

Current Jewish Periodicals

In *Modern Judaism* (February 1992), Rabbi José Faur compares and contrasts Jewish and pagan/Christian perspectives on persecution, persecutors, and the persecuted in his "Jewish and Western Historiographies: A Post-Modern Interpretation." According to Faur, the Western mind records history from the point of view of the victor and suppresses the victim's point of view. The Jew refused to "collaborate" with his conqueror and insisted upon retaining a victim's view which did not justify the conqueror's oppressive point of view. By accepting the posture of victim, the Jew withstood the social and moral pressure to deny his identity.

To merit God's support, the victim must be willing to oppose the oppressor, even if only in protest. In non-Jewish experience, the victim adopts the persecutor's perspective, relieving himself of the shame of defeat by abdicating his spiritual identity. Only when the ancient Israelites cried out as victimized slaves, without justifying or identifying with the Egyptian persecutors, did God hear their cry and begin to intervene in history. For the stoic Gentile, such crying is crude. By continuing to cry in pain and protest, the Jew remains an outsider to be despised because by crying, the victim's accusing perspective seditiously refuses to be suppressed.

According to Faur, "the Jewish attitude toward political enemies has deeply offended Western sensitivities." Jewish hatred of the persecutor is too self-centered, filled with malice, and un-Christian. By hating the persecutor, the Jew will be unwilling to become a persecutor. When the Samaritans and the Christians identified with Israel's enemies, they betrayed their destiny by adopting the perspective of the persecutor and became persecutors themselves.

In *Sh'ma* (February 21, 1992), there are several reports about the successes and failures of Orthodox beginners' *minyanim*. Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald of the National Jewish Outreach Program and rabbi of the beginners service at the Lincoln Square Synagogue in Manhattan explains that his beginners' service is not a service at all; *devarim she-ba-qedusha* (those parts of the prayer service which require the presence of a *minyan*) are omitted, giving the rabbi/instructor the freedom to teach the mechanics of prayer without invading the sanctity of public prayer. His Lincoln Square beginners' service is limited to 50 people, so that the participants community can be absorbed and integrated more easily into the larger synagogue community. Novice congregants are not only taught the mechanics of how to pray; they learn "the meanings and philosophies behind the prayers." But Buchwald concedes that his people come "because it [the beginners' service community] is home."

SaraLee Rosen, a member of the Orthodox Civic Center Synagogue, created a beginners' service as an outreach program for her community. On Rosh haShanna, the men were too intimidated to wear the tallit; on Yom Kippur, many took the tallit, and even more people attended. When a woman asked if were permissible to pray in English in the main sanctuary, Rosen, who was emotionally moved by the question, answered in the affirmative.

Joseph R. Rackman's report on the beginners' *minyan* of the Young Israel of Scarsdale echoes Rosen's finding that sincere prayer may take place even when

the participants are not Orthodox from birth. He claims that Orthodoxy's beginners services, with their abbreviated liturgies, English readings, and extensive explanations "have clearly been influenced by the Reform Movement." He also contends that without the Reform approach to outreach, Orthodoxy would not have evolved an alternative service, and urges non-Orthodox synagogues to develop alternative beginners' services for those who would not attend a service where men and women sit separately. Rackman comments that two non-Orthodox synagogues protested the beginners' service because the services were free, and these congregations rely upon non-member paid attendance fees for their economic well-being.

In *Tikkun* (March/April 1992), Rachel Biale reviews Debra Rene Kaufman's *Rachel's Daughters* (Rutgers, 1991) and Tamar Frankiel's *The Voice of Sara* (Harper, 1991). Kaufman is a sociologist who is committed to feminism and in spite of herself, finds elements of *Haredi* Judaism to be compatible with feminist concerns. Unlike Kaufman, Frankiel adopts Orthodox practice, theology, and sociology.

Biale notes that "some of Kaufman's subjects self-consciously appropriate feminist thinking while others are unaware of how much their concepts and language are formed by feminism." Biale argues that Kaufman's subjects "ignore the aspects of feminism that challenge traditional structures." She argues that

Frankiel and the women Kaufman interviewed portray Orthodoxy as a conflict-free resolution of the problems of the contemporary world. They depict an inner life, both in the psychological and theological-spiritual realms, that is free of doubts and ambivalence. But embracing Orthodoxy as a panacea for modernity requires, it seems to me, an extraordinary measure of denial, and is likely to result in a flat, impoverished life of the mind and the psyche.

For Biale, "it is the conflict, rather than the halakhic solutions, that form the body of sources that are continually relevant and meaningful."

Writing in *Modern Judaism* (May 1992), Joel B. Wolowelsky argues that halakhic sources allow women to join in saying the *sheva berakhot* recited after the meals held during the first week of marriage in honor of the new bride and groom. (His argument does not apply to the *sheva berakhot* said under the *huppa*.) However, he notes that the question of what should be public policy on this matter is not clear at all.

Rabbinic authorities have an obligation to protect the integrity of the halakhah, not simply decide technical issues of "permitted or forbidden." Currently, "egalitarianism" encourages women to participate in areas of tradition even when it cannot be justified by a halakhic argument. To allow women to participate in areas which they have avoided (whether or not it was technically permitted to them), the argument would go, is to confuse those unlettered in halakhic sources and encourage a non-halakhic egalitarian approach. On the other hand, one might maintain that when authorities forbid what is actually permitted, they strengthen the hands of those who say that rabbinic prohibitions in this area flow from personal biases rather than halakhic commitment and in the end encourage the proponents of egalitarianism. This is a most legitimate debate. The problem is that proponents of each side are convinced that the correctness of their respective positions is *pashut* [obvious and indisputable].

Reform Judaism (Spring 1992) deals with the lack of religion in the lives of Jews. Rabbi Alexander M. Schnindler cites the National Jewish Population survey which finds that the current intermarriage rate of American Jews is 52%. He concedes that the Reform approach "requires a revision" and urges readers "to intensify our efforts to gain converts, both before and after marriage. All studies agree that conversionary marriages are infinitely more stable Jewishly and in every other way."

Let our Outreach commission and its Task force on the Unaffiliated lead us in this wider mission assured that we Reform Jews possess the water which can slake the thirst, the bread which can sate the hunger for the holy that has seized so many in our generation.

Essays in *Conservative Judaism* (Winter 1992), reflect current ferment in its community. For Rabbi Susan Grossman, "Judaism and feminism are two ethical systems" which command her allegiance and guide her conduct. While she feels that "Jewish laws "are often seen as part of a system that was 'bad' for women, a system created by men which objectified woman as 'other,'" Grossman nevertheless has decided to observe the mikva rules because they "provide a way to sanctify God's gift to women." However, she is unwilling to observe the halakhic historical "fences" legislated by the rabbinic sages concerning physical contact.

In reality, each couple defines for itself what fences are required, beyond what point they should not go so that they do not engage in sexual relations.

Bradley Shavit Artson, an advocate of homosexual rights within the Conservative rabbinate, joins Grossman in defining Judaism anthropologically. But, unlike Grossman, he does not believe that the practice of the laws of *nidda* can avoid "sustaining and contributing to the suppression and denigration of women."

Howard Addison is very uncomfortable with contemporary Conservative rhetoric. He finds that catchwords and concepts are not convincing the Conservative laity; the "scientific" study of Judaism does not engender commitment to Covenant:

Academic respectability and ethnic associationalism alone are proving to be incapable of fostering, let alone strengthening, American Jewish loyalty. Perhaps the moment has arrived for Conservative Judaism to make explicit religiously what has been implicit theologically. Let us begin to act consciously as a denomination based on the tenet of divine/human partnership.

When Conservative Judaism "substituted History as the arbiter of Jewish authenticity," argues Addison, Conservative Judaism robbed itself "of any self-defining unifying spiritual standard."

Writing in *Moment*, (April 1992) Rachel Cowen, a Reform convert and rabbi, related an incident that occurred after an intensive session on outreach to the intermarried:

A prominent member reported to me that she told her eligible but unmarried son that she was glad that he had not come to the sessions. "'Why?' I asked." Because he would have heard too much about accepting the interfaith married

and not enough about preventing intermarriage.

In the same issue of *Moment*, Stuart T. Eizenstat bemoans the intermarriage statistics confronting the Jewish community. Noting the number of Jews receiving no Jewish education, he is disturbed that nearly 600,000 Jews “now have either no religion or have another religion,” and he is troubled with a recent study in Philadelphia that “showed that no grandchildren of mixed marriages without conversion to Judaism identified themselves as Jews.” While endorsing Orthodoxy as “one of the most certain avenues of Jewish identification in America,” he adds that “for many American Jews, Orthodoxy is too limiting despite the beauties it affords.” Consequently, Eizenstat calls upon the liberal denominations to inspire their affiliates, he challenges the larger Jewish community to improve Jewish education.

In the same issue of *Moment*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the new Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, offers his “Orthodox Judaism will enable the Jewish People to Survive.” He cites several prominent sociologists who maintain that Jewish birth, divorce and *aliya* rates are directly proportional to the level of one’s commitment to Orthodoxy, and, conversely, that non-Orthodox *yoredim* lose their Jewish identity “faster than any group since the ten lost tribes.” On one hand, more Jews study Torah today than at any time since the writing of the Babylonian Talmud, and for the “first generation since the French Revolution,” Jewish children are better educated and more observant than their parents.

The author, of course, insists on the importance of the “small things” of religious observance, and moves on to discuss the polarization within religious Jewish life:

Today even rabbis are heard to say that religious arguments are matters of politics rather than *halacha*. . . . When one great Torah sage can accuse another of heresy, Torah itself comes dangerously near to disrepute.

For Sacks, while the diversity of the Torah community is a virtue, “the hostility of its component groups to one another is its besetting vice.” In calling for a return to traditional definitions of Judaism, Rabbi Sacks calls not only for the geographic return of the People Israel to the Land of Israel. He challenges world Jewry to begin the “spiritual return of Jews to their faith. . . . That is the unfinished agenda of Orthodoxy.”