At the Gates — 

Rabbi Richard Israel (z’l) once observed: “The only thing a rabbi should excel in is being good at everything.” My old friend Dick was indeed an excellent rabbi! Most of us are not quite excellent. We are very good, even outstanding, in some things, but only adequate in others. We are constantly reminded, however, of our deficiencies and, I would hope, strive to improve them. In a variation of Rabbi Tarfon: “You are not obligated to be really good at all your responsibilities, but neither are you free to refrain from them.”

This issue of the Reform Jewish Quarterly is an open one, meaning that no theme has been assigned, such as the last issue’s conversation about Loss or last summer’s discussion about Reform Judaism and the Talmud. This edition is especially open. Often, I find a line of inquiry that coincidentally connects a number of the articles. In this case, the range is broad and varied. It is indicative of the breadth of Jewish scholarship and activity that occupy a rabbi’s professional life; all the elements we try to be good at.

Jon Hanish and Becky Hoffman suggest that congregations consider “Audacious Education,” in which religious schools come to grips with differences in learning patterns between boys and girls. Paul Steinberg (“Addiction in Body, Mind, and Jewish Spirituality”) reinforces a rabbi’s pastoral and counseling role, specifically for individuals dealing with addiction, by discussing both the mind-body source of addiction and the role that certain Jewish sources might play in dealing with it. Barbara Borts, in “Becoming Jewish in a Taxi,” considers an important role historically assigned to rabbis: determining who is a Jew. But, who today, Rabbi Borts asks, is really making this determination?

It is possible that, by the time you receive this issue, the state-by-state confusion over the legality of same-sex marriage will have been cleared up by the U.S. Supreme Court. Even from the time Arthur Gross-Schaefer and Sonia Gala’s “To Wait for the Law to Change or Not to Wait, That Is the Question,” was submitted for consideration to the writing of this essay, the number of states for which such marriages is legal has almost doubled (from 19 to 36), virtually rendering the question moot. The paper nevertheless is a
valuable summary of the legal record that has opened up legitima-
tion of same-sex marriages, and a comprehensive discussion of the
legal and social ramifications entailed in any marriage. Although
waiting or not waiting may no longer be the question, this is an
important reminder of the inevitable nexus between religious min-
istry and the State.

Two of the articles included in this issue were drawn from pre-
sentations given at the 2013 CCAR Convention. Joshua Garroway
and Dalia Marx contributed to an evening honoring David El-
lenson upon his retirement as president of HUC-JIR. Both College-
Institute faculty members were asked to speak on topics within
their expertise. Professor Garroway (“Philo on Moses”) takes up
Philo of Alexandria’s work De Vita Mosis. At issue, however, is not
a Judeo-Greek philosopher’s understanding of a central biblical
personage, but rather the presentation of the quintessential Jewish
leader, by a Jewish community in his own right. Dr. Marx (“Secu-
lar(?) Versions of the Kaddish in the Kibbutz Movement”) surveys
the spiritual evolution of the kibbutz with regard to the memorial-
izing of the dead. In the process, she reveals an important insight
in the religious evolution of the Jewish State.

Two former professors at HUC-JIR also make contributions. Ste-
phen Passamanecck (“Was Rashi Wrong”) seeks to clear up a prob-
lem presented in a conventional reading of a passage of Talmud.
The concern, the sale of a ship and its contents, might appear to be
quite marginal to most rabbis, even those who lead Talmud study
sessions. Dr. Passamanecck, however, teaches that close attention to
the text can raise valuable insights regarding traditional readings
and modern sensibilities. Leonard Kravitz (“God-Language”) em-
ploys the writings of the medieval philosophers, Saadia, Halevi,
and Maimonides, in order to show that our contemporary discom-
fort asserting the meaningfulness of statements about God has very
old roots. Of particular significance in Professor Kravitz’s explica-
tion of classic Jewish philosophical skepticism of God-language, is
the recognition that Saadia, Halevi, and Maimonides were indeed
believers in the reality and redeeming presence of the Divine. In
the disconnect between their philosophical conclusions and their
faithfulness, we today can also find a path to belief.

In an early draft of Mishkan T’filah, the editors considered in-
cluding all three paragraphs from the books of Deuteronomy
and Numbers that follow the twice-daily recitation of the Sh’ma.
Ultimately—and for sound reasons—the liturgy was cut back. The second paragraph was eliminated, and the third was left as an optional reading in morning services. Their absence from the Reform siddur does not negate their significance in the history of Jewish prayer. Elliot Gertel (“The Sh’ma as D’varim”) strives to explain their inclusion in traditional liturgy: how the Sh’ma itself introduces the paragraphs, and how, in turn, Moses’s proclamation to Israel is modified by them.

The articles in this issue therefore draw on Scripture, Talmud, early and medieval philosophy, liturgy, and modern Hebrew poetry. They discuss the role of the rabbi as a decisor, counselor, officiator, and educator. Throughout this issue of the Reform Jewish Quarterly—including the book reviews that cover texts, poetry, history, and spirituality, as well as the poems—we are reminded of all the manifold elements in which a rabbi strives to be good.

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