oral and written tradition that has grown up around the text as it has been passed from generation to generation over the millennia. Just as the biblical Torah text is adumbrated by rabbinic interpretation, here, too, we look at a piece of teaching from Jewish tradition that sheds light on the Torah of the elder sages. Each teaching can be applied to our own encounters with fragility and mortality.

## Learning and Growing

My first Torah is, "It's never too late to learn and grow." People think of the nursing home as the end of the road, for, as one resident put it, "You come in on two feet and you leave in a box." But if you are still alive today, it might be that there is not only something to learn, but something new to become. This Torah was impressed upon me by

a group of twenty nursing home residents, assisted-living tenants and elders from the community who decided to participate in an Adult Confirmation program at the home. In the home, Confirmation was an opportunity to affirm a connection to Jewish tradition and study for those who were 70 to 95 years old, most of whom were women who had never been offered a Jewish education.

The Confirmation process took seven months. The students participated in a course about Jewish values and contemporary social issues. They had to meet a requirement of "perfect attendance," meaning no unexcused absences. Over the course of the class, members faced both ongoing frailty and major life crises. Rachel broke a hip. Her daughter called me while Rachel was in the hospital: "All Mom wants to know is whether she can still be confirmed. Is there work she can do? Does she need a tutor?"

## Mitzvah Project

Despite challenges, the students were remarkably committed to participating in class sessions. In addition to their studies, the elderly students did a *mitzvah* project, helping an after-school program for at-risk Jewish and Arab children in Israel. They managed to raise more than \$600 for computers, and they corresponded with the kids, who were amazed and thrilled that this group of elderly Jews on the other side of the world had taken such an interest in them.

On the second day of the festival of Shavuot, twenty confirmands made their processional into the synagogue

on walkers, in wheelchairs and in electric carts. Wearing white robes, they conducted the service, received certificates and spoke to the 250 relatives and friends in the audience. This is what one confirmand said in her speech:

I never had a formal Jewish education, though I was raised by wonderful Jewish parents and grew up to be a properly raised Jewish girl . . . I wanted to join the Confirmation class because I could be enlightened about our Jewish religion and what it means to be a Jew . . . I can truly say that in our discussions, I learned that there is a God. I feel wonderful that I was able to complete this course. I'm proud of myself and my fellow confirmands.

One confirmand literally came from her deathbed to the ceremony; in the end-stage of pancreatic cancer, Sarah had continued to attend classes, and emphatically wanted to be present for the ceremony. I was devastated to learn when I came for the ceremony that Sarah had been taken to a hospital for an emergency procedure that very morning. Amazingly, thanks to my screaming and the administrator's persistence, she was brought back, and was wheeled into the sanctuary in a geri-chair in the middle of the service. Sarah was able to chant the *Aleinu* prayer in Hebrew, and to receive her certificate in the presence of her family. She died one week later, having achieved a cherished goal at the very end of her life.

Like Sarah, all of the confirmands felt a profound sense of accomplish-

ment and affirmation; they had reached for something and attained it, despite impairments, serious illness and loss. They had managed to serve as exemplars of life-long Torah learning, Jewish commitment and continual growth and renewal.

## Lifelong Learning

These confirmands were fulfilling a holy demand. Maimonides, the great medieval Jewish sage, taught that learning is a lifelong obligation for everyone. Rich or poor, smart or simple, weighed down by family responsibilities or not, all are called to keep studying Torah. Even an elderly person whose strength has waned must continue to learn. Until when does this obligation last? Until the day of your death, teaches Maimonides.

What does this Torah mean for spiritual caregivers? We need forever to continue discovering. We must never assume we know it all. We must never meet the 100th person in a given condition or situation and think we know what it is about for him or her. We are called to stay curious, keep open, keep learning — from books, from colleagues, from our own life experiences, and most of all, from those whom we accompany through their suffering.

This Torah also calls us to shift the way we see those whom we accompany. We are invited to recognize in them the striving not just to endure, but to continue to become. The person who is still becoming is always a subject, never an object. When we see him or her as reaching, we are barred from becom-

ing condescending. On the contrary, we are inspired to stretch ourselves to become more, better. If we are lucky, we can become like the dream weavers of Second Wind Dreams. This incredible organization's sole mission is to help elders in institutions to make their wishes come true, such as enabling a pioneer woman pilot to fly a plane at age 91, taking a wheelchair-bound man on a deep-sea fishing trip, or assisting a retired church organist to put on a concert in the home. We, too, can be dream weavers. We can support aspirations and the thirst to learn and grow.

### **The Power of Mitzvah**

My second piece of Torah is about the power of *mitzvah*. A *mitzvah* is a commanded, holy act. In colloquial usage, to do a *mitzvah* is to do a good deed. My elderly teachers have shown me how much doing a *mitzvah* can transform them, and us.

Ethel, Esther and Bertha had struck up a friendship in the nursing home. They came from strikingly different backgrounds, but they found that they enjoyed spending time together. Every Friday evening, the three of them came into the synagogue, supported by canes and walkers, and found their way to their usual spot, right up front in the second pew, on the right side (no one sat in the first pew, as is, seemingly, universal custom in congregations everywhere!).

After a while, Ethel, who had been managing to get around with the help of a walker, could no longer do so. Suddenly, Ethel was in a wheelchair, a

source of great unhappiness to her. "This is not Ethel," she would say, pointing to the wheelchair and her useless legs. Being in a wheelchair also meant that Ethel could no longer sit in her usual pew in the shul. On the first Shabbat that Ethel arrived in a wheelchair, I noticed that Esther and Bertha were also not seated in the second pew. They had quietly moved chairs to the space behind the pews. They were seated on either side of Ethel's wheelchair. Esther and Bertha had understood Ethel's sadness. Through this simple *mitzvah*, they reminded Ethel that she was very much "still Ethel," despite the wheelchair, despite the pain, despite the dependency.

### **To Change the World**

In my experience, frail elders not only wish to do *mitzvot* that change the lives of those who cross their paths in the nursing home; they want to change the world. For example, a few years ago, our nursing home congregation was told by a guest speaker about Yonah, a 26-year-old Ethiopian Jew airlifted to Israel in a remarkable rescue effort, Operation Moses. Yonah's mother and siblings were still in Ethiopia. He was barely subsisting on government stipends and trying to find work in his new land.

Although they were previously unaware of the existence of the Ethiopian-Jewish community, my congregants immediately wanted to reach out to this fellow Jew. The residents decided to adopt Yonah. They wrote letters, with the help of volunteers, who took dic-

tation from them, since most couldn't see to read or write. They sent photos and expressed sentiments such as, "Don't give up, you'll soon be with your family," and, "I remember when I left my family in Russia when I came to America as a young man. You should find the happiness I found in my new home," and, "God should watch over you, and by Pesach, you and your family should all be together."

Sending encouragement was not enough for these nursing home residents turned activists. They wanted to do something. They raised money to help rescue Yonah's family, contributing dimes and quarters from their meager spending money or bingo winnings, and asking family members to donate as well. Their giving spurred local synagogues to join in raising more than \$6,000 for Yonah's family. Several months later, Yonah wrote back, "When you write, I feel like I have brothers who care about me. Everything you wrote, it has come to be. You wrote that God would bring my family to me. At *Pesach*, my mother and brother came to Israel."

## From Learning to Doing

Through their involvement with Yonah, my congregants came to experience themselves not as patients, residents, or recipients of care, but as redeemers, observers of the *mitzvah* of *pidyon shevuyim*, redeeming the captives. Truly, these elders taught me the lifesaving power of a *mitzvah*, not just for those toward whom it is directed, but for those who perform it as well.

According to Jewish tradition, a per-

son is part of the ongoing covenant between God and the people of Israel. We are born not only into a loving family, but into a relationship with God as a part of our people. God's part is to be present for all of the generations; our part is to keep the *mitzvot*, the commandments.

There are *mitzvot* that are between you and God, including the whole realm of ritual observance, and, equally importantly, *mitzvot* that are between you and your fellow human beings. Amazingly, God needs us to do the *mitzvot* . . . to fulfill our part of the covenant, and, ultimately, to be God's partners in repairing our broken world and bringing redemption.

We have worth always, because we have this cosmic job to do. And, it turns out, even if we are ill or frail we are not off the hook. We are still obligated, and thus, still able to be God's partner in changing the world. If we cannot do the whole thing, then we do the part we can, the way we can, for this is a "sliding-scale" obligation. When we do all that we can, we have fully discharged our obligation.

## Engaging in Holy Action

For those who are facing brokenness or mortality, engaging in holy action has a transformative power. You change the world, and you change yourself. Here's the challenge: In order for those who are frail or impaired to do their *mitzvah*, someone else may have to help. I suggest that the shaping of the task in a way that is accessible and doable may well become our responsibility as spiritual caregivers.

How would our work be transformed if we thought not just about how we can comfort and heal, but about how we can help those we are serving to use their will, love and abilities to comfort, heal and help? For spiritual caregivers, part of our task thus becomes empowering those we serve to do and to contribute. We need to ask: What is the part of the task we need to do or shape so that the one we serve can do her part?

Can the bedridden, homebound elder become a caring phone buddy for a latchkey child of working parents who comes home from school to a house empty of company, nurture or supervision? Can the person struggling with depression be invited to pray for someone else in the community? Can the dying hospice patient give a lasting legacy to her loved ones by making an ethical will? What do we need to do to make that possible?

This Torah can be something of a paradigm shift for us. We are accustomed to thinking about the transformation that occurs when spiritual caregivers are simply present. We try to quell within ourselves and our students the impulse “to fix” the one we are accompanying. The Torah of *mitzvah*, though, also calls us to enable those we serve to do and be all that they can be. And when we do that, neither we nor the one we are helping will remain the same.

## **The Courage to Love**

The third piece of Torah deals with the courage to love. Residents of the

nursing home are veterans of loss. They have withstood legions of tiny as well as monumental bereavements, losing everything from the furnishings of their longtime homes to their dearest beloveds. There is no one who has survived without parting with siblings, friends, parents and neighbors. Most have lost spouses or partners; many have lost at least one child.

In the home, death is the neighbor next door; crouching at the threshold, it is ever-present. You just never know quite where it will next strike. Will it be your roommate? Your tablemate? Will it be you? You never know from day to day who will be there in the morning when you wake up.

In that land of loss and grief, you would expect that hearts close down. It can be just too painful to open up to human connection, only to lose it yet again. Yet I have seen true courage in that barren wasteland, for I have seen that the will to love can conquer the fear of loss.

## **Finding a Teacher, Finding a Friend**

Dr. Rose was a retired professor of Jewish studies. When his beloved wife died a few short days after they came to live in the nursing home, it seemed that Dr. Rose might give up altogether. Suddenly, instead of sharing his home with his wife of more than 60 years, he was rooming with a stranger. Instead of being the teacher, respected by neighbors and students alike, he was “a resident,” expected to follow the routines like all the others. His three children lived far away, so in a sense, he

was truly alone. Who would have guessed that the stranger in the bed next to him would become a dear and treasured friend? Who could have imagined that Dr. Rose would once again become an honored teacher?

Dr. Rose's new roommate was Mr. Fairstein. Mr. Fairstein prided himself on his intellect, and felt that there was no one in the home whom he could consider a peer. Mr. Fairstein had completed several advance degrees, run a successful business, and always maintained interest in Jewish life. He reluctantly moved to the home after the death of his second wife, when he could no longer manage alone, since he had lost one leg to diabetes complications, and the other was infected.

Somehow, the scholar and the intellectual had a meeting of minds. Mr. Fairstein, always fascinated by Jewish history, asked Dr. Rose to give him a tutorial. Thus began a daily study session, filled with discourse, debate, good humor and mutual respect. When Mr. Fairstein became confined to his bed for nine months because of his ever-worsening leg, it was Dr. Rose's lessons that kept him going. Dr. Rose said of Mr. Fairstein, "He is my best pupil." Mr. Fairstein said, "Ours is a true intellectual peership." The two pledged unending friendship, and promised each other that they would remain roommates until death separated them, which they did.

## Love and Marriage

Lillian and Eric were 75-year-old residents in independent living. They

had each recently lost a spouse after a long illness, and both were volunteers in the nursing home. Eric noticed Lillian's flaming red hair and, one day, he got the nerve to invite her to coffee in the cafeteria. One thing led to another and soon they were inseparable. He called her "Carrot Top," and she walked around with an elated grin. One day, they made an appointment to see me. They had decided to get married, they said. They wanted the wedding in the home's synagogue, and they wanted me to officiate.

It is a tad embarrassing to say that, 30 years old and unmarried at the time, I had the *hutzpah* to suggest pre-marital counseling. Lillian and Eric and I had some frank and difficult conversations, as they shared the pain of caring for a spouse who became frail, and their fear of how they would feel if it should happen again. I asked if they were prepared once again to face loving and losing. Lillian and Eric were absolutely clear; however long we have, they said, we are going to enjoy each other.

After some delays due to illness, the big day finally came. The wedding was small, simple and moving. Under the *huppah*, the wedding canopy, Lillian and Eric looked with delight into each other's eyes. Her children and grandchildren celebrated with them. Eric was dead a year and a half later. Lillian was bereft, but philosophical: those were the best months of my life, she said.

Someone observing these loving ties among the oldest old might think that they are cute or sweet. I, however, think that what we see are awesome examples of real grit, from people brave enough

to open their hearts and give and get whatever love they can for as long as they can.

## **Attachment and Loss**

We can keep our hearts open to love by learning from the Bible. Look at Naomi, for example. Shorn of husband and sons, she could not bear to remain connected to her daughters-in-law, for she feared being a burden. Or, perhaps, she could not face the risk of yet another loss should they decide to abandon her. Yet after pushing them away, when Ruth was persistent, Naomi let her in. She found the courage to open her heart to the one who wished for connection. And this love bore fruit, for Ruth's child became hers, too. Suddenly, instead of being a bitter old woman, Naomi was connected to present and future, a vital link, a nurturer.

This Torah is relevant for spiritual caregivers in some way. Even if we care for well people, our relationships are finite; we become attached to people who will be in our lives for a limited time only (of course that is also the human condition). This Torah is particularly rich for those of us who care for people at the ends of their lives. The nature of our work is to love and lose. It is an excruciating condition of our situations. But how are we to cope with this? How do we respond when the person we have come to cherish, whose soul has touched ours, is gone? And when there is another person in her bed, her seat, her place, intensely needing our care while reminding us of the hole left by the one who has died?

Our elders teach us: We can keep our hearts open to love by keeping them open to loss, to crying those tears, to stopping to feel the sadness, and to remember just who it is we have lost. Rachel Naomi Remen teaches us that burnout happens to helpers who keep accumulating losses without ever giving themselves a chance to grieve. We simply cannot keep caring when our hearts are broken. We need to acknowledge and mourn those we love and lose in order to keep our hearts soft and open to the next person whom we will be called upon to accompany. We need to mourn relationships lost, not just through death, but also through trust betrayed, boundaries transgressed or illusions shattered. The mourning for a lost relationship might be formal — a prayer or a service — or it might be makeshift — a moment of meditation, a journal entry or a conversation with a colleague.

We can find the courage to remain open to love through the Torah of the elders, those who have preceded us down this path, for they have shown us that we gain even in loss, and that, as Lillian said, every moment of connection is a blessing, for as long as it lasts.

## **One Hundred Blessings a Day**

The fourth piece of Torah has to do with blessings. Over the course of the time I worked in the nursing home, all kinds of things happened in my life. I bought a home; I got married. My congregants shared the events in my life with avid interest and great enthusiasm. When my first daughter, Anya, was born, I felt as if she had hundreds of

*bubbies* and *zeydes*, grandmas and grandpas, many of whom were intensely interested in her every developmental milestone and adorable antic.

And then I got divorced. How could I tell my loving congregants that my heart was broken, my faith shaken, my world turned upside down? I could not figure out a way, so I did not tell them. People would ask how my family was, and I would say, "Fine."

Except for Bessie. Bessie was 100 years old. We had known each other for nine years, and there was a loving, knowing way about her that just made me feel good in her presence. We had been through so much together: the death of her son-in-law; the conversion of her granddaughter's husband, who found Judaism through attending services with her; her worries about her daughters' declining health. So when Bessie asked shortly after my husband and I separated, "How are you, how's your husband, how's the baby?" I just could not lie or evade. So I told her.

Bessie said, "To tell you the truth, I never thought he was your type! But I want to tell you something . . . when you were born, God made a *bashert* (destined one) for you. You'll find him in a *vinkel*, a corner."

Bessie's blessing cheered me enormously. She had joined me in my suffering, and offered me a vision of hope. And, it turned out, she was right! I did find my *bashert*, my beloved husband, David, and I thank God every day!

## Words of Blessing

It was not just Bessie who gave me

blessings. Early in my work in the nursing home, I noticed that this was a kind of pay that I received daily. In nearly every interaction — casual conversation, hospital visit, exchanging greetings after Shabbat or holiday services — at some point, the person I was with would offer me a blessing.

Some of them were quite simple: "You should be well." "God should let you live to be my age, but healthy." "I wish you everything you wish yourself." Others were amazingly profound: "May God grant you the happiness I've known." "May we live and be well and be here together next year." "May God bless you with a future which is unprecedented, and may your congregants appreciate the meaning of your message."

Some blessings used the language of faith; others were simply offered as loving, sincere, wishes. However they were articulated, these blessings were abundant and powerful. They shifted the nature of my relationship with my congregants. They made our encounters explicitly reciprocal; we were each giving to the other in a holy way. Moreover, these blessings connected the two of us to the Transcendent, the Source of life and love. Privileged to receive these blessings on a daily basis, I felt rich, full, sated.

## Avoiding Complacency

A text on blessings: In the Talmud, tractate *Menahot*, we are taught that a person is bound to recite 100 blessings a day. The justification for the number 100 is in a reading of "And now, Israel, what does the Eternal your God require

of you?” (Deuteronomy 10:12). The word *mab*, “what,” is read as *meab*, which means 100. So what is it that God requires of us? 100 [blessings].

The blessings to which this text literally refers are liturgical benedictions. In Jewish tradition we offer a benediction to acknowledge the wonders of nature, like seeing the sea or a beautiful tree, or hearing thunder. We say a benediction before doing a commanded act, like lighting Shabbat candles, and we recite a benediction when we experience sensory enjoyment or satisfaction, like when we eat, drink or when we go to the bathroom. We say a blessing when we hear good news, see a wise person, and even when someone dies. It’s easy to see how you can get to 100 in a day!

The wisdom of offering these blessings throughout the day is that it keeps us from becoming complacent, from taking for granted what the Siddur calls *nisekha sh’ b’khal yom*, the miracles we experience every day.

The Torah of the elders’ blessings also sharpens our capacity for gratitude, wonder, and holy connection. It calls us to appreciate and acknowledge the blessings we receive from those we serve. And it invites us to find our own capacity to offer blessings, to elevate an encounter to the Holy by invoking the Divine, by entering into the dimension of the Eternal. As David Spangler teaches in his wonderful book, *Blessing: The Art and the Practice*, blessings remind us that “we are made of spirit stuff, soul stuff, love stuff . . . and therefore kin to life and to each other.”

## Lives Enriched

Once we develop the habit of giving blessings and acknowledging the ones that come our way, our whole lives just might be richer and sweeter. Who knows, we might be giving a blessing to our partners as they rush off to work, to our assistant for coming through in a crunch, or even to the person who managed to deliver our newspaper after a blizzard! We might find ourselves getting a blessing from the grocery store checkout person, or even from our kids as they cuddle before bed.

The Torah of blessings is infinitely valuable for us in confronting fragility and mortality. When we respond to the call to give blessings, we are drawn to notice and celebrate the beauty, nobility and goodness that exist right in the midst of pain, suffering and death. If we become aware of and share blessings in our relationships with those we accompany, we will deepen our capacity to be present to all of reality. We will be sparked to receive bounty from those we serve, and to give our love back in a transcendent and eternal form.

May we who walk with those facing brokenness and the finitude of this life, who ourselves are fragile and mortal, find the strength and inspiration to keep our minds open to learning, our souls open to empowering, our hearts open to loving, and may we find a way, like Abraham, not to just give and receive blessing, but *he’yeh berakhah*, to be a blessing.

---

1. This article reports on the experiences

of Jewish elders in a Jewish residential care facility. Most frail Jewish elders reside in non-Jewish care settings, and are thus isolated from Jewish life. This fall, Hiddur will release *Sacred Seasons: Jewish Resources for Elders*, a series of resource kits devised

to enable a staff member, volunteer or family member to facilitate the celebration of Shabbat and holidays with elders. The materials will be available after October 2004 at [www.sacredseasons.org](http://www.sacredseasons.org).)

# Membership, Identity and Status

A Review of

*The Jewish Political Tradition, Volume 2, "Membership"*

edited by Michael Walzer, Menachem Lorberbaum, and Noam J. Zohar;

co-editor, Ari Ackerman

(New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003)

BY SETH GOLDSTEIN

Several years ago, an ambitious project was unveiled — a comprehensive reading of Jewish text and tradition through the lens of political theory. The project is under the guidance of Michael Walzer, a political theorist at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, and of several Israeli scholars (all associated with the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem). It seeks to present, in anthology form, a survey of Jewish thought and practice as they relate to the main issues of political thought, communal organization and governance.

The work, titled *The Jewish Political Tradition*, is to be published in four volumes. The first volume, "Authority," was published in 2000 and dealt with the fundamental questions of decision-making and leadership in the Jewish community. In this new volume, "Membership," the editors present and grapple with related fundamental questions of Jewish thought: *What*, and, therefore, *who*, is a Jew?

## Scope and Structure

The scope of the project is very wide. All Jewish texts are eligible for citation and examination. Biblical and rabbinic texts are well represented, as are codes and responsa literature, but so is modern philosophy, Zionist thought, prayers both ancient and modern, and Israeli Supreme Court decisions. (The absence of any reference to Mordecai Kaplan in the previous volume has been corrected here.) The texts are arranged thematically — chapter titles include "Election," "Converts" and "Gentiles" — and chronologically within each theme.

This organizational structure is foreign to the texts themselves; Jewish tradition, for the most part, did not think in terms of political theory. Yet reorganization itself is not foreign to the Jewish textual tradition, as it is marked by the ongoing organization and reorganization of text, law and legend into categories, beginning with the Mishnah

---

Seth Goldstein is the rabbi of (JRF) Temple Beth Hatfiloh in Olympia, WA.

(if not earlier). Different communities at different times will reorganize the texts to address their own particular questions. The questions of communal organization are our questions.

The effect of this organization is wonderfully talmudic, as different texts and authors speak to each other on subjects across the generations and continents. Interpretive essays by contemporary scholars, which seek to continue that conversation, are scattered throughout. Biographical sketches of the texts' authors, a listing of citations of traditional texts, and a comprehensive index are on hand to help make this book usable as well as useful.

This "usefulness" factor is very important, as these volumes are not merely intended to be historical records or scholarly surveys. They are meant to be used, to serve as a guide for future discussion and action, and to be a resource for addressing major concerns of the Jewish community today.

## **The Meaning of Membership**

Nowhere is this more evident than in the question of membership. As the editors point out in the opening line of the introduction: "In every political community, and across what is today called international society, membership is a contested issue. And so it is for the Jews, and has been for most of Jewish history" (3).

The overriding question of "Who is a Jew?" has been a part of the Jewish experience since its (Israelite) origins. And that question brings with it two other questions: the question of equal-

ity within the community and the question of relationship with those outside the community.

As raised in the book, the question of membership is addressed in different forms. On the one hand, it is a religious question, which relates to issues of conversion, apostasy, commitment to a shared religious practice and outlook, and other related concerns. On the other hand, it is an ethnic question, which relates to issues of lineality, secular national identity and similar concerns. All of these themes are touched upon here.

The "political" nature of the question is less clear, according to the editors. Throughout its history, the Jewish community addressed issues of membership as religious or ethnic, rather than political. Until recently, the Jews were a stateless people, with no government formally to make or enforce decisions around membership — or, as in the case of a polity, citizenship. The creation of the State of Israel, in which state power does have recourse to define and enforce identity parameters, is the newest wrinkle in the question, one that may not be resolved for a long time.

## **Civilization and Nationhood**

Approaching Judaism from a Reconstructionist perspective, however, in which Judaism is viewed as a civilization, makes asking the questions about membership as a paradigm of political theory very relevant. With this perspective, Jews do not merely fit on an axis of religion and ethnicity, but comprise

a people, a “nation,” in which religion and ethnicity are constituent elements. All Jews are seen to be “citizens” of this nation; a sovereign political state is but one expression of this nationhood. (“Nationhood” remains a difficult term insofar as it can easily be confused with “nationality.” Kaplan initially used the term “nationhood” in *Judaism as a Civilization* (1934), rather than “peoplehood,” which later became the normative conceptual term in Reconstructionism to describe the Jewish corporate body. “Peoplehood” had the advantage of being easily inclusive of the Jews of the Diaspora as well as of those who were citizens of the State of Israel.)

### Concept of Election

The book begins with the concept of election, its impact on the issue of Jewish membership and challenges to that belief. The two chapters that follow address social and gender hierarchy. The texts and discussions are rich and thought-provoking. The latter sections, however, on “Converts,” “Heretics and Apostates” and “Gentiles,” prove to be the most relevant to contemporary liberal communities (at least to Reconstructionist communities, which have in theory “solved” the questions of election and social and gender hierarchy through the radical embrace of egalitarianism).

The first of these sections deals with the question of “Who is a Jew?” The texts and essays are excellent and contribute much to the discussion. However, one sees the limitations of a book dealing solely with theory; the question

of “Who is a Jew?” is multilayered, one that cannot be discussed solely at the theoretical level.

### Status and Identity

The theoretical part of the discussion is important, but the book falters somewhat when it flirts with sociology without giving it full consideration. An intriguing essay by Zvi Zohar, in which he discusses conversion as a “birth” into the Jewish people, allowing converts the same ambivalence born-Jews may have, ends with, “Empirical studies seem to confirm that if the non-Jewish spouse [in an intermarriage] does not convert, the couple’s children will rarely identify as Jewish” (263).

Unfortunately, no empirical studies are cited, and the question itself remains wide open. Zohar, in fact, mingles two categories — Jewish status and Jewish identity. The former is imposed from outside and is a “yes” or “no” question. The latter is self-imposed and has many variations. In Zohar’s scenario, if the mother is Jewish, then the child will have Jewish status. But he is referring to something more than status; he is speaking of the content of that child’s Jewish identity, which he questions without fully addressing the subject. The question of identity is much more complex than a single line in an essay; the discussion is ongoing and spans many empirical studies. (For a fuller discussion of this, see my article, “Identity, Status, and Rabbinic Leadership in Contemporary Judaism” in *The Reconstructionist*, 66:1, Fall 2001.)

The chapter on “Gentiles” also pro-

vides ample material for discussion, both because it addresses the timely and relevant issues of non-Jews in the Jewish community (including the State of Israel), and of Jews in non-Jewish communities. For American Jews, this section provides important source material and reflection on the issue of the role of non-Jews in Jewish congregations and communities.

## Majority and Minority Status

The last two sections of this chapter deal with the current political realities of the Jewish people, some of whom reside outside of Israel — a minority within a non-Jewish majority — and some of whom reside in Israel — a majority alongside a non-Jewish minority.

The former section, “Jewish Citizens of Gentile States,” addresses the question of how Jews in the Diaspora view themselves, using two versions of a “Prayer for the Country” as found in Orthodox and Conservative prayer books. Reading these prayers closely is fascinating. The first expresses a desire for the ruling powers to “deal kindly with us,” while the second calls for mutual respect among the different groups that comprise American society. Michael Walzer, in his examination, raises an intriguing notion when he writes that this second prayer “is the new democratic politics of exile — or, better, it is a politics that effectively marks the end of exile, that is, the end of subordination and fear” (519).

This is most certainly correct. As contemporary Jews living and thriving

in countries throughout the world, we need to reexamine the question of exile. That category, as Walzer suggests, is perhaps moot for Jews living outside the land of Israel. And it is Kaplan, who celebrates rather than apologizes for the Jewish Diasporic existence, who is given the last word in the section, with an excerpt from *Judaism as a Civilization* explaining the concept of living in two civilizations.

The latter section, “Gentile Citizens of a Jewish State,” addresses the question of Israeli citizenship for non-Jews, and presents interesting theological and political texts. But recent and not-so-recent events regarding Israel’s relationship to the Palestinians, as well as the more recent influx of foreign workers to Israel, raise important questions about the concept of membership and of relations to non-Jews. These are barely addressed, an unfortunate omission.

## Contradictions in Identity

Placing these two sections next to each other raises another question: How do Jewish citizens of Gentile states view themselves in a world in which there is a Jewish state? American Jews, it may be suggested, are conflicted over this identity, seeing themselves as simultaneously both in and out of exile. In the concluding essay, Nomi Maya Stolzenberg points out the contradictions inherent within Israel’s self-definition as both a Jewish and a democratic state. [See the essay by Ilan Peleg in this issue —Ed.]

To apply this contradiction to the American Jewish community is to rec-

ognize that the values of individuality and liberty define American democracy, while the values of collectivity and Jewish national culture define Israel. For American Jews, who benefit from the former yet celebrate the latter, the result is a contradictory self-identity regarding membership.

One can go on discussing and arguing with the material in the book, and indeed that is the point. Each page contains a new gem, whether it is the Israeli Supreme Court weighing in on the Law of Return and Jewish status in the Brother Daniel case, or commentators throughout the ages addressing the Korach story and issues of hierarchy.

The interpretive essays do much to further the discussion; one wishes there were more of them. I often looked forward to scholarly reflections on cited sources, only to be disappointed by their absence. The essays often expand the discussion initiated by the texts. For example, an essay by Noam Zohar on

texts relating to “moral coexistence” between Jews and Gentiles posits an interesting interpretation of the category of “heathen.” He writes: “Freed from certain medieval monotheistic prejudices . . . we might ask ourselves now whether there are particular creeds whose adherents, because of their commitment to violence and brutality, should truly be treated as ‘heathens’” (511). The possibility of revaluating and redefining the concept of “heathen,” with all its subsequent consequences, is an intriguing one.

One can always argue for the inclusion of omitted texts, and question the value of some that are cited; the nature of anthologies is to be comprehensive, not complete. Nonetheless, this book deepens the contribution to the world of Jewish letters made by the first volume of *The Jewish Political Tradition*. It is a profound achievement that, in the true spirit of Jewish texts, raises as many questions as it seeks to answer.

# Seeking a New Way for Jewish Education

A Review of *Visions of Jewish Education*  
edited by Seymour Fox, Israel Scheffler, and Daniel Marom  
(Cambridge University Press, 2003), 352 pages

BY SHAI GLUSKIN

[L]arge numbers of Jews have become ignorant of Jewish knowledge and alienated from Jewish life . . . The American Jewish population has reached unprecedented levels of assimilation. The contemporary challenge to Jewish education is clear and severe” (11-12).

**T**he crisis in Jewish education is not new. Compelling and competing cultures vie for the attention and loyalty of Jews of all ages. Where appreciating the richness and beauty of Jewish texts may require significant commitment and study, the competing popular cultures demand less. Nor is this problem confined to children; popular culture competes for the identity, attention and loyalty of Jews of all ages.

Though the diagnosis may not be new, the commitment of the Mandel Foundation to work on the problem of Jewish education through its “Visions Project” has been refreshing. Launched in 1991, the project has as its mission the creation of a conversa-

tion that would put vision at the center of the discussion about renewing Jewish education:

What is required is fresh and energetic thinking about the Jewish future and its rationale, in view of the desperate circumstances we face. We need, in sum, new efforts to formulate the philosophical basis of Jewish existence in our own day (12).

## Education at the Center

In a frazzled culture that judges projects according to outcome and productivity, the Visions Project’s emphasis on reflection and thoughtfulness is novel. It also inspires hope to realize that one of the most significant foundations in the Jewish world desires to support “efforts to formulate the philosophical basis for Jewish existence in our day,” and that Jewish education is at the center of that effort. While the state of Jewish education may be dire, it certainly is a sign of health in the Jewish

---

Rabbi Shai Gluskin is the director of education for the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation.

community that such a significant and sustained endeavor is taking place.

Mandel Foundation Program Director Seymour Fox and Senior Researcher Daniel Marom are the director and associate director, respectively, of the project. A prime endeavor of the Visions Project has been to invite major Jewish thinkers to propose visions for Jewish education. Each thinker was asked to present a vision and to respond to the questions and critiques of the other scholars and of leading educators gathered to dialogue with the scholars. These conversations, held in person in Jerusalem and Boston and via exchange of written materials, were meant to model and inspire the creation of visions for Jewish education formulated by lay leaders and professionals throughout the Jewish community. The core questions they asked the scholars to consider include: "What is an educated Jew?" and "What does an educated Jew need to know?" and "What would you consider to be the product of a successful Jewish education?" (14).

*Visions of Jewish Education* presents the core of the work done since the project's inception. Its publication also bolsters efforts to move this conversation beyond a small circle of academics and leading educators. The editors relate two examples of previous powerful visions in Jewish history that made a significant impact on Jewish life: the Maimonidean revolution, which sought to put the study of philosophy into the Jewish curriculum, and the early Zionist movement, which aimed to turn Hebrew into a spoken language that would transmit secular

ideas in addition to religious ones.

## Glimpses of the Visions

Scholar of medieval Judaism Isadore Twersky (ז"ל) proposes a neo-Maimonidean approach. He emphasizes character, Jewish practice and the pursuit of the rationale behind the commandments in order to train students in the love and service of God:

The deep study of the content of the commandments and their purposes is . . . required in order to teach us that all of the laws of the Torah are intended to elevate man to the highest possible level of morality, to the most exalted level of holiness, and to the perfection deriving from these attainments (68).

Historian and philosopher Menachem Brinker uses one Israeli term for the word "student," a *mithanekh*, a reflexive verb from the root *hinukh*, meaning "education," which suggests that the student is imbued with power and responsibility for his/her education. The process of becoming educated is the process of becoming a human being. Jews study Jewish texts because they are a testament to Jewish history and part of the Jewish human story. They are an important educational component in the quest of Jews to understand themselves. Jewish texts have no greater authority than any other texts. Ancient Jewish texts like the Bible and the Talmud are neither privileged nor dismissed in Brinker's curriculum. He proposes putting much more em-

phasis than is currently done on texts from the last 200 years.

The role of Jewish studies as well as the role of general studies is to provide *mitbankhim* with a wide range of potential inspirations to enable them to assume ultimate authority over their own lives, their behavior with others, and their choices as citizens (105).

Brinker believes that his vision is viable only in Israel, where being Jewish and being human are more integrated than in the Diaspora.

## Uniqueness and Objectivity

Modern historian and Reform thinker Michael Meyer proposes a vision that stresses putting Jewish uniqueness and the “objectivity of the tradition” as the core components of Jewish education:

The community begins with commitment to the tradition as a source of truth and values. Even when the texts contain elements that the community, or some of its members, find it necessary to reject on intellectual or moral grounds, such dissent does not vitiate commitment to the tradition as a whole. The subjectivism of teacher and students is balanced by the objectivity of the tradition in its totality (158).

Meyer attempts to incorporate the key Reform value of personal autonomy into his vision by suggesting that the core texts themselves often

don't respond in a singular voice. He writes, “[T]he tradition itself provides options, and the teacher does well to stress its internal variegation” (158).

Hebrew University Bible scholar Moshe Greenberg puts text study at the core of his vision. Greenberg identifies for study the “accepted fundamental books of Judaism,” which he names as Bible, Talmud and Midrash, as well as the body of commentary that has grown around that literature. His definition of commentary is broad, including contemporary commentary as well as academic works. He argues that students' lack of knowledge about the tradition of commentary in Judaism contributes to the alienation of those students:

One of the obstacles to our students' acceptance of the tradition is its petrified appearance. They are ignorant of the history of biblical interpretation and of the conflicting trends within it, and are therefore unaware of the ongoing reciprocal influence of the text on its interpreters, and interpreters on the text. Authentic Jewish culture can arise only from the dialogue between the source and the members of each generation, a dialogue in which both the loyalty of the people to the text and their adjustment of it to the culture of the present find expression (127-8).

## Segregating Content and Method

Co-editor Seymour Fox suggests the following:

The translation of a theory into practice is an art, one that requires us to consider the necessary elements of education, one by one and together as they influence each other. It is only such translation that can turn theory into vision, a comprehensive guide to education in the actual circumstances that confront us (255).

Fox's assertion that vision can only come about in the confrontation of theory and reality comes on page 255 of a book that is dominated by presentations of "visions" by academics whose specialties are outside of education. Their visions, as presented in the book, are unconnected to the realities of implementation. There is little discussion of methods and even of the role of students and teachers. Although the Visions Project gathered a group of professional educators, scholars and practitioners to respond to the visions, their comments are included only sporadically and in generalized summaries in chapter supplements.

The structure of the book fails to support the integration of vision and method. Instead, the book is divided into "Visions in Detail" and "Visions in Context." The "Visions in Context" section, however, does not propose methodological suggestions in any detail in response to the "Visions in Detail" section. Fox, rather, whose chapter is called "The Art of Translation," speaks mostly in theoretical terms about the importance of translating theory into practice. This is ironic, since Fox himself holds that the defi-

nition of a vision is a theory that has met reality. This can leave the readers confused about Fox's ultimate vision for his book; perhaps a better title would be "Toward Visions of Jewish Education."

## Scholarly Visions

In addition to the work of the scholars who specialize in particular content areas, four chapters were written by scholars of education. Hebrew University professor Michael Rosenak, a modern Orthodox educational visionary in his own right, attempts to establish a metavision that could contain multiple visions across ideological boarders. While it is interesting to wonder how the different visions may be synthesized, the chapter nonetheless diverts attention away from specific and coherent visions. I longed to see his personal educational vision proposed and explicated.

Similarly, the impact of Harvard University professor emeritus of education Israel Scheffler's inspirational writing is muted by the fact that it serves as a kind of background footnote regarding ideas from the world of general education about the meaning of an "educated person." He first describes the problem of Jewish education using ideas from educational theory, and then goes on to describe a vision of education in general. However, he does not "translate" his ideas (to use Fox's term) into a specifically Jewish vision with any particulars. As the overview in Chapter 3 mentions, his role was to "treat some aspects of

general philosophy of education and then develop their relations to Jewish educational thought” (34). Scheffler’s writing on general education begs for translation into specifically Jewish pedagogy:

[T]eaching resembles conversation; it is to a considerable extent unpredictable in its course, following where the exchange leads. Unlike mere conversation, teaching indeed operates under the constraints of relevance, regard for evidence and respect for truth, but in its openness to variant perspectives and its unpredictable course it resembles — in fact is a specialized form of — conversation (225).

Scheffler’s insights about education are resonant with the conversational and associative style of the Talmud and other rabbinic texts. I wanted him to link his suggestion that education is a kind of conversation to a method whereby rabbinic texts and their method might serve as a model for contemporary Jewish pedagogy.

Finally, Daniel Marom, associate director of the project, describes his experience as a vision consultant at an unnamed Jewish community day school. He functioned as both observer and consultant, and drew an inspirational picture of a community that was trying to live by its values even as it tried to define them. But here again, the educational expert was not asked to fashion a vision. While we learn about his vision from the way he taught and consulted with the faculty, it is not

stated directly.

As education professionals and scholars, Rosenak, Fox, Marom and Scheffler were best poised to do some truly integrative visioning, but they did not do so. It seems ironic in a book dedicated to educational visions that the professional educators would take a back seat to the scholars of “content” disciplines. The merging of the two, as Fox himself points out, will be the key in creating the clear visions so much needed for the Jewish education of the future. The book is a highly worthwhile read, the beginning of important conversations that should take place throughout the Jewish community.

## **Reconstructionist Vision of Jewish Education**

As a Reconstructionist educator, I am invested in developing a vision that combines both content and method, because Reconstructionist ideologies have often been quite bold in asserting the importance of method. Mordecai Kaplan wrote in 1955:

Reconstructionism is a method, rather than a series of affirmations or conclusions concerning Jewish life and thought . . . Whatever I am about to state concerning my conception of God is Reconstructionist only in the sense that I have arrived at it through the application of the Reconstructionist method. I do not, by any means, claim that it is the only legitimate conception, even from a Reconstructionist point of view. Nor should it be re-

garded as a Reconstructionist conception of God. It is not within the province of the movement to pronounce any one theology as truer than another. All that Reconstructionism stresses is that a Jew, to be a Jew in the full sense of the term, should have a theology in which he [sic] believes with all his heart, soul and mind. Moreover, in saying that I have arrived at a conception of God, I do not wish to give the impression that my mind is completely at rest, and that I have closed it against any new idea.<sup>1</sup>

What can we learn from this quotation that would inform a Reconstructionist vision of Jewish education? First, we see that method is important, so much so that it can be the founding principle for an entire approach to Judaism. Second, we learn that engagement with life's most important existential questions should be critical for every Jew. Third, we understand that the most important thing in building community is shared endeavor, not shared belief. Fourth, Kaplan's ideas stress that the student should not expect, from herself or others, that the result of a process of full engagement with any idea will produce a static result. Ongoing openness to new ideas is an inherent part of the Reconstructionist method.

Kaplan's method resonates with the *Ahavah Rabbah* prayer, which we recite just before the *Shema* in the morning service: "Give us the heart to understand and to enlighten others; to lis-

ten, to learn and to teach, to guard, to do, and to establish." This overflow of verbs conveys the desire of the one praying to be fully involved in life by involving oneself in seemingly contradictory endeavors — preserving and creating, learning and teaching. In this vision, all teachers are also trainers of teachers. I cried tears of joy when I witnessed my five-year-old son lead a three-year-old guest to solve a puzzle without doing it for her, using the same technique I have used with him. The ability to teach others is not something reserved for specific ages or those with credentials.

These ideas are in concert with Moshe Greenberg's vision, which emphasizes students' participation in creating commentary. In the supplement to the Greenberg chapter, the editors report that the educators who gathered to listen and respond to Greenberg's vision had created a five-step sequential curriculum to implement his vision of focusing on text study and *parshanut*. It is only at the highest level that students begin to engage in the creation of their own commentaries to the text.

## Beginning with Commentary

Conversely, the Reconstructionist vision that I am proposing sees that commentary, in a variety of media, should be created at the very beginning of any process of learning to engage with sources. Whether the students have heard the primary text as a narrated story, have read an English translation or multiple English translations, or have comprehended the original text,

it is incumbent upon educators to facilitate the student's development of her/his own opinions, insights, and associative responses to the text from the very beginning.

Some may be concerned that by empowering students to develop their own opinions and ideas, we may be promoting a pedagogy that supports the natural self-centeredness of early childhood and impedes maturation and higher level moral behavior. When facilitated appropriately, the opposite happens. The commentaries students fashion in response to text are written, drawn, sculpted, torn, sewn and otherwise viewable for sharing within the classroom. The teacher models for the class a supportive critique that does not challenge a student's interpretive choices, but does challenge the student's depth and quality of expression.

When a teacher says, "I don't understand your point" in response to a student's poorly written *midrash*, it communicates the teacher's interest in finding out what the student is trying to express. Intellectual rigor thus increases in a class where students are crowned "Torah commentators." This appellation, coupled with the development of a shared understanding that everyone has something to teach, will create a rich and motivating atmosphere for learning.

In this vision, Rashi and other classical commentators are introduced as "peers" — other people who also struggled with the text. After a teacher points out how a classical Jewish commentator had a similar question or problem with a text, the students will

be motivated to know what else they share with the commentators who were their ancestors. Learning Rashi isn't a prerequisite for engagement, it is a consequence of engagement.<sup>2</sup>

Scheffler writes:

To provide favorable circumstances for caring to emerge is to enable the subject matter to become the property of the pupil. By this I mean that it is no longer to be seen as the alien possession of the teacher or other adults or authorities (229).

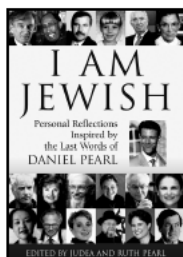
In the liturgy of the Shabbat Musaf service, it says, "*Tein helkeinu b'torah-tekha*," "Give us our part in your Torah." Participation is central; we each long for a part. Judaism's rich tradition of intellectual diversity and playfulness has helped Jewish students feel as though they can find their part in Torah and their unique place in our community.

---

1. Mordecai Kaplan, response to a letter from Rabbi Myron M. Fenster, *The Reconstructionist*, February 18, 1955, 26-27. Ironically, Kaplan, and to a certain degree the Reconstructionist movement as a whole, are better known for Kaplan's specific beliefs about God than for his understanding that the core of the movement is about method. Within the movement, however, process is certainly very important, though this particular quotation may overstate the case.

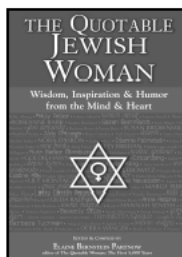
2. See the work being done at the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation to implement this strategy through the TorahQuest project. Go to <http://torahquest.org>.

# New from Jewish Lights



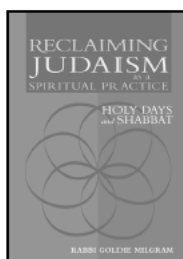
HC, 6 x 9, 304 pp  
1-58023-183-7  
\$24.99

Reflections of 147 Jews—some famous, some not—from 12 countries, representing the spectrum of Jewish life and belief. *I Am Jewish: Personal Reflections Inspired by the Last Words of Daniel Pearl*



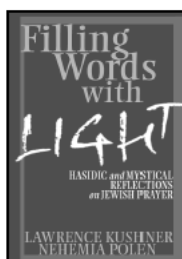
HC, 6 x 9, 496 pp  
1-58023-193-4  
\$29.99

Inspiration and comfort to any woman searching for female companionship in the Jewish world. *The Quotable Jewish Woman: Wisdom, Inspiration & Humor from the Mind & Heart*



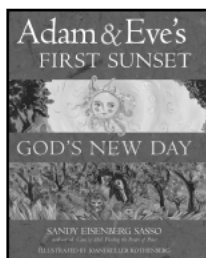
PB, 7 x 9, 272 pp  
1-58023-205-1  
\$19.99

Covers Holy Days and Shabbat. A fresh and delightful guide that will allow you to rediscover the spirit of religion beneath the layers of old traditions and rituals that may have lost their meaning. *Reclaiming Judaism: Spiritual Practice* by Rabbi Goldie Milgram



HC, 5 1/2 x 8 1/2, 176 pp  
1-58023-216-7  
\$21.99

Hasidic and Mystical Reflections on Jewish Prayer. Be led through the traditional prayer book with fresh insights and meditations that bring the words to light. *Filling Words with Light* by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner & Rabbi Nehemia Polen



HC, 9 x 12, 32 pp  
1-58023-177-2  
\$17.95

Adam & Eve worry—"Is it our fault? Is God leaving us?"—when the sun sets for the first time. A lesson in hope for every child who has worried about what comes next. *Adam & Eve's First Sunset: God's New Day* by Sandy Eisenberg Sasso. Full-color illus. by Joani K. Rothenberg



6 x 9, 224 pp  
HC 1-58023-125-X  
\$21.95  
PB 1-58023-213-2  
\$16.99

Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow. Brilliantly written introduction to Kabbalah. Re-tools the ancient language of Kabbalah to address the needs of our generation. *A Kabbalah for Tomorrow* by Arthur Green

## JEWISH LIGHTS PUBLISHING

Sunset Farm Offices, Route 4 • P.O. Box 237 • Woodstock, VT 05091  
Tel: 802-457-4000 • 24-hour Fax: 802-457-4004  
Orders: 800-962-4544 (8:30AM-5:30PM ET M-F) • [www.jewishlights.com](http://www.jewishlights.com)

Subscribe to

# *The Reconstructionist*

## *Four Issues for \$50*

Please make check payable to *The Reconstructionist*  
and mail to: *The Reconstructionist*  
1299 Church Road  
Wyncote, PA 19095-1898

- Please enter my subscription to *The Reconstructionist* for four (4) issues beginning with \_\_\_\_\_. I have enclosed a check for \$50 (\$45 for members of JRF affiliates). Back issues are available for \$12.<sup>50</sup>/issue.

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_