Book Reviews

***The Juggler and the King: An Elaboration of the Vilna Gaon's Interpretation of the Hidden Wisdom of the Sages* by AHARON FELDMAN (Philip Feldheim, Inc., 1990).**

Reviewed by
Matis Greenblatt

Many years ago, this reviewer asked Rabbi Aharon Feldman, then the Rosh Yeshiva of Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem, what approach he used to impart the basic principles and worldview of Judaism to the young *ba'ale teshuva* at Ohr Somayach, coming as they did from myriad backgrounds and life experiences. He replied that his chief reservoir of material came from the writings of the Gaon of Vilna; he himself had found great inspiration in the writings of the Gaon and therefore used them for his disciples as well. *The Juggler and the King* is obviously a labor of love reflecting the author's ongoing attachment to the Torah of the Gaon.

The immediate purpose of the book is to provide an elaboration of the Gaon's unraveling of the riddles and mysteries of two groups of *aggadata*: the Rabba bar Bar Hana stories in *Bava Batra* 73a-74b and the Elders of Athens riddles in *Bekhorot* 8b. After years of careful study of the Gaon's analysis of these *aggadata*, Rabbi Feldman presents in expanded form the Gaon's solution and their implications for everyday life. On the surface these *aggadata* are incredible and bizarre, but with the help of the Gaon's vast erudition and with his own meticulous skill, Rabbi Feldman works out every detail of each story, revealing a complex tapestry that reflects and projects a *weltanschauung* covering the conflicts and struggles of a Jew's life. In his introductory comments, the author emphasizes that his purpose was not merely to provide literary and intellectual enjoyment or even elevation; rather it is nothing less than that of incorporating the book's ideas into the reader's heart, mind and daily activities.

Thus, on the one hand, the book is intellectually engrossing; like a detective story, it puts together the pieces of these seemingly inscrutable stories into meaningful wholes. On the other hand, it deals with the nature of the Jew, his place in the world and the purpose of his existence; the conflict between man's self-centeredness and yearning for self-aggrandizement and his sensual and spiritual natures. Besides the usual table of contents, the book contains a Table of Scope of Chapters covering six broad areas: God and his Providence; Man; The *Yetzer Hara*: General Topics; The *Yetzer Hara*: Specific Aspects; Torah and its Study in Jewish History. Each broad topic breaks down into numerous subtopics.

As is well known, the Gaon was a master of the Kabbala; most of his writings were commentaries on Kabbalistic works. However, his explications of these two groups of *aggadata*, as far as I can determine, involve basic principles of Judaism and various *mussar* concepts. The simple meaning of the stories is not obvious, yet the Gaon's approach to these *aggadata* is understandable to any reasonably intelligent Jew. Why then did the rabbis couch these stories in non-obvious garb (assuming they were not employing terms and images which were understood by their contemporaries but whose meaning has since been lost)? Did Hazal wish to puzzle us or enlighten us?

In his chapter "An Overview of the *Aggadata*", Rabbi Feldman attempts to deal with this problem. And, in an appendix to the book, he provides a valuable translation of Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto's essay on the *aggadot*, which also deals with this problem.

The answer which is most reasonable to this reviewer is that the obvious, allegorical nature of the stories provides for rich multiple layers of meaning not possible in a straightforward statement of principles. But there is something deeper; allegory and poetry attempt to communicate the fullness of experience, stretching language to the breaking point. In the commandment to write the Torah (Deut 31:19), Torah is described as "*shira* (song)." Even the prose sections of the Torah fall under this rubric. This is because the nature of Torah is such that it puts us in touch with the totality of being.

Let us cite at least one of the stories the book discusses, "The Wave and the Club":

> Said Rabbi bar Bar Hana: Those who go down to the sea have told me that the wave which sinks a ship seems to have a fringe of white fire at its tip, but that when one strikes it with a club engraved with the name of God . . . it dies down (page 21).

Rabbi Shmuel Edels, the Maharsha (*ad loc.*), saw the sea as representing the nations of the world, the waves, the suffering and *Galut*, the ship, the Jewish people adrift in *Galut*, and the club with God's name, as God, protector of His people and their redeemer from *Galut*.

Rabbi Feldman presents the Gaon's interpretation as follows: Man's passage through this world is like a voyage across the sea to a distant land. The sea through which he travels is his physical existence on earth; the ship which transports him is his body; and his appointed destination is the reward of the world-to-come. The ship of man has a difficult journey. The sea, the physical world, roils with storms and turbulence—the hazards that face every living thing in the imperfect world of the physical. The frail craft of human life could capsize at any moment. But the greatest danger of all is man's evil inclination, the *yetzer hara*.

Physical suffering can be devastating, but it attacks only the body, leaving the soul unscathed. A meaningful life can be carried on somehow even when the body is disabled or racked with pain, for the soul that defines man's existence is still intact. The *yetzer hara*, though, is the "wave that sinks the ship." Man's evil inclination rarely portrays sin as a forbidden act. Instead, it seeks to convince man that the sinful act was never forbidden. The wave of the *yetzer hara* has fire at its tip: First it fans the flames of human passion; but in order to achieve its goal, it masquerades as an emissary of pure intentions. Its fire is tipped with virtuous white.

Rav Kook (*Commentary on Aggadot of Rabba bar Bar Hana*, printed in *Maamare haReiya*) saw the sea as representing wisdom, the waves as powers of defilement and the boat as the Jewish people. The fringe was our beginnings before we sinned and went into exile; the club is the integration of compassion and judgement in this world and the next. The parable represents Christianity's contention that *Galut* proves that God has forsaken us, whereas in actuality it is the vehicle through which the Jewish people spreads the knowledge of God throughout the world.

Here we have three distinct interpretations, each of which is conceivable. Perhaps they are all true.

The Gaon's commentary is contained in less than one page. (The volume includes the full original text of the stories and the Gaon's commentary.) Rabbi Feldman expands and expounds the brief remarks of the Gaon into a ten page closely knit *mussar shmuess*, all the while keeping close to the text.

And so the author does in 27 chapters, each of which is a gem of intellectual thoroughness and subtlety. More importantly, though, the book springs from the heart and soul of its author and "words that come from the heart enter the heart."

***The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence*, by ERVIN STAUB (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 336 pp.**

***Why Genocide? The Armenian and Jewish Experiences in Perspective*, by FLORENCE MAZIAN (Iowa State University Press, 1990), 291 pp.**

Reviewed by
Ben Eilbott

Both Ervin Staub, a psychologist, and Florence Mazian, a sociologist, use the Holocaust and the genocide of Armenians in their comparative analyses of the reasons that individuals—and the nations they represent and for whom they profess patriotic fervor—engage in genocide. (In addition, Staub examines the genocide implicit in the Khmer exterminations of Cambodians and the group violence intrinsic to the disappearances of citizens during a succession of Argentinean governments.) It is somewhat strange how Mazian, whose book was published in 1990, made no reference to Staub's 1989 volume, though documentation for quotes and hypotheses in both books frequently cites identical sources.

The authors are uniquely equipped—and burdened—for their work. Staub was a six-year-old Jewish boy in Budapest in 1944, the year the Nazis deported several hundred thousand Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz after at last imposing their Final Solution on a country in which until then it had eluded them. Mazian is of Armenian descent; many of her relatives were victims of the 1894-96 or the 1915-23 Armenian genocidal massacres. Each finds the roots for genocide and group violence in the historical, psychological, sociological, and cultural background of the murderers and their victims.

Staub's emphasis throughout *The Roots of Evil* is on what he calls "difficult life conditions" and "certain cultural characteristics that may "generate Psychological Processes and motives that lead a group to turn against another group." The influence of culture; the psychology of the perpetrators, as individuals and a group; and the progress along what he defines as the "continuum of destruction" are the other major and encompassing underpinnings of his study.

His elaboration of the factors that can lead nations to contemplate genocide is meticulous; his analysis can be said to be correct by the very definition of his categories, each of which is amply documented in the examination of its place along the genocidal arrow, and by references to still other historical massacres that buttress them. Examples from his four "situations" support his judgments.

The Khmer Rouge slaughter of perhaps two million other Cambodians may on the scale of death have outweighed, or been at least equal to, the Armenian murders. Theirs was the all too familiar "example of human cruelty perpetrated to fulfill a vision of a better world: anyone bound to the old ways by former status or present behavior was to die, to make this better world possible." Pol Pot's genocidal

actions had their roots in class, cultural and economic ideologies; the fact that the murders were internecine made them no less genocidal. In Argentina, "the culture of the Argentine military and historical conditions created in part by the military gave rise to mass killing. . . . Predisposing characteristics joined with economic crises and political violence to create instability, chaos, and fear." Indifference to the killings in both countries was pandemic, though President's Carter administration provided some support for the persecuted in Argentina.

It is difficult to disagree with Staub's interpretations or his conclusions; they verge on the incontrovertible. What must be noted is that some of his analysis is facile, or based on post hoc reasoning—arguing from mere temporal sequences to cause and effect relationships. It is also true that while Staub's focus is on the roots of evil, he should be obligated to provide the reader with at least some faith that behavior can be modified and ways established that would create a continuum of benevolence rather than of destruction. Success of such efforts would preclude the possibility of genocidal action, or at a minimum increase the likelihood that the efforts at national death missions be met by early resistance. But I submit that it is indeed time, and urgent, to focus on whether the language of the examinations, the analyses, and the conclusions, will ever be translated into a vocabulary that can assure us of being unafraid of victimization, or whether the tens of thousands of studies like Staub's and Mazian's have become luxuries we can no longer afford.

Having given us a persuasive etiology of genocide, Staub is less convincing in his evaluation of why nations and national groups that have faced his "difficult life conditions" and other criteria for entering the "continuum of destruction" have chosen not to pursue negative goals. Nor is he able, except in generalities, to explain the frequent presence of those in the inside group who, unlike their next-door neighbors, are not seduced or intimidated, and, often at extraordinary risk, either refuse to participate in genocidal acts or resist them actively and in some instances openly. It is as though Staub believed that our roots grew predominantly to evil, as though the inhuman in our personalities (and the author cites sources to support genetic coding for such inhumanity) could be more easily addressed and chillingly analyzed, while our selfless and generous motives remained puzzling!

I am confident that Staub—and Mazian, as we will see later—were convinced that their books, in adding to an understanding of the past, could contribute to a reshaping of the future. That is the universal cliche with which the world lives: as a result of doing no more than believing it, perhaps, the world dies. It is in this aspect of his book—the prescription for a better world—that Staub's extrapolations and recommendations border on the ingenuous. Since his style is excellent and his evaluation of causes persuasive, the unfortunate conclusion to be drawn from his almost lame prescriptions is that he has failed to convince even himself that his readers will learn from his lessons.

He tells us that "to reduce the probability of genocide and war, helping must be inclusive, across group lines, so that the evolving values of caring and connection ultimately include all human beings . . . Business people and engineers can give up some profits to train unskilled youth. Many people could adopt teenage mothers. . . . Parents need to focus responsibility on the child for others' welfare. . . ."

The thoughts and the words cannot be faulted; how to translate them into the languages of 1992 has yet to be demonstrated, particularly when Staub himself recognizes that

> At least minimally supportive social conditions are also required, that is, reasonably secure and ordered life circumstances. The benevolence and care that are necessary for positive socialization may be *impossible for parents who cannot fulfill their basic needs for food, shelter, stability and psychological support. Minimal social justice is therefore necessary.* (Emphasis mine)

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Why Genocide proposes very similar roots, though in Mazian's terms the focus is on six basic and recurrent necessary and sufficient aspects: The Creation of Outsiders; Internal Strife; Powerful Leadership with Territorial Ambitions Forming a Monolithic and Exclusionary Party; Destructive Uses of Communication; Organization of Destruction; and the Failure of Multidimensional Levels of Social Control. There is unavoidable overlap among her categories and striking similarities appear between them and those of Staub's major concepts, and, like his, her emphasis is on the why rather than the why not. Nor are her prescriptions for what she calls "social control" more persuasive.

Although Mazian's analysis of the factors producing the Holocaust is extensive, it is flawed by being derivative and thus more reportorial than analytical. It is also repetitive and in too many instances superficially written (or proofread), with frequent grammatical errors and an occasional factual lapse. Nevertheless we are presented with an interesting and disturbing study. It is not difficult for her, as she traces the path that led to the death camps, to apply to it her six major criteria, and to establish their role in the movement along the genocidal route—once it was taken and not interdicted. She sees Hitler as "the creator and very being of Nazism, and at the center of the war against Jewry," with the "ideas and ideology of [his] party providing the basic organizational embryo that would grow into one of the most frightening institutions known to the world." While she stresses the Fuehrerprinzip, the governing axiom of the Nazi Party, she does not neglect the cultural, religious, and political history that she feels made inevitable the blind obedience of most Germans to that principle of leadership. And as she views that obedience, if not enthusiasm, through the prism of her major hypotheses, she reviews the known elements that brought Germany—and all those whom it reassured or converted, or by whom it was admired, merely observed, or actually emulated—to be the ultimate incarnation of evil.

Her major focus, understandably, is on Armenian genocide; she is meticulous in her documentation of dates, geographical locations, reports, statistics, and, most important, of those responsible, providing exhaustive historical examination of the massacres of 1894-96 under Sultan Abdul-Hamid II, and, beginning in 1916, after the Young Turks had assumed control of the country, of the extermination of in excess of a million more. As someone of Armenian ancestry, she cannot be entirely dispassionate in her indictment of Turks, Kurds, and, for that matter, of most of those nations who in the late 19th and early 20th centuries considered themselves to be "civilized." But, then, how dispassionate are we in our documentation of the nature of death and life in Treblinka, or in our analysis of the motives driving Hitler, Goebbels, or Julius Streicher?

Parenthetically, it is morbidly fascinating to read repeatedly about the role played (not played) in the Armenian tragedy by the US Ambassador to Turkey, Henry Morgenthau, Sr., father of the Morgenthau who was FDR's Secretary of the Treasury

during World War II, and who finally, if much too late, was persuaded to assist in the attempt to rescue the remaining Jews under Nazi control. As US Ambassador, Henry, Sr. observed, reported to his government, and on occasion enunciated a value judgment or two. In several books the horrors of what he had witnessed and reported were eventually published for the world to weep over—years after the fact. How close Henry, Jr. came to being a clone of that approach!

No attempts were made by Morgenthau, Sr. or any other representative of the major powers to dissuade the Turks from their genocidal mania, to threaten sanctions or reprisals or, with very few exceptions, to offer sanctuary. Chief among the observing villains, ironically, was Germany, for whom Turkey was a valued ally in its World War I adventure, and whose own political agenda in opposition to Russian and French and English interests made the Armenians desirably expendable. Nor do France and England escape the most severe censure; Mazian's documentation and evaluation of French and British preoccupation with their division of the Mid-East territory they expected to acquire as a result of victory over Germany exquisitely lays out for us the total insignificance, when considered in the political scheme of things even among the so-called democracies, of the existence of entire nations, much less of that of ethnic or religious groups. That of course brings us full circle to the history of the creation of Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon and Jordan, to Turkey's recent belated offer of air bases, to poison gas and Kurds and oil—and, ultimately and inevitably, to Israel, Zionism, and Jewry.

The parallels between the Holocaust and the Armenian annihilation are worse than frightening. Official government-planned and implemented policies of extermination as final solutions; death camps and forced death marches; primed local conquered or non-indigenous populations acting as surrogate executioners; religious fanatics appealing to God as they strip human beings of their human faces, replacing them with sub- or non-human terror masks which must be struck at and destroyed; appeal to the noble aim of the race or of a nation's greater good and destiny that require the excision of the malignancy that is the stranger and the despoiler in one's midst—the comparisons go on, odious and ghastly.

Unavoidably, we must return to the question so poorly addressed by both authors. Mazian asks, *Why Genocide?*; Staub searches for *The Roots of Evil.* But the gap between explanation and the inexplicable is the gap between conjecture and ashes, between learned sociological hypotheses and Babi Yar. The stage can be set, and both Staub and Mazian set it. The plot, scenery, actors, and, indeed, their very words, are reproduced and dissected and analyzed with learned arguments and documented in details.

Yet, some men kill, and some do not. Some acquiesce and some do not. Some participate, and some, risking death, do not. Ultimately almost all look the other way, refusing even to observe what they see coming from elsewhere. Therein lies the gap. What is it that makes that difference, that triggers that reluctance, that finds the inner button to be pushed in the face of terror and almost certain death? What are the factors, what is the continuum, that can lead to defiance? In *Township Fever,* a play based on the 1987 railworkers' strike against the South African government, the playwright Mbongeni Ngema observed:

> I watched the defense showing how, in a situation of intensifying conflict, group polarization can push accepted standards of behavior beyond the norm. I spoke to the accused. I read the court records and became [aware] that I, or indeed

anyone of us . . . might well have participated in the deed. "There but for the grace of God go I," I thought.

Genocide is what, where and when we make it; the who and the how are subordinate to that awful fact. Exclusionary views of the Holocaust as *the* genocide are casuistry, a specious *pilpul* that dishonors the martyred Jewish dead. The evil root is culpability—by the perpetrators, and by the onlookers who do not interfere, protest, or extend help and the means of defense to victims, stateless or not, who have been targeted for death so that others may live life in the manner they wish.

We must learn to locate the evil root and destroy it before it grows; to prepare the soil in which a different kind of root can take hold; and to gain the insight into what has always made it possible for some to understand the sharp distinction between talking morality and applying it. Until then, the seeds for genocide, always there to be planted in fertile soil by some Saddam Hussein or other, will continue to take evil root, grow, and bloom. The flowers, beautiful to most, will destroy the ignored, dishonored, and unsupported few who recognize that, if not rooted out, the obverse of this beauty is the poison of genocide.

REVIEWERS IN THIS ISSUE

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