At the Gates — בפתחים

There is revolution and there is reform. Both forms of social development arise from discomfort or dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs. Revolution determines that a complete break is necessary, while reform operates from the notion that one must find the point in the past from which the current discomfort arises and forge a new path from there.

In the first century of the Common Era, most of the people Israel were dissatisfied with the increasing oppressiveness of their lives. One influential group ultimately sought to promote the existence of a new covenant; a revolution that became Christianity. Another cohort rather returned to Sinai, to the revelation of Torah, and suggested that an alternative Torah was revealed. Out of this reform of the religion of ancient Israel, Rabbinic Judaism was created. And at the culmination of this process of reform is the principal document of Rabbinic Judaism, the Talmud.

In the nineteenth century, Western Europe’s Jews had a revolution thrust upon them in the form of emancipation. They were emancipated from their politically autonomous communities, and thus were placed—willingly or unwillingly—in a state of discomfort. Again, the response was reform. At one end of the spectrum, Rabbi Moses Schreiber, the Chatam Sofer, sought to freeze the structure of the Jewish thought and practice as a way of ensuring that the present eve-of-emancipation mode of Judaism would not be subjected to deviation in the future. At the other end was Rabbi Abraham Geiger, who preached that Judaism must reach back to its foundational text, the Tanach, in order to elicit and preserve its eternal values and bring them forth anew into the present era. Geiger effectively turned the solution to the crisis of first century Judaism into the problem of Judaism’s entrance into modernity.

The Reform Movement is the intellectual and spiritual descendant of Geiger. For most of the history of the movement, therefore, the Talmud has been eclipsed. Even to this day, I would surmise that Reform congregations provide as a rule opportunities for study and discussion of Torah and Tanach, and only occasionally at best hold sessions on Talmud. Yet Reform Judaism is dynamic,
self-consciously evolving; it is, in the expression once associated with the movement’s summer camps, living Judaism. Is there a possibility that within its synagogues the Talmud will come out of the shadows?

I am grateful to Rabbis Daniel Bronstein and Debra Landsberg for raising this question, and inviting eleven thoughtful colleagues to discuss the potentially evolving role of Talmud and Talmudic study within Reform.

Perhaps as a result of cosmic coincidence, bashert, or in the felicitous expression of the poet Danny Siegel, “traces of Design,” one of the scholarly contributors to Rabbis Bronstein and Landsberg’s Talmud symposium is also the focus of this issue’s Maayanot offering. Dr. Ruchama Weiss has been a professor of Talmud at HUC-JIR in Jerusalem, and is also a published poet. Rabbi William Cutter has examined Professor Weiss’s poetry as an example of the younger Israeli poets, and presents a translation and analysis of some of her most recent published works.

The book reviews in this issue of the Journal were managed by our new book review editor, Evan Moffic. Lawrence Edwards has concluded his term of five years of service to the CCAR. Larry was the first classmate I met in Jerusalem, as we embarked on the College-Institute’s initiative of having students begin their rabbinic training in Israel. Our paths have intertwined throughout our careers, although, ironically, he leaves the Journal staff just as I come on board. Larry zealously pursued a standard that the Journal inform its readership of a wide variety of works—from popular fiction to academic tomes—that could be of interest and value to Reform rabbis and like-minded individuals. On behalf of the CCAR, I thank Larry for handling this challenging assignment with both enthusiasm and care. I know that Evan, with Larry’s gracious initial assistance, will maintain this valuable asset of the Journal.

Paul Golomb, Editor