At the Gates — בϿ㽐חִים

To Learn and Be Inspired

In the summer before my sophomore year of college, I was working at the URJ Eisner Camp in Massachusetts (we called it Camp Institute back then, but that it is another story). An HUC student was spending a few days at the camp, and with the possibility of becoming a rabbi in mind, I asked him about the school. He said the curious thing about a rabbinic education is that you study a great deal of stuff, but almost nothing in how to be a rabbi.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote, “Some things cannot be said. They must be shown.” Such is the case of the modern practical rabbinate. At least for me, the great bulk of the day-to-day requirements I needed in order to serve a constituency—pastoral care, supervision and management, planning, budget and finance—I had to acquire on the job and not in the classroom. Yet, most everything I know about being a rabbi, a facility with Jewish texts ancient and modern, has its roots in the courses taken at Hebrew Union College. In our best moments of being rabbis, we honor our teachers.

A number of the articles in this issue of the Reform Jewish Quarterly not only engage in traditional sources, but also engage with the authors’ teachers. A most prominent example is Jill Cozen-Harel’s “Borowitz’s B’rachot,” in which Rabbi Cozen-Harel and colleagues seek to draw from their learning with Prof. Eugene Borowitz z”l, as they analyze mishnayot from Tractate B’rachot. David Barak-Goredetsky (“For the Sake of Zion?”) carries on a virtual conversation with Prof. Haim Rechnitzer on the concept of a post-nationalist Zionism. Cathy Schechter (“Forgetting What We Think We Know”) acknowledges her debt to both her mentor Prof. Nehemia Polen and her teacher Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams, z”l.

The Living Text

Of course, one might argue that all scholarly writing is an engagement with a teacher. The writer is not merely reading the texts, but permitting them to speak. Sentences on the page become...
challenges: What are you trying to tell me? Why are you saying this here? The philosopher Jacques Derrida explained that all instances of writing and reader are exercises in time travel. The written page is thrust into the future to be read in the present. In this fashion, it differs from speaking and hearing, which has the immediacy of the present; what is spoken is at the same time heard. Yet, active reading serves to conflate time. The past—the written text—is made present.

We see this process in most of the contributions to this issue. Matthew Kraus (“Renewing Abram’s and Sarai’s Unconditional Covenant”) turns to the oldest strata of Israel’s history, the first Patriarch and Matriarch, even before they became Abraham and Sarah, and elicits themes that underpin a contemporary understanding of being a Reform Jew. David Polish (“Our Debt to Martin Luther”) does not go that far back. On the five hundredth anniversary of the commencement of the Protestant Reformation, he discusses Luther’s impact on the decidedly German (and Lutheran) development of Reform Judaism. Mark Dov Shapiro (“Before Yom HaShoah Was Yom HaShoah”) delves into even more contemporary history by searching for the origin of a twentieth-century observance that has found its way into many current siddurim, Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox.

In these pages are further engagement with traditional texts. Chelsea Feuchs (“Revelation at Sinai”) both returns to the climactic moment at Sinai in Exodus 19 and 20, and to the feminist approaches to that moment as initially expressed in Judith Plaskow’s seminal work, Standing Again at Sinai. Ian Silverman (“Yismach Moshe”) explores the liturgical context of V’Shamru (Exod. 31:16–17) in the Shabbat Morning Service. David Zucker (“Remembering Jochebed”) reads the few biblical references to Moses’ mother in light of midrash and pseudepigrapha. Michael Eli Nutkiewicz (“Who Knows What”) examines Maimonides’ attitude toward prophets, and Moses, in particular. Benjie Gruber (“On Self-Images and Jewish Identity”) also references Abraham as he describes how each of us might form our own Jewish self-identity.

David Whiman (“In Praise of Preaching”) and Eliana Fischel (“The Myth of Monogamy”) take up professional elements of the rabbinic vocation: sermons and pastoral care. They do so, however, with careful attention to sources. Rabbi Fischel’s article is an
especially challenging exercise in employing Jewish texts to the changing social mores of our time.

*Acharon Acharon Chaviv*

I wish to conclude with brief comments on two final contributions to this issue. Lawrence Hoffman (“The Climactic End to *N’ilah*”) brings his thorough-going expertise in liturgy to reconstructing the development of the last lines of the concluding service on Yom Kippur. Prof. Hoffman was honored by Hebrew Union College upon his retirement. With this erudite paper, he honors all of us.

Andrea Weiss (“Jeremiah 17:5–8 and the Teaching of the Trees”) engages in a careful and illuminating reading of these verses of *Tanach*. Most significant, however, Prof. Weiss has dedicated this paper to the memory of Rabbi Aaron Panken, President of HUC-JIR. Dr. Panken and I crossed paths only a relatively few times. We first met, however, over twenty-five years ago, when we were serving as faculty at Camp Eisner (yes, by the early 90s, it was Camp Eisner). Being faculty at the URJ Camps affords us rabbis an opportunity to be far more informal, and indeed silly, than the persona we erect for most of the rest of the year. Aaron and I were just that. But I noticed, in my status as the most senior colleague among the faculty at that session of camp, that Aaron showed a love for texts.

A number of years later, I saw him as he was working on his doctoral dissertation. The enthusiasm with which he was attacking the Talmudic sources virtually radiated from his face. One can sense that enthusiasm in the pages of the publication of that dissertation, *The Rhetoric of Innovation* (University Press, 2005). Dr. Panken’s students and colleagues would know this better than I, but I believe that he brought more than scholarship and insight to his teaching. He brought a feeling of sheer joy in the wonders and discoveries that could be found within the classic texts; ink on paper coming alive. For the example he gave, we honor our teachers.

Paul Golomb, Editor