

Book Reviews

Philo Judaeus: His Universe of Discourses, by NAOMI G. COHEN, (Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Mein, Berlin, Bern, New York, Paris, Wien, 1995).

Reviewed by
Walter S. Wurzbürger

In this impressive volume, Naomi G. Cohen succeeds in reclaiming Philo Judaeus for Jewish thought. She portrays him as an advocate of the integration of Judaism with Hellenism who utilizes his familiarity with both worlds to persuade his contemporaries to adhere to normative Judaism. By translating Judaism into the language of Greek philosophical categories, he hoped to pull his contemporaries into the orbit of Torah—both belief in its tenets and observance of its laws.

Because he wrote in Greek, Philo's writings were largely regarded as totally irrelevant to the development of Jewish thought. Unfortunately, Dr. Samuel Belkin's study, *Philo and the Oral Law*, which demonstrated Philo's familiarity with halakha, was given short shrift in the academic world. Even Harry Austryn Wolfson's *Philo*, which attempted to show that all of medieval philosophy (including Jewish) was built upon Philo's foundations, failed to make a dent in the widespread prejudice that the latter was essentially a Hellenistic thinker who had little knowledge of Judaism.

Dr. Cohen refutes these arguments by documenting that, even on the questionable assumption that Philo could not read Hebrew, he was certainly familiar with numerous orally transmitted *midrashim*. As a preacher to Greek-speaking Jews, he drew upon midrashic traditions which circulated among Alexandrian Jewry long before they were recorded in rabbinic literature.

Dr. Cohen's *Philo Judaeus: His Universe of Discourses* revolves largely upon an exposition, analysis and commentary on *Spec. Leg.* IV 132-150. She shows that his conception that the Decalogue contains all the 613 *mitsvot* was, at the time of Philo, taken for granted by the Jewish community. She offers cogent arguments for the view that his term "unwritten law" refers to the entire corpus of *Torah she-be-al pe*, which includes ordinances enacted by latter-day rabbinic authorities as well as various traditional customs.

The author notes in her foreword that her father-in-law, Rabbi Dovid Cohen, a towering figure widely known as *HaRav haNazir*, had urged her “to bring Philo back into the library of committed Jews.” The scholarship displayed in this major contribution to Philonic literature is an important step towards the realization of this objective. We are looking forward with great anticipation to the promised sequel to this masterful study of Philo, who emerged in this volume as the first exponent of what is now called *Torah im derekh erets*.

On Judaism, by EMANUEL FELDMAN, (*Artscroll, New York, 1995*).

Reviewed by
Yitzchok Adlerstein

There is good news and bad news in the predictable popularity of *On Judaism*. The book will have a most positive impact on the lives of many of its readers, and we will feel comfortable offering it to non-observant acquaintances as a substitute for the time we often do not have to offer them. It is an introduction to Judaism that is substantive, witty, contemporary, compelling, and passionate without preaching or condescending. Earlier primers were often detached road-maps of the landscape of practical observance. *On Judaism* goes its own way, being much more an argument for the reasonableness and attractiveness of the Torah lifestyle than a how-to manual.

The cause for concern is that the effectiveness of the book is a powerful indicator of the intellectual ruggedness, or lack thereof, of our generation. It speaks to people who care about the bottom line, not only on their balance sheets, but in addressing the problems of life. To be sure, there are notable exceptions, but Rabbi Feldman is betting that the majority of Jewish sideline-sitters will be best served by an elegant distillation of issues, by cogent crystallizing rather than step-by-step discovery and rigorous analysis.

In *On Judaism*, Dr. Feldman the thinker moves aside before Rabbi Feldman the quintessential pastoral leader, who knows well his flock. More accurately, he is forced into expressing himself through incisive sound bite, though all that he says is informed by classic rabbinic commentary. Two realities, I suspect, prompted the author to suppress his full depth and intellectual reach, and opt, on balance, for maximum impact. Decades ago, an *adam gadol* counseled me not to worry about becoming an effective apologist, to spend less time developing sophisti-

cated defenses for the foundations of Judaism. Decades of working with *ba'alei teshuva* and potential *ba'alei teshuva* have shown him to be essentially correct. At least in my experience, the overwhelming majority of intelligent and academically well-heeled returnees do not have patience for carefully crafted, annotated presentations, systematically comparing and contrasting the thoughts of savants from other places. This is a generation of fast-food, quick-fix solutions. They want the abstract; they lack the patience to plow through the article.

A second reason is surely more reassuring, at least to those of us attempting to win over the many to halakhic commitment. More and more often, people today do not need to be intellectually made over in order to embrace observance. They desperately want to be convinced, but ask to be reassured that they are not becoming unthinking puppets. By the time a person is a candidate for return, often without knowing it, he or she is already full of yearnings and proclivities in that direction. Demonstrate that you have carefully thought through the issues yourself, explode a few myths, show yourself to be caring, offer a plate of *cholent*, and you are well on your way to success. *On Judaism* speaks to the reality that workers on the front lines of *kiruv* these days see few fire-fights between intellectual titans.

The first chapter works hard to assure the reader that he or she is not being propositioned to change behavior. Do not believe this for a moment. The book is an open invitation to explore observance, or perhaps a series of rhetorical body-blows, designed to lure the reader into increased openness and study. (Indeed, this is the note on which the book ends, the final call to arms: *zil gemor* — go out and study!)

On Judaism is organized as a sequence of conversations between a rabbi and David, an inquiring and searching young man. The dialogue spans most of the expected areas that puzzle the neophyte: God, prayer, Torah, holiness, mitzvot, Shabbat, kashrut, interpersonal relationships and the roles of Jews and non-Jews. Given the fascination so many spiritual seekers have with the mystical, and the steady defection from our ranks of young people convinced that spirituality can be found only in Tibetan caves, it is surprising that there is no consideration of the role of *Kabbala* in Jewish life. Absent as well is a defense of the role of *korbanot* in the Torah, an item that almost inevitably is a sticking point in the growth of a newcomer towards acceptance of Orthodoxy.

The conversational device confers a relaxed informality on the book; it immediately assures that you can read it rather than study it. This simplicity is disarming. Rabbi Feldman's quick retorts are informed by a mastery of rabbinic commentary. The conversational mode also sup-

ports a point-and-counterpoint development, which is one of the book's strongest features. The student is permitted to respond to each new argument with all the objections that the reader might likely have. The author can follow through by immediately addressing the reader's hesitations through his surrogate character.

There is a price that he pays for this device. To keep up the artifice, he has to throw in all sorts of niceties: reassurances to the young student, back-patting, and a constant march of artificial discussion openers. The skeptical students to whom I offer the very same arguments rarely respond with the same warm endorsements that "David" offers. "Now what is that supposed to mean!" is much closer to my reality.

Rabbi Feldman is at his best in delivering adroit bon-mots that cap off discussions of a few paragraphs' length, rather than long and probing discourse. The results have not only immediate impact, but long-term appeal. Here are some of the verbal bonbons I enjoyed. Why does Shabbat demand complete withdrawal from the weekday routine? "Because you are entering another realm entirely — just as a world-class surgeon or athlete leaves everything behind when he enters the operating theater or the playing field." How should the search proceed, for those who are not even sure if they believe in God? "Perhaps you should 'behave in God,' and then belief in God will inevitably follow." Does Jewish history demonstrate that God should be relied upon to bail out His people? "Although on the surface it may appear that God's checks occasionally bounce, the long-term story is that He has excellent credit and that nothing of His really bounces." Should prayer include persistent requests for pedestrian things? "Tradition teaches us that God is pleased when He is 'noodged.'" Why have many sincere attempts at finding spiritual satisfaction resulted in so many dead ends? "Because this higher yearning within man can be met only by addressing itself to things beyond the physical. If a person is dying of thirst, it is foolish to buy him a new tie." Can mortals really respond to the constant scrutiny and demands of our halakhic system? "Only a human being has the capacity to reach higher, to do not what comes naturally, but what comes supernaturally."

The effectiveness of this book is not limited to the potential *ba'al teshuva*. (Indeed, parts of the book seem to take for granted that the religiously experienced are watching. *Hannuka* and *Purim* are referenced, but their basic story is never told.) Thoughtful, observant Jews will enjoy it as a wonderful spiritual pick-me-upper. It will infuse them with an exhilarating sense of confidence in and enthusiasm for our beliefs.

The famed Alter of Slobodka reportedly commented on the Mishnaic dictum, “Know what to respond to the heretic.” “Which *apikorus!*” he asked. The answer came through an index finger pointed at his own chest. “This one!” *On Judaism* will certainly prove effective in addressing the stirrings within many people.

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