

Important Books

GOD IS PROOF ENOUGH, by *Walter S. Wurzburger*
(Devora Publishing, 2000. 143 pages.)

Walter S. Wurzburger is an endangered species—he still thinks ideas matter. The massive defections from the Jewish people have radically altered the priorities of policy analysts. From the secular panacea of Birthright Israel to various Orthodox outreach movements, the emphasis is on the pragmatic. Whatever will “hook” a Jew and awaken his interest on any level must be discussed, funded and implemented. Too many Jews are being lost too quickly to be concerned with niceties—such as ideas. Experience is what counts. True enough, various programs do emphasize Jewish substance, but the underlying motive is always pragmatic: What will reawaken a Jew to his identity? No one will quarrel with the depths of the crisis and the necessity of pragmatism, but there needs to be a constant reminder that the eternal ideas of Judaism, in their full panoply, remain an ultimate concern for all Jews. Walter Wurzburger’s newest book serves as such a reminder.

A collection of essays, most previously published, Wurzburger’s *God is Proof Enough* confronts the timeless philosophical quandaries of Judaism, from meaning to faith, from the existence of God to the problem of evil. Other topics include the Sabbath, the covenant and the emulation of God’s ethical attributes. The range here is wide. Wurzburger, well known to readers of this journal as its former editor, is a philosopher, not an historian of philosophy. If he refuses to submit to the Jewish public policy imperative of pragmatism, he equally refuses to submit to the academic penchant for avoiding issues in favor of historicism, geneticism and relativism. Wurzburger wants to know: Is an idea true or false? Wurzburger takes stands. He ducks behind no veil. His treatment of the problem of evil, for example, is not a “summary of the field.” Rather, it analyzes arguments, dismisses or modifies them—or wholeheartedly promotes them.

I was skeptical of these chapters at first glance. How can someone say something worthwhile on, say, evil in a mere eight pages? Wurzburger manages it. He is deft; he knows his material; he wastes no time on diversions and dead ends; he has a lot to say, and isn’t afraid to say it. I do add one caveat: I wish Wurzburger had read a bit more contemporary science.

The Argument from Design, for example, need no longer merely mean that “the various constituent parts [of the universe] fit together *harmoniously* [my emphasis] . . .” After the biochemist Michael Behe’s *Darwin’s Black Box*, the key term *harmoniously* can be so much more tightly defined (and defended) as an irreducible complexity.

**THE MASHGIACH: REFLECTIONS ON THE LIFE OF RAV MOSHE
AARON STERN ZT’L, MASHGIACH OF KAMENITZ YESHIVA,
collected and edited by *Yechiel Michel Stern*
(Feldheim, 1999, 653 pages).**

**FROM A PURE FIRE: A SERIES OF SHMUESSEN
BY RABBI MOSHE AHARON STERN ZT’L,
transcribed and translated by Yitzchok Meir Goldstein
(Feldheim, 2001, 277 pages.)**

These two books on the late Rabbi Moshe Aaron Stern pay homage to a master. To be successful, such books must meet very exacting standards. Clearly, they are intended to praise and to eulogize, but if that is all they do they will likely be meaningful only to those who knew the deceased, and thus be self-defeating. The first book is the more successful, perhaps because the ability to convey the sense of a person’s life is easier than to convey the feel of a speaker’s *musar shmuessen*. The author of the second book sets his challenge high: not merely to convey Rabbi Stern’s ideas, but his urgency, his exhortation, his desire to change behavior. The ideas do come through (and needless to say this is important), but the persuasive power doesn’t make it. On the other hand, the biography is irresistible.

Today, it is almost *de rigueur* for an American Orthodox high school graduate to travel to Israel for one year of Torah study. When Moshe Aaron Stern left the US in 1947, he was one of a handful of such students. He could expect no “*hevra*,” no English-speaking teachers, no overseas calling cards, and no round trip ticket. To go to Israel to study Torah then was a commitment for a lifetime, or, at the very least, for many years. The book vividly conveys the family background and the personality of Stern that made his unusual mission a success. He not only fruitfully studied under the Torah personalities of Israel, he became one of them. Amidst the Stern narrative are countless anecdotes

that convey not only his life, but the lives of the Torah scholars among whom he lived. Added to all this is a wealth of photographs, such that the reader can ask himself: Why didn't I take the time to get to know Rabbi Stern?

MARITAL INTIMACY: A TRADITIONAL JEWISH APPROACH,
by *Avraham Peretz Friedman*.
(Jason Aronson, 1996. 139 pp.)

Is there anything more to be said on this topic? Manuals on *hilkhot nidda* abound. Apologia for *tabarat ha-mishpaha* are plentiful. Somehow, Avraham Peretz Friedman has published a book that does not overlap with either the halakhic or the broader presentations on this topic. One of the lines on the book jacket notes, "The sources are holy and the teachings are unambiguous." Friedman is unambiguous. He does not talk around the topic. He draws together many traditional sources that, essentially, equate the pleasure of human intimacy with holiness; and he distinguishes between acts and intentions during intimacy that render it unholy and therefore not only forbidden, but *less pleasurable*.

This is a frank and open argument for pleasure, and for the traditional restrictions on intimacy as enhancing that pleasure. The main thrust of Friedman's argument is not the already familiar argument that the *nidda*-based cycle of abstinence itself enhances pleasure in intimacy. Friedman addresses the act itself: how the wrong intentions during intimacy not only derogate it by some spiritual criteria, but how the violations of these criteria actually render the act less pleasurable. This is a book for the modern age. It addresses sex per se. It effectively brings to bear traditional sources on the topic. It is both candid and tastefully written.

THE MAN WHO STOPPED THE TRAINS TO AUSCHWITZ: GEORGE MANTELLO, EL SALVADOR, AND SWITZERLAND'S FINEST HOUSE,
by *David Kranzler*, with a foreword by *Senator Joseph I. Lieberman*.
(Syracuse University Press, 2000. 341 pp.)

I am not enough of a scholar even in the secondary literature to know all the recent ins and outs of the delicate issue of Holocaust rescue, especially as pertains to the controversial role of Switzerland. I cannot comment on specific research claims of this book. I can say this: Anyone

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who has dwelled seriously in the palimpsest of Holocaust literature knows its bottomless pits, its inescapable horror. One of the rare shafts of light amidst the blackness of night is the story of Holocaust rescuers.

Before Schindler, the most well known rescuer was Wallenberg, but in fact there were many people who rescued groups of Jews marked for death. The tale of the Holocaust rescuers has come to light much later than the atrocities presumably because rescue was so much smaller a part of the Holocaust than murder, and also because the rescuers, by nature, were quiet and discreet. These were the qualities necessary to navigate either the Nazi machine or other governments' bureaucracies. These qualities are amply on display in Kranzler's book on George Mantello, whose deeds remained virtually unknown until just a few years before his passing. To read of Mantello and the other rescuers shows that human heroism never dies. We who come after can only stand back in awe—and gratitude.