Fragments of the Divine

One of the more poignant passages in the Talmud (B’rachot 8b, and again in M’nachot 99a) begins with a creative interpretation of Deuteronomy 10:2, suggesting that both the stone tablets on which Moses inscribed the mitzvot, and the pieces of the tablets that Moses smashed, were placed into the Ark. It then proposes that this act teaches us to have respect for elders, even if their intellectual gifts have been diminished by age.

At first glance, this Talmudic admonition seems to suggest compassion for individuals who once had something to teach, but cannot do so anymore. I think the message is more subtle. Grayer heads, stiffer joints, weaker eyes, and even more frequent “senior moments” might only be a façade hiding the greater depths of insight brought about by experience. In the words of Joni Mitchell, “something’s lost, but something’s gained in living every day.” I find it useful to read the passage as reminding us to look past superficial disabilities when sitting at the feet of elders.

This issue of the Reform Jewish Quarterly is particularly rich in the contribution of some of our older colleagues. Stephen Passo maneck (ordained in 1960) likes to refer to himself as an erstwhile professor of Rabbinic Literature at HUC-JIR. His “Weapons Control and Jewish Law” is the latest in a series of articles for the Journal covering a broad range of interests: maritime law, rabbis as judges in criminal cases, fighting a fire on Shabbat. Weapons control might appear to be the most relevant, but I find Dr. Passetmaneck’s contribution especially enlightening in its steering a path from the Talmud through medieval sources and teaching how a Jewish legal tradition responds to contemporaneous issues and sociopolitical realities.

Simeon Maslin (1957) begins his essay, “Adonai Over the Mighty Waters,” with an anecdote from his childhood nearly eighty years ago, when his father combined a movie and a monument with an introduction to the Psalms. In a combination of reverie and scholarship, Rabbi Maslin epitomizes the aphorism that Torah is “our life and the length of our days.”
Edward Zerin (1946) also reaches back to the 1930s and offers his translation from the Yiddish of some selections from a multivolume collection of teachings, Fun Unser Alt’n Oitzer (From Our Ancient Treasure), compiled by a Polish-born journalist, B. Yeushson. The material is from “the world that disappeared,” pre-WWII Eastern Europe, yet Rabbi Zerin shows that in attempting to bring traditional sources to the issues and concerns of their day, the rabbis in Yeushson’s collection betray a vitality that still teaches in our day.

Finally, I include with the contribution of Richard Damashek: an excerpt from his essay on W. Gunther Plaut, Herman Schaalman, Wolli Kaelter, Alfred Wolf, and Leo Lichtenberg, the so-called Gang of Five rabbinic students evacuated from the Berlin Lehranstalt to HUC in 1935. The story of their journey from Nazi Germany to Cincinnati, related here in this excerpt, is one of courage and intrepidness. It is only the foundation of a larger story of these five’s seminal contributions to North American Reform Judaism and particularly honors Rabbi Schaalman (1941), who celebrated his hundredth birthday last April.

The passages in the Talmud are schematic. Just why were the bits of the smashed tablets also placed in the Ark? Unlike the two tablets that were inscribed by Moses (al pi Adonai, b’yad Moshe), the broken bits of stone were written by the finger of God. In the thoughts and writing of the Sages who taught us, we are the gracious recipients of those sparks of the divine.

And Furthermore

Hebrew Scripture laid down a foundation. The time that has ensued from the earliest strata of Torah has produced an immense library of Jewish literature that might be thought of as a three-thousand-year conversation. As part of that conversation, a number of the articles in this issue continue themes established in recent years.

In Spring 2015, through the inspiration of guest editor, Ruth Gais, the RJQ presented a series of articles on the topic of Loss. The range of losses discussed was broad, but always at the center is the recurring challenge to most rabbis of having to deal with congregants confronting the end of life. Thomas Louchheim (“Avoidance by One-Liner”) navigates through the conventional words of comfort extended to those stricken by the death of a loved one and thereby reveal layers of meaning that can so often be buried in cliché. HUC
student Benj Fried (“The Handmaiden’s View from the Roof”) examines ethical and textual sources as they are brought to bear on end-of-life decisions. Both articles call attention to the two rabbinic roles—comforting pastor and bearer of tradition—which must be wedded together at such difficult moments.

The immediate past issue (Summer 2016) contained a piece by Sanford Seltzer calling attention to the ritual and symbolic significance in Jewish life of physical structures, something that is often overlooked in a religion that is so tied to the sacredness of time. Rabbi Seltzer’s concern was the employment of space itself, with only a brief nod to how that space is filled. Elliot Gertel (“Engaging, Artistic Invitations to Jewish Life”) turns however to the issue of architecture; specifically synagogue architecture and the extraordinary career of Percival Goodman. Beginning right after World War II, and for over thirty years, Goodman designed more than sixty synagogues in the United States. Traditional sources do not say much about the construction of a house of worship: basically high ceilings, windows, some decoration, and a sense of order. For the most part, the most distinguishing element in the architecture of a synagogue is that it does not look like a church! Gertel shows that Goodman did not standardize the form of the postwar American synagogue, but he did much to have it direct and fit the needs of the modern congregation.

Jewish approaches to economic matters show up periodically in the pages of the Journal. Two recent instances are Stephen Passamanek’s comment on a piece of maritime commerce in Summer 2015, and Hillel Gamoran’s highlighting of economic concerns in Talmud study in Summer 2014. As a rule, however, these discussions proceed from the assumption of a market that is under Jewish control; that is, if Jewish sources and practice were the basis of the society, this might be how its economy would run. Matthew Kraus (“It’s the Economy, Shmendrik”) turns this type of analysis on its head. Rabbi Kraus rather investigates how certain features of the American capitalist system inform Jewish economic decision-making.

The pages of the RJQ are often filled with scholarly analysis of Scripture. Fundamentally, there are two poles for this analysis: within and outside the boundaries drawn by the text itself. The former often employs intertextuality and classic sources of interpretation, and the latter draws on the modern tools of biblical criticism. Whether inside or out, many of the Journal papers begin with a problem that arises from contemporary sensibilities. The
Spring 2016 RJQ, for instance, devoted a number of articles to the challenge of morally questionable passages. In this issue, Ian Silverman (“Hebrew Slavery in Egypt: How Long and How Come?”) tackles, within the boundaries of the text, a more modest problem: the various assertions of the duration of Israel’s sojourn in Israel. In doing so, he also moves outside the narrative in order to ponder what the compilers and redactors of the Scripture might have been trying to teach us through these different time spans.

Prose and Poetry

Back in my undergraduate days, I had the pleasure of attending a Hillel that produced an annual Latke-Hamantaschen Debate. Two teams of academics would argue on behalf the superior sociopolitical and economic importance of either latkes or hamantaschen for the sake of world peace and security. The best of these affairs were remarkable exhibits of creativity, mental dexterity, and near deranged lunacy. I think back to those bright college days when reading Ramie Arian’s “Roundness and Redemption.” Rabbi Arian is not reaching for Purim-spiel type madness as he contemplates the relationship of the potato pancake to the celebration of Chanukah, but it is nonetheless a delightful and instructive exercise in creative speculation.

All the submissions that are published in the Reform Jewish Quarterly are indeed exercises in creativity. No matter how sober and scholarly the research and effort that went into the production of the finished paper, it is an effort to instruct and inspirit; to stimulate the reader’s imagination. Perhaps, this is the reason that libraries place collections of poetry in a sector distinct from fiction and journals such as the RJQ include a poetry section.

“At the Gates” very rarely remarks about the poems. (A notable exception is the Spring 2004 CCAR Journal, which was devoted to a fifty-year selection of published poems.) Poetry is deceptively hard to write well. It is very easy to give in to overused expressions and images, or in trying to avoid stale metaphors, produce a work that feels constrained and overthought. Little wonder, then, that far more poetry submissions do not get published in comparison with prose entries. With gratitude to Marc Dworkin and his predecessors as poetry editor, I commend to you the poems printed in this, and in past and future issues.

Paul Golomb, Editor