

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Morality, Halakha and the Jewish Tradition* by SHUBERT SPERO (Ktav–Yeshiva University Press). 381 pages. \$24.95

*Reviewed by*  
Arnold Ages

It has become fashionable in recent years, especially among the circles associated with Yeshayahu Leibowitz, to deny not only the primacy of ethics and morality within Judaism but to assert that they play no role whatsoever in Jewish religious philosophy. Shubert Spero's magisterial inventory of morality within the fabric of Judaism from the Biblical matrix through the Talmudic literature to current corpus of rabbinic thought will serve as a useful antidote to that excessively narrow view of Jewish law and tradition. In assessing the presence and dimension of specifically moral strains within Judaism Spero explores thoroughly the basic philosophical questions relating to definition, i.e., the difference between morality and ethics and place of morality within legal structures.

After his generous preamble the author moves into an exegetical exercise which shows that the Torah was not merely aware of moral categories as differentiated from legal ones but was conscious of their special significance. Spero suggests several proofs to validate the thesis that the Torah looked upon morality with special favor: rewards are prescribed in the Pentateuch primarily for those *mitsvot* which have ethical resonances; the Ten Commandments and their primacy in the Scriptural canon bespeak the importance of morality because more than half of them concern that domain.

In stressing the uniqueness of morality from the Jewish perspective, Spero draws some very fine distinctions

in order to demonstrate the superiority of Israel's ethos over that of its contemporaries. In this regard the author uses an unusual argument. He says that the pagan nations also had complicated systems of jurisprudence. In that regard both Israel and her neighbors were similar. For Spero, however, Israel's grandeur lies in the fact that her morality was superior to that of other nations.

In parsing the quality of Israel's unique moral posture among the nations the author astutely observes that whereas ethical systems in antiquity were based on perceptions of wisdom, Israel's ethical postulates emerged from the prophetic voice. Spero buttresses his arguments by pointing to the prophetic literature to show that while the prophets did not condemn sacrifices per se, they were appalled by insincere offerings without substance. He goes on further to argue that the major thrust of the prophetic message is moral and that it is involved in the national destiny of the Jewish people, that is to say, that Israel's future depends primarily on its ethical conduct rather than its adherence to ritual and ceremony.

In surveying the Talmudic literature the author takes great pains to identify the ethical strands which permeate that body of law and lore. He acknowledges, of course, that in the rabbinic dialectic morality was channelled halakhically into Aggada—which Spero defines deftly as an approach used for moral teachings not reducible to behavioral rules. He also furnishes some very striking examples of the ways in which the

## Book Reviews

rabbis introduced new interpretations into the ideal of personal morality. This area produces some of the most valuable insights in his essay: the analysis of the role of holiness and its all-embracing character is an especially valuable one. Spero points out that the rabbis were conscious of the moral impulse and quotes relevant passages from the Talmud to illustrate the argument; “He who wishes to be saintly (chasid), let him fulfill the words of Avot . . . let him fulfill the words of Damages,”—is one such citation.

The author observes that in the rabbinic world there was no exact counterpart, linguistically speaking, for the term morality. The phrases “*derekh erez*” and “*ben adam lechavero*” are among several adduced by the author to examine the rabbis’ reference points to the idea conveyed by the English words ethics and morality.

The final sections of Spero’s study deal with the presence of moral concerns in the more recent rabbinic literature and with the whole question of Jewish morality versus universal concepts of that idea. It is a real joy to watch Spero confront the great Kantian hypothesis as it is expressed in the categorical imperative. Spero is daring in taking on the giant of Koenigsberg but he does so with courage and aplomb, condemning the historical infatuation which Jewish thinkers have had in their attempts to reconcile Judaism with Kant’s ideas about morality—

as if it were necessary to validate Judaism through him.

Equally daring are Spero’s exertions on the question of free will and determinacy, the bugbear that inevitably intrudes into any discussion of ethical acts. The author surveys this question with admirable detachment as he records the rabbinic teaching about the “scourge of love,” Maimonides’ philosophical abstractions on the question and Rav Soloveitchik’s *teshuva*—laden response to the same issue. This reviewer was especially impressed with Spero’s footnote apparatus on this conundrum—in which he disserts on the disutility of quantum mechanics in solving what is basically a theological problem.

In assessing Spero’s contributions to the question of morality within Judaism there is one small but niggling question which remains in this reviewer’s mind. Granted that morality and ethics are embedded both in the Biblical and Talmudic dialectic, is it correct necessarily to isolate them as entities independent of Halakhah? The moment this exercise is accomplished an antinomian spirit inevitably animates the discourse—with a resulting fragmentation of the edifice of Judaism. By stressing the primacy of morality within Torah does not the author unconsciously promote the same interpretation of Scripture as that endorsed first by Christians and then latterly by liberal Jews?

*Journey to Tradition* by MICHAEL GRAUBART LEVIN (Ktav Publishing House).

Reviewed by  
Joseph Grunblatt

The first thing that must be said about the book is that it is delightful reading. I do not consider myself a literary critic and I do not know whether the book

merits the term literature, but it is very effective three-dimensional writing. The characters are real, the events are vividly portrayed and the points are unmistak-

## Book Reviews

ably made. The author claims that the purpose of the book is to give a glimpse of Orthodoxy to the secular Jew and to impress the Orthodox Jew with the trials and tribulations of a *Baal Teshuva*. I believe he has succeeded on both counts. His description of Orthodoxy is sympathetic (in spite of his “backsliding”) and his facts and their interpretations are mostly accurate, with a few exceptions. For instance, the statement that you wait after meat to eat dairy but never the other way around is obviously incorrect because there are hard cheeses after which one does have to wait.

A much more serious indiscretion is a theological statement ascribed to his favorite Orthodox rabbi. I have no reason to doubt that the quote is genuine; one of the charms of the book is the author’s unrestrained honesty. He quotes the rabbi saying, “A fundamentalist belief in this miracle or that catastrophe as described in its (the Bible’s) pages is not a prerequisite for being counted as an orthodox Jew. The critical thing is behavior, whether one acts in accordance with its laws or not.” That may sit well with a Franz Rosenzweig, or with Conservative Judaism, but not with Orthodoxy. Jewish Orthodoxy may not be dogmatic in the Christian sense, but we do have our principles of faith. The veracity of Torah and *Torah min hashamayim* (the Torah is directly from God) are unchangeable principles of Orthodoxy. We shall return to this point a little later because it is very revealing about Michael Graubart Levin and his odyssey.

Levin draws a very vivid picture of the existential condition of a young person in the *teshuva* process, from the hesitant beginnings to the intense peaks. But what I personally learned, as a “frum from birth” Jew, is what I and my lifestyle look like to a secular Jew. He views it alternately with puzzlement, disbelief, humor, or revulsion. That would be very helpful in outreach, or even in an attempt to achieve a *modus vivendi* between the two communities.

I would like to turn from the avowed purpose of *Journey to Tradition* to its essence, Michael Graubart Levin. The last chapter is obviously the “punch line.” It opens with the statement, “Brace yourself for the surprise ending: I didn’t live ‘happily ever after’ as an orthodox Jew.” In all honesty I was not surprised—disappointed somewhat, yes, but not surprised. Let us first look briefly at his two major complaints.

First, the mistreatment of a “street person” at a communal *seder* in an elegant East Side Orthodox synagogue, implying the lack of ethical practice within Orthodoxy. I will not apologize by saying that that particular synagogue or rather that particular group of people who ostracized the “street man” at the *seder* are not necessarily representative either of Orthodoxy or Orthodox ethics. (By the way, community *sedarim* are not the typical Orthodox “thing.”) It is true undoubtedly that *ba’alei teshuva*, judging by their own newly gained excitement, expect every “frum from birth” Jew to be in a constant state of religious fervor, and every individual Orthodox Jew to be a paragon of absolute virtue. I recall reading the remark of a well-known Reform rabbi who turned to *shemirat hamitsvot* (observance of the commandments), to the effect that “it is one thing to get excited about *kashrut*, it is another thing to meet the kosher butcher.” (No offense to kosher butchers!) It is a lack of realism that can be understood and forgiven. Torah is a way of life, an opportunity, “a good bet” but no “automatic.” There is no magic in Torah and *mitsvot*, only a “way.” During the second Temple there was much Torah and lots of *mitsvot* and yet the Talmud readily admits that the Temple was destroyed because of *sinat hinnam* (unwarranted animosity towards one another).

The second indictment is much more serious and painful—the lack of acceptance of the *ba’al teshuvah* in the “frum” society, *à la* “would you want him to marry your daughter?” This is

true in spite of all the accolades for the *ba'al teshuvah* and the professed commitment to "outreach." We often treat him like a "morally reformed" AIDS victim who is tolerable, but still a bit contagious. The pain of loneliness for one bereft of the old ties of family and friends, and the clinical acceptance without the embrace in the newly found society, are keenly felt by the *ba'al teshuvah*. Again, while the malaise is not as all-pervasive as the author suggests, it is bad enough for us to plead guilty and be ashamed.

But after all is said and done, many *ba'alei teshuva* with all the complaints and disappointments do adjust and become good Orthodox Jews. I can see the author reading my review and saying, "Here goes another 'frum' Jew, and a rabbi at that, who questions my sincerity and is ready to argue that my 'conversion' was not an authentic 'conversion'." My response: wrong on the first count and correct on the second. I do not for a moment doubt the author's sincerity in his search for and discovery of tradition. But let us go back to his first 12 days at Ohr Someach, a *ba'al teshuvah* yeshiva. The approach was, "We do not expect you to change your beliefs overnight; try to experience Orthodox Judaism even if you have to proceed as if our premises are correct." That is what the author did

and this is where he remained! He discovered the possible solutions to Jewishness and his own existential dilemmas, but he never made the leap to the Orthodox faith. He became experientially Orthodox but not ideologically. By his own admission, until the very end, he was not quite sure what he believed in other than the conviction that this is the right way to live and to be a Jew. What is experientially acquired can be experientially discarded. A deeply convinced Jew is not readily deterred by bad experiences. He really lived what that Orthodox rabbi told him: "It ain't necessarily so, but do!"

Some years ago a Conservative rabbi from Philadelphia complained bitterly that he works very hard to "turn his young people on" to religion. The moment he succeeds they leave him for "some Orthodox guru in New York." That is the case very often, to the great chagrin of liberal Judaism.

What happened to Michael Levin was the opposite—and that is rare and surprising. He was turned on by the Orthodox and he became, without knowing it even now, a fairly good Conservative "bal habos" who appreciates Orthodoxy enough not to view it as a threat and with disdain. In conclusion: it is a very good book and I highly recommend it.

#### REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

ARNOLD AGES is a professor at the University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario.

RABBI JOSEPH GRUNBLATT is Spiritual Leader of the Queens Jewish Center in New York.