

THE SACRED ACT OF READING

The fact that American Jews must dedicate a month to the Jewish book ~~is~~ ^{ought to be} a source of profound embarrassment to them. A man is not conscious of his heart until he suffers a coronary. He is not aware of the functioning of his lungs until he has pneumonia. The Jew does not need a Jewish Book Month to remind him of his duty to read until he has experienced a sickening lack of books in his life, a lack which is a symptom of a diseased soul. The Hassidic teacher, Rabbi Levi of Liska, before departing for the synagogue on the Eve of Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, would turn to his bookshelves and, with tears in his eyes -- ask forgiveness of his books!

The American Jew has not fared much better than his fellow-citizens. ^{in this respect} He too must turn to his books -- and ask forgiveness for the fact that it is necessary to dedicate ~~one~~ ^a month to ~~his books~~ ^{them}. "And thou shalt meditate in it day and night," was the command of the Almighty to Joshua concerning the Jewish Book. Not a month and not a week -- but day and night.

For traditional Jews, "a Jewish book" does not merely mean a book about Jews written by a Jew. It was Mohammed in the 3rd Sura of the Koran who called us "the people of the book." Notice: not the "people of a book," or even the "people of books," but specifically the "people of the Book." So have ~~we~~ ^{Jews} been known by all non-Jews, and ~~so~~ ^{such} has been ~~their~~ ^{an authentic} glory and ~~our~~ pride for ourselves. In a word, ~~we consider~~ ^{is} a Jewish book only that which in some way reflects some aspect, no matter how indirect, of the Book. The Jewish book must have in it some of the spark of divinity that is contained in the Book of Books. It must reflect, in some way, some of the passion for righteousness, some of

the love of humanity, some of the indignation at injustice, some of the love of God and the warmth that comes from obeying Him, some of the *anguish and* bitterness in contemplating our inability to put an end to violence, and some of the joy and comfort in realizing that, after all, man was created in the image of God. It makes no difference to us what genre of literature it concerns; so long as it reflects some aspect of Torah, so long as none of us would be ashamed to take that book into the same room in which there stands a Sefer Torah.

We now come to our central point: the unique Jewish phenomenon, that the study of Torah is the highest form of worship. Is it not strange, especially when compared with other religions, that the highest form of religious experience in Judaism is not the devout prayer, not the act of submission or leaps of faith, but the exercise of intellect, the reading of a book? *How can we explain the fact that Judaism is* ~~Why is Judaism~~ the kind of religion in which the Book takes a place of such central importance that reading is raised to the status of mitzvah, a sacred act? To understand this, we must understand the relationship of the author to the book, the relationship of the reader to the book, and then the ultimate function of mitzvah.

A genuine Jewish Book is rarely autobiographical. The great Jewish books speak of everyone and everything, but *rarely* ~~not~~ directly of the author himself. As Professor Gershom Scholem of the Hebrew University has pointed out, even in the literature of Jewish mysticism, where one would normally expect a great *pouring* ~~outpouring~~ of emotion and relation of subjective experiences, the Jewish mystical literature is remarkable because of ~~its~~ *the* absence of the autobiographical element.

And yet, despite the absence of direct writing about the author himself, there is an identification of the book and its author such as exists with no other people and in no other literature. With ~~the~~ Jews, a book was often regarded as a flower bed in which there was nourished the seedling of the author's immortality. The book was the symbol and the proof of its author's conquest over death and oblivion. The book was the repository of the soul of the author. For the book and its author were equated in the eyes of ~~the~~ ^{this} people. It is remarkable that until recent years, beginning with the Emancipation, Jewish scholars were ~~not overly~~ ^{rarely} interested in history. They were never overly concerned with the details of the life of Rabbi Joseph Karo, or with the wanderings of Maimonides, with the adventures of Rashi or the life story of Yehoudah Halevi. For them, the only part of a man's life that remained important for the ages was his book. His idea, his message, his writings, his original thinking -- these elements, incorporated in the books, were all of his life that were ^{regarded as} sacred ~~to~~ and worth perpetuating. Everything else belonged to the area of secular history, which may be interesting, but is devoid of inner significance. Often many talmudic scholars do not know the name of the author of a book; ^{they are studying} ~~for~~ ^{instead} they call him by the name of his book! Thus, there are great scholars whom we know of as -- and I am now translating ^{directly} from the ~~well-known~~ Hebrew ~~into the lesser known English~~ -- "The Lover of Life," "Sweet Fruit," "The Lips of the Priest," "The Roar of the Lion," and so on. Imagine if that were done in the realm of secular authors and secular books. We would ^{then} refer to Shakespeare as "King Lear," to Dostoevsky as "The Idiot," and to Flaubert as "Madame Bovary," ~~and to Herman Wouk as "Marjorie Morningstar."~~ What this indicates is that with regard to the Jewish Book there was a spiritual

He has, so to speak, contracted
the largeness of his spirit
and distilled the residue into his book. 4.

kinship between the author and his work, that the author has put his life's work and his soul's inner spirit into the pages of this book. In an autobiography the author merely tells about himself. In the Jewish Book the author's work is himself. We remain therefore with an equation: author equals book.

On the other hand, reading a book involves a similar relationship. In truth, a real, genuine Jewish Book can never be "read." It must be digested, it must be chewed over and over again. It must be studied, never just read. Philo of Alexandria, over 2,000 years ago, explained the biblical requirement for permissible animals, that they chew the cud, ~~by~~ saying that this symbolized to the Israelite the way he must apply himself to the Book. In Yiddish, so expressive of the Jewish spirit, one reads a secular book; he studies a "Jewish" book.

Briefly, in order to do justice to the Jewish Book as a reader, one must identify himself completely with the book which he is reading. The distinction between "the letter of the law" and "the spirit of the law" is foreign to the Jew. It is a typical example of Christian bifurcation. To Jews, it ~~was~~ ^{is} meaningless. Letter without spirit is a corpse; spirit without letter a ghost. The Jewish Book ~~was~~ ^{must be} alive -- so much so that the living reader ^{was able to} ~~identified~~ with it.

When the Rabbis of the Talmud want to teach the requirement to rise when a Scroll of the Torah ^(Sefer Torah) is brought into the presence of the congregation, this is the way they derive that principle: since it is mandatory for us to rise before a scholar of the Torah, then certainly we ought to rise before the Torah itself. In other words, it is a prior, antecedent ~~known~~ principle that it is imperative to rise before the

scholar. For he who studies ~~the~~ Torah, is Torah himself. The scholar -- he who reads the Jewish Book -- must be treated ^{at least as reverently} as is the Jewish Book itself. The Talmud goes so far as to compare the respect we must accord a scholar who has forgotten his studies, to the honor due to the Tablets of the Commandments after they have been broken. At more than one occasion the Rabbis of the Talmud compare the life of every man to a Sefer Torah. So that the student of the Book is at one with the Book. This does not hold only for a professional scholar, but for whoever reads the Book with "all thy heart and all thy soul and all thy might," Whether it be the scholar or layman, if it is the Book (i.e. ~~t~~ the Torah) or any truly Jewish Book (which reflects the teaching of Torah) -- they are one.

And now we come to the remarkable conclusion: if the author is spiritually telescoped in his book, and the reader in his encounter with paragraphs and chapters ultimately identifies with the whole book, then there must exist an extremely close and intimate relationship between reader and author. The book, in this quasi-syllogism, is only a means by which the reader transcends the literary message per se and achieves empathy with the author. ^{There is no bibliolatry here. Rather,} ~~The~~ book is merely a bridge on which author and reader, each starting from opposite ends, meet in the center. How often Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik of Yeshiva University speaks of his personal friendship with the 12th century savant, Maimonides. And how beautifully and warmly he describes it -- for Maimonides lives only in his Code, and the great student of the Code has identified himself with that timeless book, so that there exists an intimate friendship which extends over the 750 years which separate the two. ~~And~~ ^{as perhaps the reader can from his own.} From my own limited experience I can appreciate that kind of relationship, [^] How often I long for my late beloved grandfather, may the memory of the righteous be a blessing! How often I would want to

sit with him, speak with him, ask his advice, just communicate with him in any manner. And how wonderful to find that that desire is not doomed to frustration. For all I need to is open the work of Responsa which he authored, the Emek Halakhah, and begin to read one of the passages he wrote. As I delve deeper into each passage, I begin to feel his presence hovering above the page, and soon the responsum itself becomes only a means, only a medium, only a bridge over which I can walk and extend my hand to the hand of a beloved teacher and grandfather. The identification ^{is} ~~was~~ made. There is a oneness between author and reader. It is an experience which is not solely emotional or intellectual or religious but rather, by grace of some mysterious spiritual alchemy, an amalgam of all three which is greater than the sum of the parts.

Extending that now, to the Jewish Book, we can begin to appreciate why the Jewish tradition regarded the reading of a Jewish Book as a mitzvah. For as we stated at the beginning, a Jewish Book must be in some way a part of Torah. It must reflect Torah, and therefore it must reflect as well the Author of Torah -- God Himself. So that every Jewish Book must have in it an element of divinity. The author of the real Jewish Book must bring Godliness to bear upon his work. If the ancient prophets of Judea regarded themselves as the instruments through which the word of God was spoken, the Jewish author is the human instrument through which the divine word is written. Both prophet and author refracts ^{each} the word in terms of his own personality, his own talents, his own limitations. But each, whether visionary-preacher or scholar-writer, has caught a glimpse of the Beyond, the Nameless, the Transcendent.

Of course, we must beware of the pitfall of solemnity, of assuming too naively, which we do not, that access to the divine is direct, uninterrupted, and can be evoked at will by some magical formula. ~~I~~ ^{I once heard of a} child ~~who~~ ^{who} bought a Bible as a gift for his father. Searching for an appropriate inscription, he discovered it ^{one of} in the books of the family library, and promptly copied it ^{to} in his Bible. When his father opened the Holy Book, he read "with compliments of the author."

Not every fanatic can lay claim to prophetic authenticity, nor does every bore who takes to pen qualify as an instrument of God merely by dint of good intentions and sanctimonious phrases. Neither humor nor irony, neither wit nor subtlety, are excluded from the realm of the divine. The divine sponsorship of an author's creative work need not be immediately obvious to any mediocrity of junior high school age. It need not, in fact, speak of God at all. (The biblical Book of Esther does not mention His Name even once!) But if it ennobles man, if it somehow contributes to the dignity of man, if it helps prevent the further diminution of the Divine Image in him -- then the immanence of God in Book is established.

From this first step, the identification of Author and Book, or the Godliness of The Book or any of the Jewish Books derivative from it, we go to the second step: identification of reader and book, in this case -- the student of Torah with Torah, or the reader of the Jewish book with the spirit of Torah. Here we arrive at a conclusion which is necessary by the spiritual logic of the Jew. And that is, that when we read a truly Jewish book, we ~~identify ourselves~~ ^{encounter} with the Author -- thus, the reading of the truly Jewish book is an act of cleaving to God, an act of religious communion.

And what, if not that, is the function of a mitzvah? Such is, indeed, the ^{purpose} ~~function~~ of all the practical mitzvot -- the object of any sacred act is not the act itself, but the experience of communion, deveikut. Hence, reading a Jewish book (which is, according to our definition, an act of the study of the Torah) becomes for Judaism a mitzvah, a sacred act.

It is for this reason that reading or studying holds such a position of eminence in the Jewish Tradition. And it is for this reason that we American Jews, descendants of those Israelites who first received The Book, have seen fit to devote this month to the Jewish Book -- not that this is the only month we shall study or read, but that this month we dedicate ourselves to "Thou shalt meditate in it by day and by night," *throughout the year.*