At the Gates — בשערים

Sing unto the Eternal a New Song

At the very beginning of Mishkan T’filah, a reading begins: *Tell them I’m struggling to sing with angels who hint at it in black words printed on old paper gold-edged by time.* The line suggests that prayer is the lyric of some song; that is, it is essentially poetry. I once had a brief interchange with the poet and liturgist Marcia Falk on just this subject. All of her prayers and blessings are lyrical, yet I noted that the classic liturgy of the siddur is mostly—defiantly—prose. Ms. Falk strongly disagreed.

I believe that technically I was right. Certainly the prayer book is filled with psalms and *piyutim*, and their presence stands out precisely because the rest of the language of the worship is intended as block prose. Yet, on a deeper level—the spiritual attitude of one in prayer—Marcia Falk was correct. Whether composed as poetry or prose, prayer is intended to sing.

Prayer and poetry are highlighted in this issue of the *Reform Jewish Quarterly*. The two lead articles are contributed by two HUC faculty members. Dalia Marx in Jerusalem ("I Saw My God at the Café: ‘Secular’ Israeli Women Poets Meet God") analyzes three women poets from three generations, pre-State Palestine to the present, who would not think of themselves as religiously Jewish. Sonja Pilz in New York ("Birds Finding Home: Three Women Poets Reconsidered") is principally interested in Marcia Falk upon the publication of a revision of her seminal *A Book of Blessings*. Dr. Pilz, however, positions Falk’s work against the background of two earlier poets, one who wrote in Yiddish, the other in Hebrew. That second poet, Leah Goldberg, is also regarded by Prof. Marx. The two essays were written quite independently of each other, and yet they create an intriguing conversation on Jewish poetry and Jewish prayer.

A People Apart ... and in the World

The late political scientist Daniel Elazar once remarked in a lecture that the best way to understand how a Jewish community organizes
and manages itself is to examine the dominant gentile culture in which it resides. Throughout the course of its history, Jews have creatively and resiliently found ways in which to maintain their unique identity as a people apart, and yet they have never been really separated, physically, psychologically, or intellectually, from the peoples and cultures in which they have resided. This push-pull relationship is exemplified in a number of articles.

Reuven Firestone (“The Qur’an on Jews and Judaism”) continues his investigation of Jews and the development of Islam begun in the Fall 2017 issue of the RJQ by presenting the complex and nuanced way that Judaism is imaged in the Qur’an. Any encounter between Jews and Muslims today will benefit from understanding the uses and misuses of interpretation that arise in reading Islam’s foundational text. It is valuable to note, I believe, that the Qur’an is a Muslim text speaking to Muslims, and that Judaism serves principally as a marker from which Islam’s approach to God and the world can be distinguished. This otherwise passive role for Jews only becomes active in the context of encounter.

Elizabeth Bahar (“The Prophetic Imagination”), on the other hand, is attempting to create an interfaith encounter where none might otherwise arise. She examines the writing of Walter Brueggemann, one of the most significant liberal Protestant scholars of the past half century. As the Qur’an is intended to speak directly to Muslims, Brueggemann’s audience has been Christians. He has been a leading interpreter of Hebrew Scripture (the Old Testament) within an unapologetic Christian orientation. Rabbi Bahar recognizes that Jews can nonetheless incorporate the principal thrusts of Brueggemann’s analyses and assimilate them into a Jewish context.

Dan Polish (“Purim and Her Sisters”) pushes the interfaith conversation even further. The festival of Purim is an outlier among Jewish holiday observances, which seem to combine instances of simchah with dashes of solemnity and serious purpose. Purim, on the other hand, is an exercise in “wretched excess.” Rabbi Polish draws connections, not only to Carnival and Mardi Gras, with whom a rough relationship has long been noted, but also to Hindu celebrations half a world away. To what extent are these links a matter of actual interpersonal contact and interchange (the historian Martin Hengel and anthropologist Mary Douglas have both asserted such connections) or fundamental expressions of human nature? It is difficult to say. They certainly do exist.
These articles above point to Jewish interfaith encounter that is sought, unsought, and even unexpected. They enlighten and sometimes irritate us. As Jews, we also attempt to turn inward, drawing intellectual and spiritual sustenance from our own sources. Regular contributor Elliot Gertel (“On ‘Blessing’ and ‘Salvation’ in the Tanach”) seeks to tease out the meaning of b’rachah from its Scriptural sources. Many of you are familiar with Hayim Bialik’s conceptual analysis of the relationship between aggadah and halachah. (I commend, as well, Eugene Borowitz’s The Talmud’s Theological Language Game.) With acknowledgment to Bialik’s work, Gilbert Rosenthal (“From Aggadah to Halachah”) strives to catalog many instances in which midrash and talmudic aggadah inform and develop into halachic dicta.

What makes for a people apart; especially a people who persist scattered across the globe? Jews draw their identity from both an ethnus and an ethos: a sense of family relation and set of roughly common values and practices. Jonathan Cohen (“Two Directions toward Ethical Peoplehood”) takes this insight (not very profound in and of itself) and investigates how these two quanta of group identification are related and inform each other.

If I Forget Thee

A well-known passage in Avot D’Rabbi Natan avers that ten parts of beauty, wisdom, strength, and learning were established on earth. Nine parts were given to Jerusalem and one to the rest of the world. A mishnah in Tractate K’tubot says that one may force a spouse to go up to the Land of Israel from outside the Land. And further, that one may force a spouse to go to Jerusalem from the rest of Israel. Rabbinic literature emphasizes the specialness of this city, even above and beyond the Land itself! Jacqueline Satlow (“Images of Jerusalem in the Hebrew Bible”) focuses on the Jerusalem of Scripture and lays out the foundation for the subsequent Rabbinic claims.

And so I come full circle: words become images. We seek to make the black marks on a page sing.

Paul Golomb, Editor