At the Gates — בשעריה

I write these words on a gray and rainy afternoon as coronavirus cases and deaths continue to rise. I pray that you read them in better weather, and certainly in better times.

Such a change in fortune would be familiar to Ruth and Naomi, who are on my mind as I review the conversion symposium that beautifully comprises so much of this issue. While their story is well-known, we may find that Naomi’s lament holds new meaning as we contemplate the devastation wrought by this pandemic: “The hand of the Eternal has struck out against me,” she cries. “I went away full, and the Eternal has brought me back empty.” Yet I dare to imagine that these summer months have brought us to a place of renewed hope and goodness, that perhaps we are ready to speak of ourselves and our communities as Naomi’s friends spoke of her: “Blessed be the Eternal, Who has not withheld [redemption] from you today!”

The conversion section is ably introduced by Rabbi Dr. Kari Tuling, and I will keep my own message brief so that you may turn to it as soon as possible. And in addition to this symposium, you will find six wonderful articles that illuminate literature from biblical to modern to liturgical—as well as another selection of exceptionally strong book reviews, the magnificent poetry that is quickly becoming a hallmark of the CCAR Journal, and a meditative response to our Spring 2020 issue.

These articles begin with the compelling “Am I a Man or a Jerk?” in which Samuel E. Karff—past CCAR President, past CCAR Journal editor, and my own rabbi—musters both candor and kindness to consider Saul Bellow as a writer, a son, a father, a Jew, a neighbor, and—ultimately—a human being. Leigh Lerner also looks to literature in “The Man in the Gray Flannel Loincloth: Joseph, the First Modern?” as he perceptively compares the journeys of the biblical Joseph and Tom Rath, the protagonist of Sloan Wilson’s The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit. In “The Rabbinic Spouse in Contemporary American Fiction,” David J. Zucker offers a meticulously and exhaustively researched portrayal, pairing fictional depictions with the voices of real-life rabbinic spouses, recent studies of clergy spouses, and astute analysis.
Our final three articles take us back to biblical and liturgical literature. Neal Gold’s discerning, wonderfully titled “Guzzlers and Gluttons Will Be Impoverished” calls forth some of our most ancient wisdom—The Book of Proverbs—to examine some of our most modern issues: income inequality, the association of hard work with riches and laziness with poverty, and the relationships among wealth, wisdom, and reverence. In “Yom Kippur as Sacred Drama,” Mark H. Levin explores the biblical passages that inaugurate and close our worship on this holiest day of the year, brilliantly demonstrating how their words—and the stories they invoke—invite us to enact the journey from rebellious sinners to repentant witnesses. Finally, David L. Kline guides us through the Bedtime Sh’m a with a unique and delightful mix of scholarship, original interpretation, and reflections on aging and mortality—shot through with wry humor and sharp observations—in “Contemplating Sleep at 85.”

We are proud to continue enhancing our book review section, bringing to your attention four new nonfiction releases of special interest to rabbis as well as two volumes of Hebrew fiction—ably analyzed by Bill Cutter, David Ellenson, Andrea Steinberger, Laurence Edwards, and Israel Zoberman. And we are proud to present the poetry of Deborah Bacharach, Roger Nash, and Maay anot editor Daniel Polish—whose work for the Journal has already drawn acclaim—as well as mark the welcome Journal debut of gifted poets Lonnie Monka, Enid Shomer, Miriam Flock, and Baruch November. Concluding our issue is A. Brian Stoller’s “A Meditation on Psalm 27”—a sensitive, stirring piece offered as a response to Debra J. Robbins’s book Opening Your Heart with Psalm 27: A Spiritual Practice for the Jewish New Year and its recent review by Barry H. Block.

Perhaps Psalm 27 will have the last word as (At) the Gates begin to close: “For God will shelter me in the divine sukkah on a day of dread, conceal me in the hiding-place of God’s tent, exalt me upon a rock. Now my head is lifted! I will sing and I will offer praise to the Eternal!” May we soon emerge from our places of concealment to be exalted upon our Rock, and may the time come when again we lift our heads and sing together to the Eternal.

Elaine Rose Glickman
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