

## Current Jewish Periodicals

*Response* (Spring 1991) offers a symposium on "Multi-culturalism, Jews, and the Canon" in which intellectual Jewish activists on various university campuses express their views concerning the literature which embodies the spiritual "truth" of their world. Bennett Graff, Maria Brettschneider, Joel Abraham, and Zachary Braiterman concede that the canon of the university is based upon a Christian view of history and culture. Lisa Bean believes that Philo, Maimonides, Mendelssohn and Buber represent great Jewish thinkers who deserve canonization, but she does not know how they should be approached when they are presented in relationship to non-Jewish thinkers like Plato, Augustine, Descartes, and Nietzsche. According to Stuart Svonkin, cultural pluralism demands that the presentation of Judaism be so neutral that Jewish culture, religion, and history may be studied by Jew or non-Jew. Ruth Magder concedes that when addressing "a room of women's study majors, gay and lesbian studies majors, and African-American studies majors," there is no multi-cultural support for Jewish studies, which is beyond the pale of politically correct multi-culturalism.

In *Moment* (June 1992), Dennis Prager claims that "Orthodox Jews desperately need religious competition: Nothing keeps people honest as competition." Rather than ask non-Orthodox Jews to become orthodox, he asks that they stop ignoring mitzvot, that all their rabbis and laypeople study Torah, and pray seriously: "We need to start seeing homes with photographs and paintings of non-Orthodox Jews (men and women) dancing with the Torah. . . . Abstaining from the prohibited foods does not make you Orthodox, it makes you a serious Jew." The ignoring of God in liberal Judaism, we are told, has been "highly destructive to non-Orthodox life." In the same issue of *Moment*, Diane Winston's "Searching for Spirituality" examines how Reform Judaism is trying to bring God back into its Jewish expression.

*Reform Judaism* (Summer 1992) examines the place of "Non-Jews in the Synagogue." Reform congregations are confronting the issue of whether a non-Jewish intermarried spouse should be entitled to temple membership. Some argue that by remaining non-Jews, they "are choosing a personal boundary . . . while some non-Jewish partners do expect equal rights as members." In one Miami congregation a believing, practicing Methodist teaches music in the Shabbat school; she asserts that "non-Jews shouldn't arbitrarily be denied rights and privileges" in synagogue life. One non-Jewish spouse "do(es) not object to the setting of reasonable boundaries," while another declined to serve as sisterhood president because "she felt it was inappropriate for a non-Jew to head a Jewish women's organization." The official Reform position recommends but does not require that temple membership be reserved for Jews, while "participation of non-Jewish partners should be encouraged." In smaller temples, "where non-Jews are vital to the survival of the congregation, the non Jew often receives all of the rights and privileges of Jewish members."

The issue of religious canon and boundaries is also addressed by Alvin Kaunfer in *Conservative Judaism* (Spring 1992) in his "From Interpretation to Midrashic Process: On Conservative Methodology." According to Kaunfer, early Conservative thinkers understood the canon of Jewish documents to evolve and change through interpretation, while more contemporary ideologues use the term "midrash." Of all the early Conservative thinkers cited by Kaunfer, only Finkelstein does not explicitly claim that Jewish law as a system actually changes. Frankel, Schechter and Mordecai

Waxman all regard "interpretation" as a rhetorical apologia for reform.

The late Seymour Siegel, a theology professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, refers to this process as *midrash*, while Elliot Dorff argues that *derash*, the midrashic result, is to be distinguished from the *peshat*, which is he takes to be the text's original intent. Since God's original intent becomes irrelevant and only human interpretation, or *midrash*, is normative, the Torah of Conservative Judaism is essentially the collective understanding of its intellectual elite. According to the late Gerson D. Cohen, the previous chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary,

in classical Jewish perception, the history of the Torah is the history of *midrash*—the history of the interpretation of Torah and its application to life. We may even go one step further: the history of all Jewish culture, at least from the days of Ezra in the fifth century BCE until the secular rebellions of modern times, can be seen in terms of this process of interpretation and application.

Echoing Mordecai Kaplan, Cohen sees this midrashic process extending to "legal, artistic, literary, and musical expressions," which "were, until recently, formulated by the canons of the midrashic process." He feels that we must

create a modern *midrash*, one that will combine our scientific knowledge and our critical reconquest of the Jewish past. . . . We must create a *midrash* that embraces the totality of Jewish experience and distills from it religious elements that can serve as guides to contemporary life and action.

He cites the contemporary Conservative thinker Neil Gillman, who believes that modern Jews must create their own religious myth by creating their own *midrash*. Neither Kaunfer nor any of the thinkers he cites provide any limitations upon the midrashic process nor do they explain what the Sages meant by *derasha shel dofi*, or false *midrash*.

In an editorial, *Tikkun* (May/June 1992) takes Conservative Judaism to task for its unwillingness to follow its approach to its logical conclusion. The editorial claims that when the (Conservative) Rabbinical Assembly voted to reject the proposed ordination of gay and lesbian rabbis, they violated their own principle which requires that *halakhah* be "changed to accommodate new social realities." Those who defend Conservative Judaism's current restrictions contend that "because riding [in a car] on Shabbat is forbidden by a decision of the rabbis" [it] is easier to override than an explicit injunction against homosexuality." For *Tikkun*, Conservative Judaism did not reject homosexual rights because of an ideological commitment to its understanding of Jewish law, but because

Conservative Judaism has drifted toward conformism . . . [and] many of its members still feel quite comfortable with the anti-gay sentiments that still predominate American society. If they did not feel this way, they would have found a way to legitimize commitment ceremonies [for same sex unions]. . . . Whether in ten or fifty years, these restrictions will be lifted. Other rabbis will miraculously find good *halachic* reasons to change these rulings, and people will look back on this period as one of prejudice and narrow-mindedness.

Writing in *Lillith* (Summer 1992), Blu Greenberg outlines "Feminism within Orthodoxy: a Revolution of Small Signs." She reports that "a few Orthodox rabbis . . . as a matter of principle refrain from saying the morning blessing "*shelo asani isha*," many Orthodox rabbis speak in gender neutral language, an Israeli rabbinical court allows a woman to speak on her own behalf, and women are being trained to plead cases before the court. She predicts that as Conservative women rabbis have begun increasingly to serve in the formal capacity as witnesses in Jewish legal proceedings, "the next decade the Orthodox rabbinate will have to deal more extensively with the formal issue of women as witnesses."

After criticizing Orthodox rabbinic leadership on several counts, Greenberg expresses hope that a comprehensive legal solution will be found in marriage and divorce laws "so that the potential for inequity be eliminated and no women will ever suffer humiliation and vulnerability at the hands of a recalcitrant husband." She affirms the right of women to form prayer groups at the Western Wall in spite of the opposition of the Israeli rabbinic authorities. She notes the evolution of women's increased participation in various religious rituals, such as *simhat bat*, baby-naming rituals, reading the *megillah*, participating in Orthodox wedding rituals and saying *kaddish* for deceased relatives. For Greenberg, the only impediment to having female Orthodox rabbis is communal readiness, not halakhic constraints.

Rabbi Emanuel Rackman's "Science and Religion" in *Midstream* (June/July 1992), calls for a reconsideration of Orthodox options which he feels have been suppressed by Orthodoxy's "turn to the right." According to Rackman, the scientific study of classical texts is a proper enterprise, and Orthodox Jewish faith must be sufficiently strong to "take the risk." He mentions the scholarship of the late Prof. Saul Lieberman, who taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary rather than in the yeshiva orbit. Rackman describes Lieberman as

a man of impeccable faith and practice, a man who through his method of talmudic study enriched our appreciation of that great work precisely because every method known to science was employed.

In *Jewish Observer* (May 1992), Rabbi Moshe Sherer affirms that Judaism cannot be understood or applied without the "*Da'as Torah of Gedolei Yisrael*, the true leaders of the Jewish people." In his "*Daas Torah: Tapping the Source of Eternal Wisdom*," Rabbi Ya'akov Feitman claims that the *Moetset Gedolei ha-Torah* (the rabbinic council which determines policy for Agudas Yisrael) possesses the exclusive authority to interpret and apply Torah practice, policy, and theology. Although Gerson Bacon (Bar-Ilan University) argues that the *Da'as Torah* doctrine as currently formulated is a recent phenomenon, Feitman contends that both the idiom and its content may be traced to Talmudic literature and precedent. When a *gadol* mentions that a young scholar is indeed also a *gadol*, one finds this approbation to be

the most foolproof method for *Klal Yisrael* to obtain the correct address for *Da'as Torah*, and it also serves the continuum of Jewish history with that formal link of the *mesora* process.

According to Feitman, it is “bizarre” that

one of the critics of these *Gedolim* notes that while he has no problem with innovations in Judaism, he would in principle be able to accept the “new” doctrine of *Da’as Torah*, but finds it strange that the group that subscribes to the notion of *Da’as Torah* be the one that rejects any new ideas and incursions into tradition.

Feitman claims that this doctrine did not require articulation or formalization in pre-modern times “because everyone knew that *Da’as* with any other suffix was an oxymoron.” To counter the argument that there is no objective criterion by which one may determine who is or who is not a *gadol*, Feitman musters the view of the Hafets Hayyim concerning the

*yetser ha-ra’s* special efforts to convince us that the *Gedolim* are no longer great enough to be listened to or that we simply don’t know who they are. The Evil Inclination’s prodigious efforts in this area should alert us to the importance of being vigilant in this matter.

For the Hazon Ish, with the denial of *Da’as Torah* “the entire generation becomes orphaned and there is no room for judgment at all.” Feitman concludes his essay by affirming that *Da’as Torah* is a fundamental component of Judaism’s sacred canon.