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# MENORAH



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## For the Enrichment of Jewish Thought

### JEWISH RENEWAL

*These Holy Sparks: The Rebirth of the Jewish People*  
By Arthur Waskow  
Harper and Row

A Review essay by David Ellenson

The 1960s were a time of challenge and change, energy and anger, for the American people. The war in Vietnam, the assassinations of the Kennedys and Dr. King, protests on our college campuses, riots in the streets—these were among the happenings and images that seared the minds of Americans during those years. For many persons these events combined to create a loss of confidence in the established institutions and dominant cultural patterns of American society. Calls for personal growth and greater individual autonomy arose, and experimentation with alternative styles of life and education resulted.

Faced with the seeming bankruptcy of many facets of modern life, many persons of minority background began to turn to the richness and wisdom that could be discovered in the cultivation of their own particular tradition. The search for roots burgeoned, and many ethnics acquired a sense of genuine pride in their own cultural heritage. The perception emerged among many of them that one's own past could provide a surer compass for navigating the hazards and combatting the anomie of contemporary American life than the one that was supplied by a previously omnipresent Anglo-Saxon ethos that was now in disarray and ostensibly crumbling.

It was out of this world and from such sentiments that the Jewish counterculture movement in North America was born. The visions of those years were utopian; and while the mood of the country and the Jewish community has shifted drastically over the last two decades, a number of projects whose origins can be traced directly to the enterprises of those years are now part of the mainstream of American Jewish life. Among them are the supportive and individualistic havurah, the three *Jewish Catalogs*, the Coalition for Alternatives in Jewish Education (CAJE), *Response Magazine*, and the Philadelphia-based spiritual community of *B'nai Or*. Countless other present-day efforts—from *Tikkun Magazine* to the new *Jewish Agenda*—are equally part of the indirect but nevertheless traceable legacy this movement has bequeathed to Jewish life in the United States and Canada.

It is apposite to recall these matters in reviewing *These Holy Sparks* by Arthur Waskow, for Waskow has, for nearly two decades, been one of the most articulate and provocative spokespersons for the Jewish counterculture movement in North America. From the *Freedom Seder* in the 1960s, to *Godwrestling* in the '70s, through *Seasons of Our Joy* in the early 1980s, Waskow's words have inspired, motivated, and inflamed his

readers. An anti-war activist in the 1960s, by the end of the decade Waskow began to become involved intensively with Jewish life and thought. His interests in the Jewish community were nurtured by his participation throughout the 1970s in Fabran-gen, a participatory, egalitarian community of Jews in Washington, D.C. He is currently the editor of *Menorah*, "a journal of Jewish renewal," which he founded in 1979, and serves as the director of the Shalom Center, a Jewish project for the prevention of nuclear war. Waskow also is a member of the faculty at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College where he teaches, among other things, the "midrashic process," the task of interpreting the Bible and other classical Jewish texts so as to plumb their meanings and grant guidance to the lives of Jews and other people in the modern situation. Waskow's career and interests thus mirror the development of one segment of the Jewish counterculture community during the last 20 years. *These Holy Sparks* can be seen as both an articulate personal statement on Waskow's part and as a reflection of the evolution, spirit, and state of one element in "the movement for Jewish renewal" in North America today.

It is the metaphor of shattering and restoration that provides the overarching theme of *These Holy Sparks*. Drawn from the teachings of the Jewish mystics of sixteenth-century Safed, Waskow employs this image to describe the situations and tasks confronting Jews and humanity during the 1980s. From the outset, he reminds the reader of the "shattering" that mark our lives as individuals, as Jews, and as members of the human family. From the Jewish expulsion

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from Spain in 1942 through the crisis of modernism, which erupted for Jews in the Holocaust and for humanity in the threat of nuclear terror, Waskow is painfully aware of the imperfections of this world. These imperfections, he claims, point to the truth of the kabbalistic myth concerning the origins of the universe, a myth Waskow summarizes in the following way:

Divine energy poured into the void, creating an utterly harmonious, seamless vessel of supernal light—a holy universe. But God-energy was so intense that its very holiness shattered the vessel it was shaping. The seamless vessel of supernal light exploded into infinities of sparks.

The sparks of holy light dispersed. Because they were no longer in touch with each other, because each now stood in isolation, in alienation, each holy spark became obscured by a husk or shell of darkness and unholiness. At the root of every soul, every act, every relationship in the universe we live in . . . is the darkened spark of holiness in exile (p. 1).

Yet, the message of the myth is not one devoid of consolation. Waskow continues:

It is, said the Kabbalists, our human task—though with God's help—to gather the sparks, to bring them back in to a holy whole, and so to remove the husks of alienation that disguise them. How do we repair the holy vessel? Our every act of love and decency lifts up a spark; our every act of death and meanness lowers one (pp. 1–2).

*These Holy Sparks* is ultimately a book of hope, and throughout its pages Waskow attempts to provide what he regards as authentic Jewish insights and approaches into how “these holy sparks” might be gathered as to “repair the holy vessel.”

*These Holy Sparks* seeks to “repair the holy vessel” by offering a vision of Jewish life that simultaneously acknowledges and yet strives to overcome the compartmentalized character of life in the modern, secular world. Secularization, as sociologists have frequently pointed out, does not signify the disappearance of religion

in society. Rather, secularization indicates that the influence of religion becomes diminished, that religion informs fewer and fewer spheres of one's being and activities. Life becomes fragmented, and certain aspects of one's life often have no relationship to other parts. For adherents of western religions this may well mean that what occurs in a church or synagogue on Sunday or Saturday will have no relationship to how worshippers on those days conduct themselves during the other days of the week. Or it may indicate that a person who is punctilious regarding the ritual observances of religious tradition may totally ignore that tradition's ethical teachings and be a moral scoundrel. In view of this predicament, this “shattering” divisiveness that marks modern life, *These Holy Sparks* attempts to search for the wholeness necessary to “repair the holy vessel.” It outlines a program that will allow Jews to unite their personal needs with their communal strivings, their spiritual quests with appropriate forms of ritual and political expression.

Waskow thus takes as the subject matter of his book a vast range of concerns which occupy the modern Jew. He attempts to provide an integrated program for uniting them, a

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program he feels the Jewish renewal movement at its best models for the entire community. The first section of the book focuses on the paramount importance of Jewish study for the community and how the ethos garnered from such study ought to inform Jewish philanthropy as well as politics. In the second section, Waskow centers on the psychological needs of the individual and on the ever-changing familial and sexual patterns that characterize the lives of Jews in the modern world. In discussing these issues he attempts to show how the wisdom of Torah, creatively and honestly interpreted, can provide guidance for persons striving to navigate through the complex maze of contemporary intimate relationships. Waskow then turns to Zion-

ism, Israel, and the Diaspora and concludes with theological and personal reflections on the meaning of God, secularism, and Israel among the nations in our time.

For those familiar with Waskow's work, the scope of his topics, as well as the style and substance of his approaches, will come as no surprise. For those unfamiliar with it, *These Holy Sparks* will provide a primer for Waskow and the movement he represents. His faith in the possibility that Jews can and ought to create open and participatory communities, ones that are egalitarian, inclusive, and informed by a non-hierarchical, feminist ethic, is evident on virtually every page of the book. He believes that such communities hold the key for the “repair” of the world and the individual persons who dwell upon it.

Waskow's positions on a variety of other matters are hardly unexpected. For example, he decries the impersonal synagogue where a rabbi-specialist delivers sermons and leads prayers for a passive audience. Instead, Waskow advocates the type of learning and prayer that takes place in the intimate and intense havurah where Torah-discussions occur in circles with persons facing one another and where prayer involves the use of drama, the arts, and body movement. Nor, to turn to another item, is his contention that the spiritual legacy of Judaism can and ought to be employed to direct the charitable activities of the Jewish community shocking or particularly novel. Rather, in Waskow's view, the appearance of “zedakah-collectives” in many cities and the emergence of agencies like The New Israel Fund during the last 20 years provide new and important models for the entire community of what can happen when Jewish study unites the Jewish impulse for philanthropy with a sense of holiness and commandment. Finally, to cite one last example of his work, his claim that a “Torah-faithful” Judaism teaches not only that “God promised the Land of Israel to the people Israel on intermittent ‘loan,’” but that “in some sense God has also promised a relationship with the same land . . . to another people: the children of Ishmael, in our generation represented by the Palestinian people” (pp. 153–154) is a

position with which Waskow has long been identified. Waskow supports all these and numerous other stances with insightful, albeit frequently non-traditional, interpretations of Scripture.

*These Holy Sparks* resonates of the 1960s, and the book cannot be understood or appreciated without recourse to the spirit and idealism of those times. For some, this will condemn the book and cause them to see Waskow and his movement as not just controversial, but as hopelessly romantic, naive, and self-righteous. It will not be the first time such epithets have been hurled against the possessors of utopian dreams. However, for others who are disturbed by the neo-conservatism that dominates so many sectors of our current community, the originality and humanness of Waskow's programs will be a refreshing breeze that reveals the power and compassion—and thus the relevancy—of Torah in our lives. One need not agree with every position advanced by Waskow to acknowledge that *These Holy Sparks* is more than a mere *datum* for the study of alternative modes of Jewish faith and practice in the modern world. It also deserves attention as part of a program for Jewish life in our times.

*David Ellenson is director of the Jerome H. Louchheim School of Judaic Studies and professor of Jewish religious thought at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles Campus.*

## ISRAEL AND THE MODERN JEW

*The Left, the Right, and the Jews*  
By W. D. Rubinstein  
Universe Books

A Review essay by  
Anthony M. Orum

W. D. Rubinstein has written a broad and wide-ranging book in which he seeks to capture some of the essential social and economic features of the Jewish population in today's world, along with many of their political concerns. At the same time, he seeks to portray the reactions and resistance to which Jews today have become subject. All of this, of course, is a great task to perform, and that he does it reasonably succinctly, if

not always entirely accurately, is a credit to his doggedness and scholarship.

The main points of Rubinstein's argument are rather simple. And they are also, as he self-consciously avers, likely to be somewhat controversial. He claims that over the past two centuries or so Jews throughout the world have moved from a position of poverty and oppression to a position of affluence. But it is more than simple affluence. He argues that Jews in most countries in which they still represent a sizeable proportion of the population constitute members of the leading elite groups. Their affluence and power, he further suggests, have also begun to influence their politics. Thus, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when they represented a large segment of the working classes of the world, their politics inevitably inclined toward the radical and the left. But as they have become more wealthy and achieved higher occupational status, they are now leaning towards the conservative pole—in some countries, such as Great Britain, more than others, such as the United States.

All the while that these tendencies have been manifesting themselves, Jews have continued to be subject to various forms and varying degrees of anti-Semitism. Here Rubinstein's concern is not so much with the dimensions of the Holocaust, details which we know all too well by now, but the social sources from among which Jews may expect to receive political support or outright resistance. On this score, too, Rubinstein notes some marked changes. Whereas the impoverished Jewish population of an earlier century was apt to generate some, if not complete, sympathy from the left, today that picture has changed radically. In countries such as Great Britain and Australia (where Rubinstein, himself, claims to have suffered some particularly bitter anti-Semitic experiences), the left has become the source of considerable hostility to the Jewish population. By the same token, Rubinstein argues, conservative interests in many countries have become increasingly philo-Semitic, reversing their own stance toward Jews from a previous time.

Much of this change, of course, comes about because of the role that

Israel has assumed in the modern world. The left in various countries, Rubinstein suggests, has taken a pro-Arab, anti-Israeli stance for many reasons, not the least being that they see Israel as absolutely unbending on the question of a homeland for the Palestinians. Conservative interests support Israel and the Jews for different reasons. Among other things, they believe that Israel is vital to the protection of Western interests in the middle East, that its demise would leave the area readily prey to encroachments by the Soviet Union and would endanger the oil interests of many Western countries in the area. Ultimately, Rubinstein argues, the vitality of the Jewish population of the world will depend upon the vitality of Israel; and, in turn, the vitality of Israel will depend upon its protection by conservative governments in the West. Left-wing interests certainly can no longer be considered friendly ones to the Jews.

Some of these arguments seem beyond dispute. Israel has indeed become a focal point for modern Judaism, and on its survival hinges the fate of many, if not all, Jews. What is less clear to me, however, is whether some of the tendencies that Rubinstein depicts are as clear-cut or as obvious as he supposes. Let me dwell on just a few points. To begin with, it is not at all obvious whether the newfound wealth and education of today's Jews have also put them at the center of elites in different nations. Granted they may be richer, on the whole, but that does not mean that they are more powerful or influential. Rubinstein fails to show, in detail, how Jews have penetrated the elites of various nations and, further, how such penetration has consequences for the actual policies developed by those countries. Next, I believe that Rubinstein has overdrawn the conservative tendencies of Jews, particularly those in America. Although he acknowledges that Jews in this country face a politically unique situation—"America has no Socialist left"—his evidence for the growing conservatism of Jews here is, at best, anecdotal. In fact, a somewhat more recent study by Stephen Cohen, *American Modernity and Jewish Identity* (Tavistock Books, 1983), calls into question various of Rubinstein's ob-

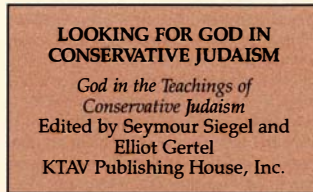
servations. Cohen demonstrates, for instance, that while Ronald Reagan drew a disproportionately high Jewish vote in the 1980 presidential election, American Jews still remain decidedly liberal. He also shows that as Jews become more affluent and better educated, their political leanings become, if anything, *less* conservative and *more* liberal. On top of all this, Cohen demonstrates that among the better educated Jewish voters, support for Israel actually *declines* rather than increases. In other words, Rubinstein's claims of how the growing affluence of today's Jews is translated into both conservatism and support for Israel are not generally confirmed by Cohen's survey data.

Perhaps the most problematic point in Rubinstein's entire argument is that Jews must (not do) support the goals of Israel, almost regardless of what those aims might entail. It is a point on which even Rubinstein himself wavers. When Israel stood as the homeland and refuge for the Jews of the Diaspora, as the site where they could finally settle after centuries of homelessness, most Jews and many other groups, particularly the moderate left, could find sympathy with this desire. But as Israel has matured and evolved since 1948, as it has become like every other nation, caught in the web of international trade and political entanglements, and particularly as it has sought aggressively to defend its own territorial interests, the question of its unqualified support has become far more controversial. This, of course, became particularly evident and salient after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1983 (prior, I might add, to the publication of Rubinstein's book). It was this event, perhaps more than any other in recent experience, that divided many Jews throughout the world. Israel, whose founding had come to symbolize the victorious fight for justice and human rights among humankind, now clearly took a stance that seemed to violate those very principles. Granted that the stance was the product of self-defense, it nonetheless deeply affected the sympathies of Jews towards Israel, sympathies that are the net result of many, often contradictory senti-

ments. Moreover, as the question of the West Bank and the settlement of the Palestinians continues to go unresolved, it is likely that such divisions will deepen—not only outside but within Israel as well.

Every thoughtful person, and especially every thoughtful Jew, is apt to be moved by Rubinstein's book. It is not, I would argue, social science at its very best; but it manages to touch on themes vital to the whole world today.

*Anthony M. Orum is head of the Department of Sociology at the University of Illinois at Chicago.*



*A Review essay by Earle J. Coleman*

The sanguine claim that all religions worship the same God is easily undermined by such atheistic religions as Jainism and Therevada Buddhism. More interestingly, one might deny that all Jews worship the same God, but a still more arresting claim is that even within a branch, such as Conservative Judaism, the members do not believe in the same God. Actually, this should not be a startling assertion, for when we turn to a segment of the strand that constitutes any religion, we find, as with Zeno's line which lent itself to infinite divisibility, the prospect of further and further divisions. Through their rich compendium of concepts of God, the editors demonstrate that Conservative Judaism is presently animated by such varied emphases as theism, pantheism, agnosticism, and mysticism. But it is largely the reader's task, as with other anthologies, to search for the common denominators, the elements of continuity that constitute the line. For it is only through a grasp of such an interconnecting thread that the bewildering varieties of a religion can be rendered intelligible.

Typically, the readings cast more light on what it is to be a religious being in general—often there is a Christian, Hindu, Moslem, or Buddhist counterpart for the idea that is thematic—than upon what it means to be a Jew in particular. Thus, Yochanan Muffs observes: "The religious types described in the following section are to some degree universal, i.e. they are not necessarily limited to any one religion, although most often they find their expression in one of the 'great' religious traditions." But some essays do address that which is distinctive of Judaism, and others present material that invites the reader to tease out his or her own conception of what is unique to the Jewish tradition. Israel H. Levinthal isolates "Among the unique features of this God idea of the Jew, above all, its ethical distinctiveness." Levinthal continues: "He was the essence of all holiness and all morality, that driving force in us and in the world, making for justice and righteousness." If this does not seem to mark off Judaism from Christianity and Islam or theistic forms of Hinduism or Buddhism, Levinthal also advances the thesis that the origin of Jewish monotheism lies in the moral sphere rather than the metaphysical, thereby provoking reflection on which of the latter two categories dominates in the genesis of other world religions. In Levinthal's account of Judaism, God conceived as the absolute seat of moral authority outshines any concept of the Divine as the speculative principle required by cosmology.

Louis Jacobs echoes the above kind of distinction in his contrast between believing and trusting in God. With the former, God possesses the ultimate reality of an explanatory postulate, however remote and unapproachable; with the latter, God is a personal reality who engages us in relations. "It is possible for a man to believe that there is a God and yet fail to trust him . . . it may be that his belief in God is too weak and vague to produce the more passionate, committed, affirmative relationship suggested by trust." Here Jacobs is affirming the personal God, the God

humans meet and interact with, over the God of the philosophers.

A majority of the other contributors to this volume agree with Jacob's affirmation. Abraham J. Heschel, for instance, approaches the idea of the Divine from the standpoint of prophetic consciousness: "To the prophet God is never an object; he is always a person, a subject." Heschel argues that the Greek view of the gods as implacable—their affections beyond the reach of any mortal's influence—is completely antithetical to authentic Jewish thought. Appealing to scripture, Heschel notes that "In the Bible, God desires to be loved." But Richard L. Rubenstein repudiates all such thinking in his essay "The Symbols of Judaism and the Death of God." For Rubenstein, modern scholarship has seriously weakened traditional Jewish beliefs. Therefore, he wishes to supplant "the old theistic Father God" with God as "the ground of being but also as the focus of ultimate concern." Of course, like Paul Tillich, Rubenstein leaves himself open to the charge that he has substituted a sterile abstraction for a living Deity. Rubenstein could simply reply that to think that every conception of God has to be personal is to beg the question at issue: Is not a new notion of the Divine needed? But one does not pray to an "ultimate concern." One does not engage it in dialogue, for such a God is not a Thou. Rubenstein faces this squarely: "He will not be found in the meeting of I and Thou but in self discovery . . . Our prayers can no longer be attempts at dialogue with a personal God."

Perceiving a possible middle ground, Elliot N. Dorff develops an alternative to the extremes of choosing either "the God of detached reflection" or "the God of personal involvement." Dorff holds that since God can be experienced in different ways, there is room, indeed need, for both orientations toward the Divine. That it is necessary to conceive of God as a personal being follows from the centrality of such a conception in Jewish history; in fact, Dorff wonders if a theology that eliminates God's personal traits deserves to be called Jewish. He adds that God has always operated within Judaism as the moral exemplar for human conduct. More-

over, to withhold personality from God is to reject the significance of one's own personality and the personalities of others. But philosophical reflection tends to yield an abstract noun or a directive principle, not an eternal Thou. Therefore, Dorff speaks about integrating the two approaches to God. He reasons that since some aspects of our experience dispose us toward belief in a personal God and some aspects make us question such a belief, logic requires that we be agnostic concerning the theoretical existence of a personal God. But this very agnosticism permits one to existentially take up the personal God of prayer without the contradiction that would attend atheism, since agnosticism is founded on the existence of some evidence for the existence of God as well as some evidence against this possibility. As with any double-truth doctrine, one can ask if what Dorff has presented is a true synthesis or simply a proposal for coexistence.

Suspicion toward the efficacy of philosophy is among the unifying themes of the readings. Thus, Israel H. Levinthal declares: "The Jews

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**One writer states: "To live according to Tao means to live passively." But this is to misunderstand a fundamental tenet of Taoism. Only in a literal sense does the expression *wu-wei* prescribe non-action; in its philosophical sense, it urges one to avoid artificial action, strained action, or unnatural action.**

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came to their recognition of God, not so much through philosophical reasoning or metaphysical speculation, but rather by instinct, what the psychologists call intuition, and what the religionists might term Divine manifestation or revelation." Monford Harris also expresses reservations about philosophical demonstrations: "When personalities become objects of proof they are just that: objects." One would scarcely try to prove the existence of someone with whom he or she stood in a deep relation, for the relation would already reverberate with the presence of the other person. Fritz A. Rothschild adds, "If

God were nothing but a concept, He would hardly deserve to be discussed."

Although these and other contributors to the anthology express reservations about the competency of philosophy, since we are inescapably philosophical creatures, none of these thinkers is able to avoid altogether engaging in philosophy. Just as the physicist Fritjof Capra argues for the compatibility of Asian religions and contemporary physics, Jacob Agus conceives of "the Deity as the projection into the infinite of the field-making capacity." Linking religion to science is attractive; after all, twentieth-century critics of religion such as Freud and Dewey argue that science should supersede religion. But if the two are inseparable, then neither can be jettisoned without the other. Of course, allegiance to contemporary scientific theories or constructs commits one to what may be transitory; scientific theories do sometimes lapse into obsolescence. Levinthal also appeals to science in developing his conception of the Divine. While many perceive the theory of evolution as a threat to religion, Levinthal regards it as a blessing, since he sees the evolution of the human mind as the means to greater and greater refinement in our comprehension of the Divine: "There is no fixed concept of God in Judaism; conceptions of Him have grown and developed and changed from the dawn of Jewish life to our own day."

Those who defend the existence of God often go on to defend God in the face of the problem of evil. Ben Zion Bokser, for example, says: "The Jewish conception is that God deliberately made life imperfect in order to give the world a chance to grow toward perfection." This raises the question: How could anything which happens in the future lend perfection to a whole that includes atrocities of great magnitude? In his *A History of Western Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell comments: "Each act of cruelty is eternally a part of the universe; nothing that happens later can make the act good rather than bad, or can confer perfection upon the whole of which it is a part." That this is an unfinished universe is certainly plausible, but to believe that future states can nullify, rectify, or fully compen-

sate for all past defects requires the kind of faith that is illustrated in Chaim Potok's novel, *My Name is Asher Lev*, in which one character cautions another against criticizing the state of the world, since God is not yet through with it.

Robert Gordis' account of the problem of evil raises the usually neglected problem of the good, for if theists are challenged to explain the existence of evil in the world, atheists can be challenged to explain the existence of the good. Can a naturalistic account of the universe do justice to the innocence of children, the beauty of a sunset, the genius in science, the creative artist, or the exemplary humanitarian? In a related vein, Milton Steinberg states that even if evil were completely inexplicable, theism would have more explanatory power than atheism, for the atheist is baffled by such phenomena as the existence of natural laws, the resourcefulness of the insect, a genius' brain, or a prophet's heart. To the Neoplatonists who regard evil not as something positive, but as the absence of the good, Gordis replies: "Whether evil exists positively or negatively, war, poverty, and disease inflict a massive burden of agony upon millions of human beings." Surely, Gordis is correct, for of those who regard evil as an illusion, one can ask: Is it not a genuine evil that there appears to be evil?

Evil is a decisive refutation of conventional theism for Richard L. Rubenstein who observes that "After Auschwitz many Jews did not need Nietzsche to tell them that the old God of Jewish patriarchal monotheism was dead beyond all hope of resurrection." Not that religious myths, rituals, or practices should be abolished, for they have psychological import: "Although Freud ceases to believe in the historical truth of religion, he never ceased to believe in the psychological truth." Similarly, Harold M. Schulweis declares that "for many . . . living in a post-holocaustal world, the older consolations and mysteries of traditional theologies and theodicies take too high a moral toll." Opposing any such thought, Seymour Siegel holds that faith in God entails believing in him precisely in the face of the radical evil of the Holocaust. In short, if we can

find no answers, we can nevertheless embrace the God that lies behind the mysteries that we find. As the play "J.B." proclaims, even though evil may be irreducibly perplexing, affirming life through love is the apt response to adversity.

Several of the contributors advance misconceptions about Eastern religions or leave themselves open to Eastern critiques. One writer states: "To live according to Tao means to live passively." But this is to misunderstand a fundamental tenet of Taoism. Only in a literal sense does the expression *wu-wei* prescribe non-action; in its philosophical sense, it urges one to avoid artificial action, strained action, or unnatural action. In short, one should act naturally, spontaneously, or in harmony with the Tao. *The Tao Te Ching* is not a prescription for quietism, but a manual to inspire and inform painting, cooking, practicing the martial arts, governing a country, relating to others, and cultivating one's self. Another writer asserts that when Buddhism confronts "the evil of existence . . . in its own uncompromising way, [it] attempts to abandon existence." This characterization is a reversion to the nineteenth-century stereotype of Buddhism as pessimistic, life-denying, or world-negating. In fact, Buddhists are fond of saying that, to the enlightened person, *samsara* (the fleeting existence of our phenomenal world) and *Nirvana* (the state beyond all suffering) are identical. A third contributor bases his belief in God on an intuition that the cosmos can be depended upon, adding that this intuition is common to all humans who reach "a certain stage of mental and social development." But monists in Hinduism and other traditions teach that spiritual advancement means going beyond any such feeling of dependence or interdependence to one of identification, as when the Upanishads declare that you are Brahman. A fourth author states that "the biblical doctrine of creation can thus be seen to be the indispensable ground for any conception of nature that does justice to its reality and value without losing sight of its contingent and conditioned character." But Taoism recognizes the reality of nature and appreciates its aesthetic qualities, all the while holding that natural objects

have derivative status as expressions of the invisible Tao. These four cases, and others of similar kind, point to the undoubtedly mutual benefit that could be derived from further dialogue between Conservative Judaism and the Asian traditions, for to study other religions is invariably to delve more deeply into one's own.

Overall, the editors have assembled an excellent collection of readings for enriching one's grasp of Conservative Judaism with all its myriad complexities.

*Earle J. Coleman is professor of philosophy at VCU.*

### THE MEANING OF MIDRASH

*Midrash and Literature*  
Edited by Geoffrey H. Hartman  
and Sanford Budick  
Yale University Press

A Review essay by Melvin Jay Glatt

Kohelet, that wise thinker whose musings often reflect our own sentiments, said ". . . of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh (Ecclesiastes 12:12)". Had Kohelet been our contemporary, who knows how tired and disenchanted he might have become by the overproduction of books which is a marked characteristic of our age.

No so, however, in regard to the volume edited by Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick. Here is a collection of serious thought that would infuse new enthusiasm even into a Kohelet, a symbol for anyone who contends that a particular subject has been sufficiently analyzed and is now closed.

*Midrash and Literature* is an intellectually stimulating work. The essays are written by respected scholars. The major goal of the anthology, namely, to define the meanings and purposes of Midrash and to illustrate how Midrash is at the very core of virtually all forms of literature, is ably and fully achieved.

*Midrash and Literature* addresses itself to two sets of people and is extremely helpful in relation to both types. First, it is an excellent tool for the novice who is beginning to be

involved with Midrash. Joseph's Dan's essay, "Midrash and the Dawn of Kabbalah" (p. 127f), clearly explains how difficult it is to define Midrash. Such difficulty notwithstanding, Midrash fulfills one of the most vital functions within the Jewish religious system. It is the chief technique employed to bridge the written sacred biblical text which contains the truth and the need to expand that truth to encompass new problems, situations, and concerns. Betty Roitman's study, entitled "Sacred Language and Open Text," expands on this technique and helps the reader to understand the beauty, albeit the complexity, of the "mobility" and the "indeterminacy" of Midrash (p. 159). Her use of the term indeterminacy in relation to Midrash brings to mind, of course, that outstanding master of Rabbinics, Professor Max Kadushin, of blessed memory, who used the pertinent expression "indeterminacy of belief" to characterize an important aspect of classic rabbinic thought.

For persons already grounded in classic Midrash, this anthology is also a vital aid. David Stern's "A Study of Vayikra Rabbah, Chapter 1," analyzes the nature and unique structure of the *Petihta* (p. 108f), one of the most sophisticated forms of midrashic exegesis and discourse. Judah Goldin's "The Freedom and Restraint of Haggadah" and Joseph Heineemann's analytical article "The Nature of the Aggadah" contain insights that can benefit even the most seasoned student of Midrash. They are writings worthy of being read several times over.

*Midrash and Literature* deals most ably with the interpretive aspect of Midrash. And, as said before, it also illustrates how such an interpretive method is linked to, and very often at the heart of, all types of general literature. One could go on from here and suggest some other important aspects of Midrash worthy of study and analysis. For example, while it is true that Midrash on its most basic level is essentially an interpretation of Scripture, it can also be seen as a *parallel to Scripture*. This parallel account, perhaps retaining or making use of other, older, or nonconventional traditions, will sometimes en-

rich the scriptural version or even diverge from it completely. In the Bible it is Moses who towers well above his brother, Aaron. And while this is also true in many midrashim, it is precisely the Midrash which contains and preserves a vast body of material in which Aaron is the real spiritual giant, closer to the people than Moses, and even more beloved in their eyes than the great redeemer himself.

Another example that comes to mind is the narrative of the akedah. The Scriptural version of the story is mainstream, but numerous midrashim collectively constitute a parallel account. In that account the key characters, Abraham and Isaac, can be seen from other perspectives, and even the ending of the story is in some instances different from that of the Bible. Shalom Spiegel dealt specifically with these akedah midrashim in his seminal work *The Last Trial*. More can be done with other clusters of midrashim if one sees them as parallel accounts to the Bible.

It also might be well to explore Midrash from another perspective, namely, that it is in many instances an advocacy literature. Beyond many of the stories, legends, and commentaries embodied in isolated mid-

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rashim, there is Midrash as a totality often advocating a particular point of view about God or the nature of the human being, about the world or about life as we experience it. These stances of Midrash are not always the same as those of the Bible. Scripture, for example, in its creation narrative does not focus primarily on the nature of man or woman. In the Midrash, however, the moral and ethical composition of the human being is a

real concern as it reviews the story of humanity's formation by God.

It is significant that as an advocacy literature, Midrash does not hesitate to deal even with God himself. The roots of this are, of course, in the Bible. It is Abraham who wants God, as the source of justice, to be just himself. But really calling God to the bar of justice and questioning his role in human affairs, as in the case of Cain and Abel, and why the deity favors one human over another, this is characteristic of Midrash and not of Scripture. Much of the appeal of Elie Wiesel's volume *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* had to do with his extensive use of Midrash from the perspective of its being advocacy literature, that is, favoring God or man or a particular human motivation, characteristic, or way of conduct. Again, more can be explored about Midrash as advocacy literature.

There is yet another aspect of Midrash that needs further investigation. Much has been written about Midrash as commentary to the Bible and also about Midrash within Scripture. But beyond these explorations there is still the issue of Bible narrative itself as Midrash. Since language by its very nature is impressionistic, perhaps a vast body of scriptural narrative is not pristine happening but rather the reporting of events through language that is midrashic—descriptive, imaginative, subjective. A case in point would be the Bible's account of the revelation at Sinai. That something spiritual happened to the people of Israel at that site is the fact. How that fact was described, reported, narrated is midrashic and is, indeed, our "scriptural" account. Far from being heretical this midrashic understanding of a vast portion of Bible narrative might help to resolve theological perplexities and actually buttress religious faith.

These and other thoughts, if not sparked by *Midrash and Literature*, have certainly been reinforced by it. It is an invaluable anthology that should be seriously read and studied.

*Melvin Jay Glatt serves as Jewish Community Chaplain for the Jewish Federation of Southern New Jersey. He was ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.*



## BOOK BRIEFINGS

*Inclusion of a book in 'Briefings' does not preclude its being reviewed in a future issue of Menorah Review.*

*Islam: The Straight Path.* By John L. Esposito. New York: Oxford University Press. This is a useful introductory volume on Islam which is valuable as a text in world religions courses as well as for the general reader. While Muslims maintain that there is one divinely revealed and mandated Islam, there have been and continue to be many Muslim interpretations of Islam. The author describes and analyzes the diversity of beliefs, practices, and movements that moulds the lives of a major portion of the world community.

*Where Heaven and Earth Touch.* By Danny Siegel. Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson Inc. This volume is a rich selection of anthologized passages from Jewish literature providing a fascinating glimpse of Jewish wisdom on a wide variety of subjects to help readers discover the core values and beliefs that, over the centuries, have spurred Jews to great acts of loving-

kindness. It can be used as a teaching aid or as a source of personal inspiration.

*The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays.* By Irving Greenberg. New York: Summit Books. As the author says in the preface, "The focus of this book is on Judaism as it expresses itself in the Jewish holidays." And he does just that in a comprehensive and compelling presentation of the Jewish heritage, communicating the excitement of Judaism as a religion that is still unfolding, not only an institutionalized system of beliefs but a way of life available to everyone. He illustrates how, through the holy days, the spirit of Judaism is constantly renewed. In thoughtful and engaging prose, he shows how the holidays relate to one another and to Judaism's central themes and how they offer the capacity to experience the full range of Jewish values and ideas.

*Love Peace and Pursue It: A Jewish Response to War and Nuclear Annihilation.* By Bradley S. Artson. United Synagogue of America. This volume presents a thorough analysis of Jewish

traditions on the value of life, the nature of heroism, and application of moral standards to warfare. By means of a comprehensive explanation of the various categories of war, and drawing liberally on biblical, rabbinic, and modern sources, the author enables the reader to evaluate the morality of the ultimate threat to human survival.

*Our Parents' Lives: The Americanization of Eastern European Jews.* By Neil M. Cowan and Ruth Schwartz Cowan. Basic Books, Inc. Of the immigrants who came to America in the first two decades of this century, those who found assimilation the most traumatic were the Jews of Eastern Europe. The authors conducted lengthy interviews with scores of men and women whose vivid memories of daily life reveal young Jews moving from a world ruled by Talmudic laws to one where the latest in scientific and social thinking held sway. This is oral history at its best—a rich and moving evocation of the Jewish immigrant experience in the early twentieth century.



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