

BOOK REVIEWS

Isaac M. Wise: His Life, Work and Thought, by JAMES C. HELLER
(New York: The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1965).

Reviewed by
Charles S. Liebman

This is an interesting book about the outstanding leader and architect of Reform Judaism in the U. S. It certainly behooves Orthodoxy to know more about American Reform, its leaders, institutions, and thought. It is questionable, however, if Rabbi Heller's book is a particularly good source for our purposes.

In his foreword to the book, Maurice Eisendrath says that "Johnson had his Boswell, Lincoln his Sandburg and now—happily for our own and countless generations of students of all persuasions in the future—Wise has his Heller." This claim is so patiently extravagant and ridiculous that one must think of accolades which the contemporary Orthodox heap upon one another to find an analogy.

In the first place the book is not well written. It lacks style and grace. Secondly, particularly toward the end, the author loses control of his material. Trivia and detail are intertwined with events of significance and the material is disorderly and

chaotic. Thirdly, for all of the book's length, we learn very little about Wise the man, his family life, his predilections and even less of Jewish life in the later years in which he functioned. Fourthly, there are a number of errors in the book. Samuel Sandmel, Provost of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, in an effusive review in the *New York Times*, anticipates unfavorable comments by noting "the inevitable tiny errors, about which scholars will have to make some striking, but also niggling, criticisms." Far be it from this reviewer to be "niggling" so let us move on to a broader discussion.

Isaac Mayer Wise represented what has come to be known as moderate Reform. Wise's ideas found widest acceptance in the west (midwest) and south. His strongest opponents were the radical reformers of the east led by Einhorn, Adler, Kohler, and Hirsch. Wise distinguished his own values from the eastern radicals by commenting that whereas his efforts were directed first to the unity and progress of Judaism toward which end reform

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was just a means, his opponents made reform the end. Not only were they far more radical than Wise in their desire to abrogate traditional authority as expressed in the codes, the Talmud, and the Bible, but they were far less yielding and compromising in their position. Wise, in his effort to convoke a Synod of all Jewish authorities in America, helped author at the Cleveland Conference of 1855, a rather remarkable set of principles. He agreed that the leading principles to govern a future Synod would include the notion that:

1. The Bible as delivered to us by our fathers and as now in our possession is of immediate divine origin and the standard of our religion.
2. The Talmud contains the traditional, legal and logical exposition of the Biblical laws which must be expounded and practiced according to the comments of the Talmud.

Thirty years later, Heller suggests, in part in order to gain support for Hebrew Union College from the radical reformers in the east, Wise agreed to and defended the famous Pittsburgh Platform which among its other points cited the Bible as "reflecting the primitive ideas of its own age" and rejected that portion of Mosaic legislation "not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization."

Wise was a great Jew in the American tradition. He forged the kinds of institutions which were to become the backbone of all Jewish groups in the U. S. A large wealthy synagogue, a seminary for the training of Rabbis, and national organiza-

tions of synagogues and Rabbis. Like most institutional innovators he was a great pragmatist. Within limits he was ideologically eclectic and accommodating. His banner was Judaism and Americanism and their compatibility. We have only to observe the developments in Conservatism and Orthodoxy to acknowledge Wise as a pioneer of Jewish institutional life.

Yet it would be senseless to decry Wise or his values. He was an enormously talented individual who refused numerous opportunities during his early years to leave the field of Jewish professionalism for an academic, legal, or political career. He surmounted a host of early failures and personal attacks. (Although here he appeared to have given as much as he received. Against Leiser, in particular, Wise seems the more intemperate.) Wise devoted his energies to what he thought were the interests of Judaism. He succeeded ultimately because his ideas and aspirations were consonant with the needs and values of most American Jews in the nineteenth century. The sweep of Reform faltered before the impact of the Russian-Polish immigrant for whom Wise showed little sympathy and less understanding. But the alternative to Wise in the nineteenth century were not Yeshivot, learning, and Orthodoxy nor were they really radical Reform and ideological purity and consistency. The alternatives, for most Jews, were assimilation and even Christianity.

A final word might be raised on the problem of writing Jewish History. The readers of TRADITION are, I trust, far removed from that

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world of parochialism which would condemn any book on Judaism written by a non-Orthodox Jew. (We might do well to remind ourselves that there are those today who will not introduce a Hebrew poem or story in a school, regardless of the work's content, if the writer was a non-observant Jew. There are those today who are of the opinion that Jewish History can only be written by those who are dogmatically Orthodox. These people, however, constitute another camp in Judaism.) Nevertheless, a problem remains. The Orthodox Jew looks upon Judaism as the enfolding of a basically singular tradition. Our evaluation of events and ideas is always from the vantage point of the tradition. Of course, in evaluating any phenomenon in Jewish life, in organizing material from the Jewish past, in assessing the impact of an idea or a story we also give expression to our own background, our own ideas, our own values. But through it all runs the effort to assess the material in relation to the tradition. Hence, to the extent that any work ignores the tradition its usefulness is diminished. This is not to say that such a book is wrong, or bad, or should not be read; only that if the event under discussion is to assume its

proper significance for us, it will have to be re-analyzed. And we are far from saying that only Orthodox Jews can analyze Jewish history or literature in this manner.

Given this point of view much of what Heller has to say is of limited utility. For example, in the opening chapters Heller discussed the setting in which Wise was raised. He notes the labor of the Assembly of Jewish Notables and the later Sanhedrin summoned by Napoleon and their response to questions about Judaism which Napoleon put to them. But this discussion loses much of its value for us when there is no mention of the extent to which the Jewish responses were within the tradition or the attitude of European Rabbinic leaders to the Assembly's activity. Similarly, much of what Wise did and said is significant to us only if we know the extent to which he did or did not remain within the bounds of normative Judaism.

I am not blaming Heller for not writing a book he didn't intend to write. I am simply trying to make clear why a great deal of what is written today in and about Jewish life is irrelevant to Orthodox Jews and is likely to be counted as no more than interesting esoterica by Jewish readers in the future.

The Legacy of Maurice Pekarsky, edited by ALFRED JOSPE (Chicago: Quadrangle Press, 1965).

Reviewed by Oscar Groner

It would not be flippant or irreverent to say that this book represents Maurice Pekarsky's search for his "grandfather," a word which he

uses as a paradigm for that which has been missing in Jewish life since the Emancipation — wholeness — שלמות. Jewish existence today is fragmentary and one-dimensional, we substitute the part for the whole

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(read, "Orthodox," "Conservative," "Reform," "Reconstructionist," "Zionist").

This theme is orchestrated in one form or another throughout every essay and lecture in the book. It makes no difference in what order the book is read. *Ein mukdam u'meuchar*. Whether you read the letter from Jerusalem (part II), the personal notes and reflections (part IV), or the institutional analysis of the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundations in relationship to Jewish student life (part III), Pekarsky still confronts us in each section with the same problem: how to restore the wholeness which has been broken and shattered. Implicit is his faith that it can be restored.

"Jewish" to Pekarsky means Jewish and human. (Even the "and" in the above sentence is misleading for it separates, more than it brings together.) Jewish-being and human-being were once co-extensive terms in Jewish life. The closest way to formulate this concept in the English language is Pekarsky's expression: human being-born-Jewish. In the modern world, these terms have now become separated so that Jewish becomes, at best, a fragment of one's humanity, and at worst, it stands in juxtaposition to one's humanity.

Maurice Pekarsky was a Zionist in the classical sense that *Eretz Yisrael* is part of the wholeness of Jewish life. He spent five of the most fruitful years of his life in Jerusalem establishing the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation at the Hebrew University. But even in Jerusalem, he found the same gropings for Jewish identity and definition. Here the confusion was in the substitution of Israeli

for Jew, or in the apt expression that he quotes, במה אני יהודי ובמה
אני ישראלי.

One senses that Pekarsky hoped to find one of the answers in Jerusalem; therefore, the following lines seem to be tinged with a note of sadness:

For essentially, problems which young Israelis face are the same questions which concern young Jews everywhere — the questions about God, man, the Jewish state, and the meaning of their Jewish identity. The accident of geography may affect the context of the questions but not their ultimate effect.

Although the phraseology, *shevirat ha-kelim* or *tikkun* are not used anywhere in the book, the analogy jumps right off of the page. How then to restore Jewish life? Is it shattered beyond recall?

This is the book of a man in search of the answer to this question. Like Franz Rosenzweig, in this regard, he offers no program, but what he does offer is that the search be undertaken with seriousness and with integrity. Pekarsky is never "preachy" or exhortative. When he engages in a dialogue, he really listens — to the partner and to himself. He shares the anguish of the young Jewish intellectual in search of Jewish identity and self-definition. He is one with him.

This posthumous collection is edited by Alfred Jospe, friend and colleague, as an act of *chesed shel emet*. "In order to preserve the spontaneity and immediacy of Pekarsky's speaking style," the material is edited lightly (and one might also add, lovingly). This is all to the good. When Pekarsky spoke to us, he was always evocative. While we cannot hear the

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tonal quality of the words as they come to us from the written page, Pekarsky is still evocative; he still acts as an intellectual gadfly, he still pushes us into dialogue through the printed page, he still asks questions we cannot answer readily. The source of his power is that he speaks with honesty, conviction and concern. You cannot ask for more.

The Book of Jewish Knowledge, by NATHAN AUSUBEL (New York: Crown Publishers, 1964).

Reviewed by Emanuel Feldman

The author of this volume has published several "Treasures" and "Histories" of Jewish life, and by now one had a right to hope that experience alone has made him a more detached and objective writer. A vain hope. For he is not only guilty of constant error and misinformation — for ignorance, in a moment of charity, we could forgive him — he is guilty of matters far more serious: he shamelessly and constantly editorializes, he carelessly parrots long-discredited theories, thus revealing a disdain for Torah and Jewish tradition. For this no mortal reviewer can forgive him.

But let us not editorialize. The book speaks for itself.

From a reading of this book, the following composite picture of the traditional Jew emerges: He performs Mitzvot which are "a staggering burden of religious practices" (p. 294). He has an "ingenuous" attitude (p. 294, p. 368). These "minutiae of observance lead only to a sterile formalism in worship" (p. 294). His notion of reward and punishment "stems from a primitive and childlike conception of morality," which are "crude beliefs" (p. 368). He is "literal-minded," and this type is "always the

most rigorous of ritual observer," and he ingenuously thinks that the righteous in Paradise will eternally "gourmandize" (p. 369). He is a kind of fossil, totally unaware of "advanced religious thinkers" (p. 369, p. 294) who try to teach him Truth. He observes laws like *Pidyon Ha-ben*, whose "primitive origin" is "clearly indicated in the Book of Exodus" (p. 340).

This observant Jew hallows Talmud, although "as is well-known to the informed," the Talmud is "marred by childish notions, trivia and incongruities" (p. 452). Yes, the Talmud "is of a very high order," but it "also contains a large assortment of pointless naivetes, taboos, superstitions, demonic lore, myths . . . and absurd argumentation." The observant Jew's *Mikvah* "may be merely a survival of the primitive purity cult of pre-historic Hebrews," and it had a beneficial effect on the Jewish woman's health in former times. "In the modern world, where the Jewish woman is provided not only with an enlightened viewpoint and with adequate medical knowledge . . . with bathtubs and showers, except for the most hard-core traditionalists among her sisters, she can see no special benefits accruing to her either in physical cleanliness or in spiritual

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purification through immersion in the mikvah."

This traditional Jew follows the Shulchan Arukh, which is revered "in particular by the modern ultra-Orthodox" (p. 406). These "ultra-Orthodox" are of "ever diminishing numbers" (p. 401). For following the Shulchan Arukh, the traditional Jew "expects to be recompensed by God . . . with ego-social and material benefits in this world and in the world to come," (p. 481) not realizing that "among the advanced religious thinkers . . . this conception was frowned upon as degrading" (p. 369).

The traditional Jew is a "small-minded literalist;" a "large number" of such are found "among the pious Jews" (p. 480). This kind of Jew believes that the Torah is of Mosaic authorship, though "for a

long time now informed Jewish scholarship has rejected this notion as being utterly untenable" (p. 42). He adheres to the laws of *Kashrut*, though "in the view of many critics of the dietary laws, the Jews throughout their history evinced an excessive preoccupation with them. These critics assert that *Kashrut* at worst represents a throwback to the primitive practice of totemism . . . at best, they say, its ritualistic observance should be only of trivial importance in the context of serious religious values."

In his preface, the author writes that he has attempted to approach each subject "objectively at all times, without interpreting any aspect of the Jewish religion . . . from a sectarian position of bias."

This reviewer rests his case.

Extra Dimension — A New Approach to the Torah, by MAX MUNK (Jerusalem: Ruben Mass, 1964).

Reviewed by
Nachum Rabinovitch

There are two major schools of thought in our tradition on the conception of miracles and divine intervention in the material world.

One view is summed up by Maimonides in *Ma'amar Techiat Hametim*:

... We try to unify the Torah and reason and we conceive things in a natural order as far as possible, except that which is clearly miraculous and there is no way to explain it — then we must say it is a miracle.

To Nachmanides, on the other hand, the admission of divine Provi-

dence as a factor in shaping events is sufficient to explain all miracles. He and his followers looked also for the effect of Providence upon natural phenomena.

With the progress of scientific knowledge the theories of both the "naturalists" and the "supernaturalists" often become outdated. But the efforts of Biblical exegetes continue. Their speculations, since they are in no way binding, do no damage and they have served the useful function of bringing the Torah closer to the people by use of the current scientific and cultural idiom.

A rather novel and interesting attempt following Nachmanides' ba-

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sic premise, is this little book by Max Munk, *Extra Dimension — A New Approach to the Torah*. Nowadays the mathematical concept of multi-dimensional space has become a vital tool in many physical investigations. The idea of many dimensions is the stock-in-trade not only of every working physicist, but of the science fiction writers as well. Now Max Munk opens new exegetical possibilities by applying the same idea. In his own words, "By extending our three dimensions, it is possible to *assume* (my italics) in this extended space the existence of beings just as substantial as those in our three-dimensional space. Life can be conceived as a substance only

in our extended vision: in the framework of our world it is a process."

The author draws on his wide knowledge of Rabbinic literature for an array of remarkably apt illustrations and supports for his system. He is careful throughout to emphasize the provisional character of his theory, but he tries to build up a fascinating interpretation of Revelation, Providence, miracles and the whole nexus of related subjects. Then he goes on to talk about the symbolic meaning of some of the *mitzvot*, in the light of his higher-dimensional approach.

If only out of curiosity for a kind of science fiction, Mr. Munk's essay should find many readers.

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