

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Leave A Little To God*, by ROBERT GORDIS (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1967).

*Faith And Destiny Of Man*, by JOSEPH H. LOOKSTEIN (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1967).

*Reviewed by*  
William Herskowitz

The Talmudic dictum concerning the *Torah She'baal Peh*, "words delivered orally you are not permitted to set down in writing," is quoted by Rabbi Gordis in discussing his reluctance to publish his sermons, "being conscious that the rhetoric of discourse differs fundamentally from the style appropriate to the printed page." The point is well-taken. There is no question that sermons suffer in being translated from the audio medium to the visual one. The preacher's charisma — his power to weave a spell or create nuances with his voice rhythms and use of gestures — regrettably is missing. While I am not familiar with Rabbi Gordis' speaking style (the inclusion of poems and long prose quotations would indicate an affinity for dramatic readings), I

know that Rabbi Lookstein's skillful use of tone, timing, and brief asides are an integral part of his success as a preacher.

A second difficulty with publishing sermons is that they are not meant to follow one another. Designed to create a mood which will arrest the listener's interest, emotionally and intellectually, sermons are to be savored in single doses where they benefit from a sanctified setting and a minimum of distractions. Ideally, sermonic volumes should come equipped with noise suppressors and a time lock to simulate actual conditions.

The present volumes under review unfortunately are limited to High Holiday *derashot*. Although *Rosh Hashonah* and *Yom Kippur* messages are not confined to the prescribed scriptural portion, there is a propensity to deliver similar themes from year to year. This is

## Book Reviews

especially true of Rabbi Gordis who devotes *Rosh Hashonah* sermons to talks on "The World" with *Kol Nidrei* and *Yizkor* reserved for "Israel" and "Man" respectively. Not only do the messages resemble each other but the identical Biblical verses are often repeated. Preached at yearly intervals to congregants absent the remainder of the year, High Holy Day sermons are invitations to become better acquainted with Judaism or pleas not to abandon the faith. Nonetheless when read in succession they become somewhat repetitious. An addition of Sabbath sermons emphasizing particular *mitzvot* and specific performances would be welcome change.

Rabbi Gordis' sermons are highly organized and designed to lead people progressively toward greater involvement. His *Rosh Hashonah* messages represent the beginning encounter and are an attempt to convince the worshipper that science can not replace religion. He stresses that "scientism," which tries to govern man's life, is a perversion and usurpation of the true role of science which is to provide man with the knowledge and tools for improving and facilitating his own existence. On *Kol Nidrei* night, the talks concentrate on problems threatening Jewish existence today — from delinquency to intermarriage. The focus narrows to the individual, spotlighting his shortcomings during *Yizkor*, urging him to avoid envy, practice forgiveness, and make good use of his old age.

Rabbi Gordis' approach is that of a scholar presenting a reasoned

analysis of a subject. The author relies on logic as a means of persuasion. His essays are lengthy and somewhat formal. Considering the rapidity with which ideas go out of vogue, it is difficult to judge today the aptness of a theme used in past years. "Scientism" is not the real problem now since science has shown it has no panaceas. Today, man is wholeheartedly committed to satisfying his appetites, his main occupation being, as Arthur Miller perceptively put it, "shopping." One is also disappointed by the "cure-alls" offered; more Jewish education and some vague reference to observance.

Rabbi Lookstein, on the other hand, is a homiletician *par excellence*. In a distinctive style, he mixes reason and emotion, anecdotes and picturesque phrasing, humor and pathos into a dramatic whole which entertains while it educates. The sermons are shorter, the approach more direct, and the flavor more traditionally Jewish. Rabbi Lookstein frequently points out practical applications for specific *mitzvot* both between man and God and man and man. Although they are divided into three categories, none of the sections are limited to a topic or to any special holiday service. Rabbi Lookstein's approach can best be summarized by the adage of the late Chief Rabbi Kook, z.l., "Let the old be revived; Let the new be sanctified."

Anyone reading these volumes will be impressed by the preparation put into each sermon. A wide ranging selection of quotes and illustrations, chosen with judicious care, enhances every essay. Rang-

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

ing from traditional Jewish sources to modern personalities, these selections provide a plethora of wisdom and insight as well as thought provoking and enjoyable reading.

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*The 28th of Iyar*, by EMANUEL FELDMAN (New York: The Bloch Publishing Co., 1968).

*Reviewed by Louis Bernstein*

*The 28th of Iyar* is a beautiful book. The term beautiful is rarely applied to books. But I feel that it is an appropriate term for Emanuel Feldman's rapturous description of the glorious days which saw the unification of Jerusalem and the recapturing of the Western Wall.

Rabbi Feldman spent a sabbatical year in Israel during the historic days which preceded the war of six days. He and his family resided in the religious city of Bnei Brak. Prior to the days on which the actual fighting took place, there was a steady flow of foreigners from Israel. Rabbi Feldman and his family decided to remain to share the fate of their people. As one who is concerned with the fate of Jerusalem, he had the rare privilege of witnessing its rejoicing.

The biographical record commences Thursday, May 18th, and continues through Friday, June 9th. On that day, Rabbi Feldman managed to get to the old city of Jerusalem and the Western Wall, by obtaining credentials for a newspaper, *The Southern Israelite*. During these weeks, he records day by day events that took place in Bar Ilan University where he was teaching, in the market stores of Bnei Brak, in the shelters underneath

the apartment houses, and in the home.

Rabbi Feldman invites us to relive with him the events of those days. It is the book of personal identification and touching vicariousness. It is so easy for us to identify ourselves with him and this reviewer cannot completely conceal the sense of envy. Is there a Jew with a soul so dead that would not have desire to share in those great moments of history?

Many volumes have been written about the Six Day War and many more are sure to follow. In addition the warmth of Rabbi Feldman's style, and the modesty of style, the book is exceptional in that it is the only one, to the best of my knowledge, that gives the reader a penetrating insight into life of the religious Jew in a religious community in the times of terrible tension. Bnei Brak is more than a city — it is a concept. It is a city vastly different from Tel Aviv or Haifa and even Jerusalem.

A walk with Rabbi Feldman on Rabbi Akiva Street on a Sabbath is an experience in itself. Religious Jews have contributed the flower of its youth to the defense of the State. Bnei Brak, like any other Israeli city, sent more than its share of young men to fighting fronts. But at home, the Orthodox Jews of Bnei Brak

## Book Reviews

turn to pray and Torah study. Even the non-religious Jews of Israel turned to their ancient faith during those historic days. "Halt-ingly, in a kind of spiritual stammer, but nevertheless steadily, the people here are resurrecting their dominant religious conscience." What is most interesting about all the involving among the religious Jews is that they are not using religion or God as a guarantee for the destruction of their enemies. Instead, they are looking at them-

selves, at their own shortcomings, and are working very hard at spiritual self improvement. There's a marked increase, for example, in giving of charity.

Words that come from the heart penetrate the heart. In the last pages of the book, in which Rabbi Feldman describes his emotions and feelings, he has captured for eternity the glorious moments of some of the greatest days in Jewish history.

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*The American Jews*, by JAMES YAFFE (New York: Random House, 1968).

*Reviewed by* Aaron Rothkoff

James Yaffe has given us an eclectic, wide-ranging analysis of the entire gamut of Jewish life on the American scene. "A Peculiar Element," the Jew imbibes of the American civilization, but never really totally becomes part of it. His Jewish roots, commitments, and preconceived partialities force him to remain "alienated." In the context of this thesis, Yaffe discusses the history, religion, Zionist affiliation, political activities, philanthropy, and national secular organizations of the American Jew.

If not for his conclusion, we could well enjoy the light style and the numerous humorous anecdotes recounted by the author. We could forgive his gross ignorance of basic Jewish ritual, and we could sympathize with his attempts to portray and explain the quests of orthodoxy

on the contemporary scene. However, his final chapter, which is little more than a sophisticated plea for intermarriage and assimilation as the future solution for the dilemmas of American Jews, betrays the author and ruins his entire volume. His concluding portion had to be read twice to fully comprehend the treachery advocated by Mr. Yaffe. Try hard as we could, there simply was no other way to interpret his claim that

The children of mixed marriages, as far as I can see, receive from their parents all those attitudes which we think of as belonging to the Judaic tradition. These parents have the same devotion to education, the same close family ties, the same standards of morality, the same belief in charity, the same liberal views in politics, that the Jewish community has. In every respect — except the formal and religious one — they are bringing up their children as Jews.

## TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

The author proudly describes the three generations of an intermarried Jewish family who have "Passover seders together" and "huge, joyous Christmas dinners," and "nobody has been inside a synagogue or a church — or a UJA banquet hall for many years." These practices, Yaffe indicates, may be "the vanguard for a new Judaism — which probably won't be called Judaism at all. Or Christianity either."

The author's total lack of familiarity with the Jewish rituals is amply revealed by his statement that after one has "eaten an egg or drunk a glass of milk, he must wait a certain number of hours before he dares to eat a steak." Equally distressing is his crude description of the sacred conversion ritual which he characterizes as "humiliating," and describes as taking place before "two learned men." Nonetheless, there is a slight strain of sympathy in Yaffe's portrayal of Orthodoxy on the contemporary scene. He, too, discusses American Orthodoxy's recent "swing to the right." This phenomenon which has recently been the subject of much discussion in *TRADITION* is attributed to a "sense of guilt" which has been engendered by the post World War Two influx of Hasidim to the American shores. His descriptions of Yeshiva boys and Stern girls and their attempts to observe the *Halakhot* which govern the relationships between the sexes are fair and interesting. Anyone intimately familiar with the Yeshiva University faculty would immensely enjoy viewing a Yeshiva luncheon through the au-

thor's eyes. Yaffe writes:

Orthodox Jews say a blessing all the time, in a manner that can give a small shock to somebody who isn't used to it. I attended an informal luncheon at Yeshiva University. At the table with me were a dozen distinguished scholars who engaged in an abstruse discussion of Jewish history and literature throughout the meal. Then, after the coffee, it was time to say the blessing, and in an instant they all turned into swaying, muttering, chanting East Europeans. On and on they went, each man bobbing his head, rolling his eyes, improvising in Hebrew on a theme of his own. There was no time limit. Several of them came to a stop, but the others didn't notice; their prayers weren't finished yet. Those who had stopped, however, turned to one another and resumed, with as much enthusiasm as before, the scholarly discussion they had just interrupted.

Many of the numerous other anecdotes and personal recollections in the volume are equally fascinating. While not agreeing with many of the author's viewpoints, we could well enjoy his research and writings. However, his tragic ending haunts us. Yaffe unknowingly reveals why he fails to truly comprehend the ever-increasing future strength of American Jewry's commitment to Torah in his next to last paragraph. Here he portrays his ability to vicariously feel and think like the various types of Jews he has previously described. As the sole example of his experiencing Orthodoxy, he declares, "I can sway and moan at an Orthodox funeral." Of all the exhilarating, exciting, and joyous expressions of authentic Jewish

## Book Reviews

life, Yaffe selects the funeral. Instead of a *Simchat Torah hakafa*, a *Purim Chagigah*, or a *Yud Tet Kislev* gathering at Lubavitch, the author chooses to identify himself with Orthodoxy — at a funeral. If

this is his gloomy concept of the Orthodox moment with which to commiserate, then we can well understand why his ultimate vision for American Jewry is so dismal, shocking, and disappointing.

### REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

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