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MENORAH

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ON HOW BEING JEWISH IS DIFFERENT

Musical Variations on Jewish Thought
By Revault D'Alonnes
George Braziller

A Review essay by Peter J. Haas

That Jews are different from others is virtually a truism in the modern world. We perceive ourselves as different from others, and others persist in seeing us as different from them. A good deal of Jewish intellectual energy in the last two centuries since the Enlightenment has been spent in attempting to explain to others, and to ourselves, what that difference is. Olivier Revault D'Alonnes' *Musical Variations on Jewish Thought* is one such attempt. It claims that this difference can be explained in terms of a fundamental conviction that characterizes Judaism, namely the emphasis on time.

The basic question is familiar enough. The problem is to describe what that difference is and what it means. Various strategies have been tried. It is possible to see Jews as different only in certain cultural habits: we do things this way, and you do them that way; we prefer these kinds of foods and you prefer those kinds. This is a sort of ethnographic approach, comparing different peoples by enumerating their various traits. In the nineteenth century a more sophisticated method of comparison was developed. This method conceived of differences, not as isolated traits but as part of a community's culture. The diverse cultural traits that ethnographers had identified were now seen as reflecting a spirit or ideal that permeates the society. Therefore each culture has a personality or character that can be identified and described. This method has the advantage of linking the cultural practices of a group together into some sort of unified picture. It helps us

see how various acts or notions fit together. Its disadvantage is that it makes it all too easy to stigmatize other cultures by giving them negative personality descriptions. While the collection and description of ethnographic data is a relatively objective activity, the characterization of a culture's "personality" is, by nature, impressionistic and subjective.

One important attempt to overcome this deficiency is the method of structural analysis developed by Claude Levi-Strauss and other French structuralists. The thesis here is that the myths and rituals of a culture can be understood as describing and placing into juxtaposition opposites that come into conflict within a culture. For example, the myths of a South American Indian tribe might resolve into an attempt to deal with the tension between natural growth *vs.* cultivation. According to this view, there are any number of such oppositions—divine/human, growth/decay, life/death, settled/nomad—that lie at the base of systems of religious symbols. The task of the researcher is to parce the myths and



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rituals of the group at hand so as to bring this opposition into focus. This is deemed to be a more scientific and objective approach to discerning a culture's distinguishing identity than the older means of characterizing the culture as though it had a human personality.

There have been a number of attempts to apply this method of analysis to Judaic culture. The question, to repeat, is to discover finally what makes Judaism systematically different as a culture. We look not for a list of specific differences, but for patterns which reveal the spirit, or values or basic oppositions that lie at the base of Judaism. It is this general program that *Musical Variations* has in mind. Its purpose, as the title suggests, is to locate that intellectual theme heard everywhere in Judaism.

Before turning to the book itself, it will be helpful to review quickly some of the assumptions bound up in this methodology. The first is that the religion or culture we are studying in fact has a single structure. That is, we must assume that all significant traits of the religion or culture are explainable in terms of one single theme or idea. This means not only that the theme we identify must be everywhere apparent but also that there can be no important traits of the culture which are not functions or variations of that theme. This last is an important consideration: the claim that a certain conviction stands behind a culture can be disproven if all important parts of the culture cannot be accounted for in this way. I shall argue later that this is a test D'Alonnes' book fails.

A further assumption is that since each culture is characterized by its particular system of convictions and beliefs, it will be systematically different from all other cultures, which are, by definition, organized around other themes. There is more in this assumption than that each culture is simply unique. It says the differences between

cultures are so deep-seated and fundamental that one culture might well be unable to understand any other fully. Each group's frame of reference is so systematically coherent within itself that it will often lack the categories needed to perceive any sense in another's system.

A third assumption is that these structural differences are stable. They do not change over time. The reason behind this assumption is linked to a certain theory of system, which holds that each part is interlocked with every other part. A change in one area will require readjustments everywhere. The conclusion generally drawn from this is that if any real change occurs in a system of conviction, the entire former structure gives way and a new structure performs emerges. Cultures that have an uninterrupted history are assumed to have kept their basic structures intact and unchanged.

With these remarks in mind, we are ready to turn to D'Allonnes. D'Allonnes proposes to explain Jewish uniqueness to us in terms of a basic, we might say cosmic, difference of opinion. This difference for D'Allonnes concerns the fundamental binary opposition between time and space. For Judaism, says D'Allonnes, the primary dimension in which human life is to be understood is time. It is this conviction that separates the Jewish world from (all) others, which assume the primary dimension to be space. In fact, D'Allonnes sometimes seems to be saying, If we understand this, we understand everything that is important about Judaism.

Let us look at what this emphasis on time means for D'Allonnes in more concrete terms. His basic metaphor is music, as the title suggests, because music, unlike the plastic arts, comes into being only in time. Music in fact has two distinguishing characteristics that make it an apt metaphor for Judaism. One is that music always depends on a text. There is always a score, a solid foundation from which to begin. The other, as we have said, is that music is also forever open to new interpretation. Since it is performed in time, there is always room for the unpremeditated: mistakes, misreadings, new interpretations, or whatever. So music, while bound to a text on the one hand, is radically free on the other because its

final form can never be known in advance. It is this radical freedom, this indeterminateness, that is the gift of choosing time over space.

Now let us see how this works in Judaism. One model D'Allonnes chooses here is Abraham. Abraham is introduced to us at the beginning of his story as the typical person living in the mode of space. He is a city dweller living in his homeland. But Abraham is told to leave and become a wanderer. As such he gives up living in the mode of space and enters the mode of time. His journey is always open-ended, his goal never fulfilled in the present space but always unfolding in time. Because of this, Abraham turns out to be fully free to pursue his own destiny. Like a piece of music, his life story is not fully known until it is completed. We can see this same truth portrayed in the story of Moses, the other great hero of Judaism. Moses leads the Children of Israel from Egypt toward the Promised Land. In the end, he gazes upon the land but is not allowed to settle there. The passion of this story is in the wandering, not in the settlement.

In fact, D'Allonnes finds this basic tension between the settled and the nomad throughout the Biblical narrative. It is the theme of which all of Jewish life is but a series of variations. For example, picking up on modern source criticism of the Pentateuch, D'Allonnes notes that there are two sets of early traditions which make up the patriarchal narratives: those ascribed to J and those ascribed to E. These two ancient sources for the Biblical legends represent the same conflict between the mode of space and the mode of time that D'Allonnes finds prefigured in Abraham and Moses. Yahweh (the God of the J source) is the God of space. We see Yahweh's victory in the establishments of the monarchy, in the building of a fixed temple, in doctrine. Yahweh is the God of settlement and rest. Elohim (The God of the E source), on the other hand, is the God of the nomad. This is the God of wandering, of promised fulfillment, and so of freedom. Although Yahweh seems to predominate in much of the Bible, it is Elohim, D'Allonnes tells us, who ultimately emerges as the truly Jewish God. This is so because this

God is located in people's hearts and minds, that is, in portable, non space-bound sanctuaries. So when the established temple is destroyed and the Jews are scattered, they lose the security offered by Yahweh but gain the freedom of Elohim.

It is easy to see from this that D'Allonnes will consider the experience of Diaspora as fundamentally Jewish. It is the creation of a time-focused culture *par excellence*. For the Diaspora Jew, life is not identified with one country or culture. Rather Diaspora Jews, like Abraham, forsee living in any number of countries. There is unlimited possibility and variety. Like music, Jewish life in Diaspora is not static, but has before it the possibility of exploring endless variations. It is lived in radical freedom, because, like music, its final form is never established beforehand.

It is fair to ask at this point whether or not D'Allonnes has really captured *the*—or even *an*—essence of Judaism. Surely his scheme is provocative. There is something to be said about Jewish landlessness as a characteristic of last Rabbinic Judaism. It is also true that the Rabbinic notion of "Galut" (exile) deemphasizes land in favor of time. But there is another side as well. After all, the holiness of the Land of Israel, and of Jerusalem and its temple, is a constant theme in Biblical writings. Even post-Destruction Judaism acknowledges the specialness of the land and of Jerusalem. The power of Zionism and the passion the resettlement of the land has evoked in modern times is surely not to be dismissed as offhandedly as D'Allonnes does. We can add to this that Jews have consistently established permanent institutions and holy sites in the lands of the Diaspora: synagogues, cemeteries, and so forth. So despite Diaspora, the Jews in Europe hardly proposed to live like nomads. The easy and clearcut characterization of Jews as temporally and not spatially oriented is too simple. Jews, like all peoples, participate in both. It is true that Jewish history over the past two millennia has conspired as often as not to make Jews into wanderers, but this hardly justifies claiming that nomadism and its emphasis on the temporal is definitive of what it means to be Jewish.

As an attempt to find one theme that structures all of Judaic experience, then, D'Allonnes' book falls short. There are melodies and undertones that D'Allonnes has not picked up. The reasons are not hard to find. A structural analysis, that is, a search for underlying themes, is a complex task even for a simple culture studied at one time. The task is infinitely more complex if one proposes to study a culture like Judaism, one that has stretched from Abraham to the present, from the Near East to America, and has included priests, philosophical schools, mystical movements, and pietistic sects. D'Allonnes' 100 pages are hardly up to the task.

But this is not to say that his book has no value. D'Allonnes has in fact presented us with an insightful, at times moving, reverie. What we have, to use Rabbinic language, is a midrash on Judaism, an attempt to capture some of the poetry that the author sees in the flow of Jewish history. As an attempt to present a structuralist account of Judaism as a series of variations on a theme, the book fails. But as a moving account of how one artist hears Judaism, it is significant. Simply as a work of art, the book is worth reading.

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IS GOOD BUSINESS GOOD?

Business Ethics in Jewish Law
By Edward Zipperstein
Ktav Publishing Co.

A Review
essay by Leonard S. Kravitz

"*Toyre ist die beste Sechoyre.*" So sang the Jewish mother to her child in the old Yiddish song, telling him that the study of the Torah is indeed the best merchandise and telling us that business is a fitting thing to be mentioned in the same breath as the Torah. That Jews have been involved with business is clear to anyone acquainted with Jewish texts: from the Bible to the Talmud to the Responsa literature, Jewish sources have dealt with the phenomenon of business and have used its modes as models of behavior.

We read in the Book of Proverbs the praise of the woman of valor who

... weaves linen and sells it and supplies merchants with their sashes ... (and who) ... buys a field and plants a vineyard out of her earnings ... (Pro. 31:23,16).

We learn in the Ethics of the Fathers that

All is given on credit ... The shop is open, the shopkeeper gives credit, the ledger is open, the hand writes. All who wish to borrow may, but the collectors go out continually ... (Mishnah *Abot* 3:17).

The sources contain such images because the Jewish people have been a business people for a good part of their history. Different kinds of business would depend on the stage of the people's development, and how that business would be conducted would depend on the attitudes and enactments contained and preserved in the literature that the people created.

Dr. Edward Zipperstein has given us a taste of that literature in his *Business Ethics in Jewish Law*. In successive chapters, he deals with Jewish Economic History; Halacha; Personal Property, Ownership and Acquisition; Wronging Another by Overcharging (Onaah); The Concept of Usury; Honest Weights and Measures; Profits in the Talmud; The Prophets and Business; Proverbs on Ethical Conduct; The Judaic Outlook on Wealth; The Law of the Land; *Herem Hayyishub*; Solomon Luria; Worker, Slave, and Underprivileged in Jewish Law; Conclusion. As appendices, he presents The Economic Element in Anti-Semitism and Werner Sombart and His Theory.

The order of the topics treated presents the problem of the book; indeed, the very lack of order, chronological or conceptual, reflects the difficulty of presenting a statement from three interrelated variables: business, ethics, and law. These three variables are affected in turn by time, clime, and situation. What kind of business, conducted by what kind of people, at what time, and in what conditions? What do we mean by ethics? Do we mean the best perceptions of what-ought-to-be at a given time, or do we mean that sense of what-ought-to-be at

all times and all seasons? What do we mean by Jewish law? Something held to be unchanging and universally applicable, or something seen to be changing all the while it was held to be unchanging? The very sources which Zipperstein adduces suggest that there was and is an interaction between history and text, between place and hegemony, and therefore among business, ethics, and law.

Business in its simplest sense involves a transaction: the exchange of goods and services for something of value, whether that thing of value be other goods and services in a barter economy or a symbol of such goods and services in a money economy. There are at least four elements: the buyer, the seller, that which is conveyed, and that which is exchanged for that which is conveyed.

Custom, ethics, and law enter into the consideration of these four elements: who can buy, who can sell, what can be sold, and what may be used as the medium of exchange. Yet such a consideration depends on the socioeconomic development of the people engaged in business. The Bible reflects the transition of the Jewish people from shepherds to farmers to city-folk. Abraham, the shepherd, must buy land to bury Sarah; the price paid to Ephron, the landowner, is in a medium determined by a third party: 400 shekels *over l'socheh*, current with the merchant (Gen. 23:16).

As shepherds the Children of Israel came into the land; as farmers they took possession. The land was divided among the tribes (Nu. 26:52-65). That division was permanent; no parcel could be sold (Lev. 25:23) but only leased against the Jubilee (Lev. 25:15). Not for any price could Ahab the king buy nor Naboth sell "... the inheritance of my fathers" (I Kings 21:4).

As land could not be conveyed to those outside the tribe, so money could not be a commodity to those within the tribe. The prohibition of interest and the sabbatical remission of debts applied to the Israelites but not to foreigners (Deut. 15:1-3; 23:20,21).

How much of the sabbatical year during which law was actually applied is difficult to assess. However, it is clear that by the time Jewish life moved to the city with its entailed business activity, there were changes in the law. We read in the Mishnah that the Sab-

batical year "... does not cancel debts due to the shopkeeper" (Mishnah *Shebiith* 10:1); and we learn that "... Hillel ordained the *prozbul*" (Mishnah *Shebiith* 10:3). The *prozbul* was that legal fiction by which the debtor owed the court, which could collect for the individual creditor.

The Mishnah reflects and is the product of Jewish life in Palestine in the first and second centuries C.E. The business practices therein depicted seem on a fairly low level; the merchant therein described is a shopkeeper in a city. For such a man in a more or less total Jewish environment, the authority of the Rabbis might operate to control what might be deemed a fair profit. The Mishnah (Mishnah *Baba Metzia* 4:3) gives, and Zipperstein quotes, such a profit as one-sixth of the original value of the item. Yet such a profit margin is clearly one of custom; we hear of a proposal of double the amount (Mishnah *Baba Metzia* 4:3).

When the Jewish people were thrust from the land to be cast up as merchant communities throughout the Diaspora so that Jewish merchants become the dominant group in Europe as they were prior to the First Crusades, there was another kind of trade and another kind of profit. It was not uncommon for travelling merchants to make almost a 100 percent profit, and there is a responsum dealing with merchants moving from Hungary to Mayence and back to Hungary making thereby a 200 percent profit (Irving A. Agus, *Urban Civilization in Pre-Crusade Europe*, Yeshiva University Press, New York, 1965, Vol II, pp. 67 and 88).

Thus there were differences between the law and the profits. What might be considered as overcharging in one context was not considered overcharging in another. The medieval world was as different from the rabbinic world as the Responsa literature is from the Mishnah.

Yet both, the rabbinic and medieval worlds and their respective literatures, the Mishnah and the Responsa, were agreed on the licit selling of one item: slaves. With slavery, we come to an issue where business, ethics, and law intersect. One might wonder, Was there an ethical, as contrasted with an unethical, way of selling slaves?

To be told by Zipperstein of the Jewish ethical notion that "Man, having been created by the Almighty in His image, represents, according to the Jewish tradition, the highest level of

value" (p 113)—after having been told that the reason the court (of the Rabbinic period) cannot estimate the value of a slave is because "... the master may compel him to marry and his children will be owned by the master" (p 34)—is to understand that he and the tradition possess some unrecognized conceptual dissonance. The escape from that dissonance would be even worse: to hold that the slave was not included in the concept "man." (In this way, Jewish tradition would be akin to other traditions: Aristotle, having defined man as a rational animal, defined the slave as an animated tool.)

Slavery as an item in ethics and law opens a broader question: What is the relation between that which is considered to be "right" and that which is considered to be "legal?" That Rabban Gamaliel accepted condolences for the death of Tabi, his slave, does not change the fact that he taught "... men may not accept condolence because of slaves" (Mishnah *Berachot* 2:7). The relegation of slaves to the status of non-persons, for whom one need not mourn, follows their legal reality as chattel. That relegation and that reality were both "ethical" and "legal" because of the practice and the dicta of the highest role models of Rabbinic (and, later, medieval) society.

Slavery is no longer acceptable and, hence, ethics and law are not unchangeable. However, it was not changes in ethics and law that ended slavery but, as our own American experience should remind us, a shift in the societal situation. For us, it was the Civil War that made slavery illegal and thus unethical, due in part to the perceived economic threat to the North presented by the possibility of the joining of manufacturing to slaveholding. John Brown's actions in freeing slaves prior to the Civil War, for which he was hanged, were seen by many as both illegal and unethical.

The societal context, then, plays its part in ethics and law as it does in business. To learn from Zipperstein that in the Rabbinic period the Sages "... consider[ed] competition a proper and healthy state of affairs" (p 37), and then to read of the *Herem Hayyishub* which restricted "... the settling of newcomers in an established community" (p 101), is not to read of a matter of ethics but a matter of practice beneficial to those already settled, but not to those wishing to settle.

Zipperstein does not address the institution of *maarufia* mentioned by Irv-

ing Agus (*op cit*, Vol I, pp 191ff). The *Maarufia* or "the law of the exclusive customer" meant that once a merchant-client relation was established, no other merchant could interrupt it nor in any way compete against it.

Both the *Herem Hayyishub* and the *Maarufia* were medieval institutions designed to limit competition, the same competition lauded by the Mishnah. These two institutions were established by law; they may well have been necessary for a Jewish community living by sufferance in a non-Jewish world. They were "legal"; they hardly would have seemed "ethical" to those kept from settling or to those kept out of competition. Law is usually the enactments of those who exercise power; one cannot imagine the would-be newcomer or the would-be competitor favoring such a law. However, they were not asked.

We come then in both ethics and law to a central issue: Who is doing the asking? And, What is the question? To the medieval merchant, the *Herem Hayyishub* and the *Maarufia* might have seemed ethical and legal; to the modern entrepreneur, they might seem actions in restraint of trade and, therefore, unethical and illegal. Only certain monopolies are allowed; the Sherman Anti-Trust law seems to have precluded all others. Monopoly once precluded becomes both illegal and unethical.

Hence the determination of who can sell and who can buy and what can be sold and what can serve as payment is set by the needs of a particular society at a particular time. It becomes exceedingly difficult to fix an eternal and unchanging ethic to a changing business. Perhaps the best that one can do is to hold onto the biblical notion of just weights and just balances (Lev. 19:36), so that both buyer and seller should always know precisely what is being sold. But even here one might wonder, Does the Biblical injunction require the scrapping of much of advertising? Or does a little "puffing" not count?

We are in Zipperstein's debt for a book that stimulates reflection, not only on business ethics in particular but on ethics in general. If his treatment has not provided definitive answers, it has provided definite questions.

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CHOOSING OR BEING CHOSEN

*The Chosen People in America:
A Study in Jewish Religious Ideology*
By Arnold M. Eisen
Indiana University Press

A Review essay by Alan W. Miller

Up to the beginning of the modern world (1789), the Jewish people considered themselves to be the Chosen People. According to the classical myth, God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth and all their hosts, chose Israel from among all other peoples to be His "special treasure." Other peoples, by contrast, were gentiles. To the Jew was given the all-comprehensive Torah with its 613 commandments. To the gentiles were given the seven Noachide laws, which are basic ethical requirements. The myth made the second class status of the gentiles and the superiority of the Jews unequivocal in the cosmic scheme of things. Gentiles were not expected to become Jews. At the end of time, they would acknowledge God's power and the Jews' superiority. One Jewish people apparently was enough for God. He didn't want a world of Jews. He merely wanted Jewish chosenness acknowledged. Righteous gentiles could enjoy a portion in the world to come (an often overplayed theme—how many, in fact, qualified is moot). By obeying the Noachide laws all gentiles could obey the will of the God of the Jews. Only the Jew enjoyed this unique, singular, distinct, and special relationship to God, the Author of all. Others ate from the spiritual crumbs of his table.

The sociological, anthropological, mythological, and psychological implications of this remarkable doctrine need not concern us here, fascinating though they be. What Arnold M. Eisen has done is to write a scholarly analysis of what happened to this remarkable self-image of the Jew when the Jews came to America in large numbers. For two things characterized the Jewish experience in America that made it unparalleled even in the annals of the Jew. In the first place, Jews could spread abroad and develop socially, economically, and professionally in ways which no other country had previously permitted to the same degree (even allowing for the impediments of American anti-Semitism). And Jews desperately wanted to spread abroad. Centuries of ghettoisation, oppression,

persecution, external limitations to growth, and expansion had crippled them in fundamental ways. Here in America they would have a unique opportunity to expand and demonstrate to both themselves and to others what they could do, what they were made of.

Secondly, at the time the Jews came to America in large numbers, America was experiencing itself as some kind of a religious experiment grounded in Biblical idiom and metaphor. The central American myth spoke of the American as a "New Adam," of America as the "Promised Land," of Americans as the "Chosen People," a second chance for humanity, who would build a "city on a hill." Nor is this rhetoric dead even in our own day, as the author points out. And here was the rub. The Jew desperately wanted to derive as much benefit as possible from being an American. But to insist that he was in any way superior to or better than his fellow citizens in the unequivocal terms of the classical myth of Jewish chosenness would clearly generate a most undesirable state of affairs. It would impede his own advancement as well as alienate others. He wanted to be different but not that much. How to be an American in as full a sense as America would permit, and how to remain a Jew and in what sense at the same time within the context of classical Jewish concepts—that was the problem, a problem that still lingers with us. Eisen has studied the primary texts of the second

generation of Jewish immigrants (1930-55) followed by a survey of those of their successors of the third generation (1955-80) in respect of the theme of chosenness. Drawing on sermons, essays, debates, prayer-book revisions, and full-length works, he asks, by implication, What happened to the Jewish idea of being the Chosen People (in the classical sense of that doctrine) in this new and unprecedented context?

The answers are depressing. With rare exceptions the rabbinical and lay minds that tackled this issue were second rate; and with even rarer exceptions, in the second generation, at least, the way in which this issue was dealt with involved no theology or no systematic elaboration of the central religious concepts with a view to reconciling or reinterpreting them with some clarity or consistency. Rather, a reactive ideological free-for-all ensued that included prevarication, contradiction, double talk, avoiding of issues, and affirming mutually contradictory statements about God, Israel, Torah, Chosenness, and so forth. The Orthodox come off best, if only because they said virtually nothing on the topic at all; they can hardly be faulted on what they didn't say. One presumes that the Orthodox found no clash between the traditional doctrine of Jewish chosenness and living in America and indeed, apart from the point of interface between Orthodoxy and modernity (Belkin, Soloveitchik), no Orthodox Jew, whatever he or she felt like inside, went on record on this topic. For the

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rest—Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist—there are some sober lessons to learn.

Mordecai Kaplan comes across as the most consistently lucid and rational voice. His thesis, based on Durkheim, called for a radical restructuring of American Jewish life totally precluding Chosenness. Salvation (ultimate meaning) would come from a reconstructed Jewish people, not from outworn supernatural beliefs. Unfortunately American Jewry was not into reason at this point in its history (has it ever been?). What is remarkable is that the verbal legerdemain and conceptual confusion of the spiritual leaders seem to reflect accurately the needs of the led. Jews, to oversimplify, believed more than they were prepared to admit, either to themselves or to others, and that they felt they were, in some sense, chosen. They may have acted in one way but they believed in another way. Ideological confusion was inevitable under such circumstances. No wonder Kaplan became so frustrated.

Nor were theologians of the third generation any more helpful. In fact the author seems to feel that second generation rabbinic ideology, poor though it was, served the Jews better than the inadequate and selective theology of the third even though it was more thought out and systematic. His analyses of Fackenheim and Borowitz are shrewd and to the point. He wields the scalpel sparingly but tellingly.

The author's exegeses of the various source materials are brilliant, incisive, and compassionate. Just about everybody comes off with egg on his face; a delicate handling of the more ludicrous contradictions is essential. (A sadist could have had a field day!) His enrichment of our understanding of Kaplan, for example, by elaborating on the Matthew Arnold-Ahad Ha-am connection, on the Puritan sources of the Kaplanian concept of vocation, and on the often overlooked fact that not Conservative but Reform was Kaplan's true "reference group" in sociological terms, is thoughtful and convincing. It also is typical of many of his fresh readings of tired sources, for which the reader is grateful. His clarifications of the thought of Soloveitchik is sympathetic. He is eminently fair and reasonable in his critique and evaluation of Heschel, who turns out to be such a theological disappointment.

As a study coming from the pen of a teacher of religion, a disturbing question hovers over the entire enterprise. In his conclusion, he writes that "the inability to derive the language of chosenness from Jewish experience will likely preclude non-Orthodox Jews from ever producing such coherent theologies. There is no thriving and distinct Jewish life on which to draw, rather remnants retained in a mixture of faith, reverence, and aesthetic appreciation" (p. 180). This sounds to me pure Kaplan. No organic community, no salvific religion. But is a coherent theology the source of ultimate meaning in Jewish life? Was it ever? Or an "organic" entity that is organized but lacks substance, like so much of modern Jewish denominationalism which reflects a kind of Madison Avenue religion, thriving on public relations hand-outs printed on glossy paper and parliamentary procedure, but lacking genuine spiritual content? Did the concept of the Oral Law, the coping stone of the edifice of Pharisaic-Rabbinic Judaism, come about as the result of systematic theology or "organic" community, or rather out of the burning need and desire of a handful of survivors and fearless leaders to make meaning out of being Jewish in a post exilic wilderness, against all evidence to the contrary?

Eisen has written the story of what happens when rabbis react rather than act. If Judaism is to continue to survive in any meaningful sense, it will be because spiritual leaders—in Martin Luther King's memorable metaphor penned in the Birmingham City Jail—decide to act as thermostats rather than as thermometers. Eisen—and with probably only one exception, Mordecai M. Kaplan—has charted two generations of thermometers. May the Lord raise up a rabbinical thermostat speedily in our days and may a Redeemer come to Zion. But before that, read Eisen's book. It is one of the finest of its kind in many a decade. It will give you a lot to think about, not least why going to synagogue in 1984 can be so boring—or vacuous—to use Eisen's own word. There is a history even to that and you will find it in this book.

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POETRY: THE GIFT OF SIGHT

By Sharon Weinstein

John Ciardi once said that what he liked about poetry was the white space at the end of the line. For the reader of Harvey Shapiro's and Yehuda Amichai's most recent collections of poetry, that white space at the end of the line—and sometimes, at the end of the poem—functions as an invitation to stay with the poem, to leisurely enjoy its drama, to encourage one's imagination to unfold before the page is turned.

Shapiro's *The Light Holds* (Wesleyan University Press) and Amichai's *Great Tranquility: Questions and Answers* (Harper & Row) share an economy of voice, a sense of spareness that is rich with suggestion and, perhaps, all too rare in a society where one is bombarded with quantities of often meaningless words. But, while both poets elicit a certain response through use of this style, there the similarity ends. The difference in their Jewish heritage is apparent. Shapiro's sense of place, family, nature, and space have been shaped by his life as an American, while Amichai's relationship to his father and a closer connection with history in Israel influence his work.

A native of Chicago and author of six books of poetry, Shapiro centers his work in *The Light Holds* in New York, where he formerly edited the *New York Times Book Review*, and is a deputy editor of *New York Times Magazine* and a *Times* literary critic. His poetry, like the city, is claustrophobic, constrained; subjects are contained in rooms, or by desks. Despair and angst are expressed, moreso here than in Amichai's poetry.

The title of Shapiro's book is taken from a poem, "July," in which he first muses on "poets of the late Tang." Feeling a linkage with these poets, the author also is "walled in by ocean and sky." As his mind floats back and forth in time, he reflects, "Here, for a moment, the light holds." There are many images of light and dark in these poems—but it is as if the light can barely win, the darkness prevails so strongly.

"City," with reference to "Silver dawn over Madison Avenue," "the wind on 48th Street," "Great Neck, at 4:30 in the morning"—the poet who

cannot sleep. "The word 'happiness'/ like the sun in late march/ is a light I can see/ but not feel." In his room—the woman asleep—"What I say in the room/ is for me and the walls. We are doing darkness/ each in his own way."

Nature is generally used to reflect a somber mood, as in "The Card," which begins: "Closed in by rain." Or sometimes to suggest the impossible—as in "The Wish": "This night in Brooklyn is as ancient/ as nights get, though the moon/ hangs like a lamp, and the traffic/ slurs in my room." And the poem ends—"Lights rise from the water, a city/ across the way, that I raise/ in my empty room to starlight."

There is little joy in personal relationships in Shapiro's poems. In "Middle Class" Shapiro writes that "I spent one hour with one son at his shrink/ discussing (my choice) why he seemed to hate me." With women there are moments of ecstasy, but more often unattainability, distance, failed dreams.

There is though, a strange and sly humor, as in "The End," which begins:

Imagine your own death.
I'm wearing my father's
gray tweed overcoat.
I've just had a corned-beef
sandwich on 47th Street.

When—suddenly—it hits.

Amichai's poems, too, deal with memory and loss—reminiscences of his father. But there seems more potential for joy and the closeness of human warmth in Amichai's poetry in *Great Tranquillity*. Amichai's poetry moves with different rhythms. For one thing, it is closer to nature, to open spaces, to the texture and feel of nature's bounty. There is more a sense of open-eyed wonder at life's mysteries, more connection with history—especially Israel's.

Amichai consistently works with the ordinary materials of our daily lives, and then surprises and leaps into the most unusual combinations and connections. Over and over, his images mesh the abstract with the tangible.

Witness the opening stanzas from "Things That Had Been Lost":

From newspapers and notice
boards
I find out about things that have
been lost.

This way I know what people
had
And what they love.

Once my tired head fell
On my hairy chest, and there I
found my father's smell
Again, after many years.

Or, as in "A Second Meeting With My Father" where Amichai sets the stage:

Again I met my father in the Cafe
Atarah.
This time he was already dead.
Outside, the evening
Mixed oblivion and memory, as
my mother
Mixed cold with hot in the
bath tub.

The most immediately obvious contrast with Shapiro's poetry is Amichai's sensuously joyous and delightful poem, "I Feel Good In My Trousers." Amichai begins with the Romans and the Arch of Titus and how "we know the shape of Jews/ Because they multiplied unto me," and easily takes us to the line "I feel good in my trousers/ In which my victory is hidden. Even though I know I'll die/ And even though I know the Messiah won't come,/ I feel good."

His poetry is intimately bound to the Biblical: "I dreamed a dream; in my dream seven maidens/ fat and sleek came up to the meadow/ and I made love to them in the meadow./ And seven skinny windscorched maidens came up after them/ and swallowed up the fat ones with their hungry thighs. . . ." In another poem, "An Arab Shepherd is Seeking a Kid on Mount Zion," there is "An Arab shepherd and a Jewish father" both seeking something they lost on Mount Zion—one a kid, one his son:

Afterwards we found them
between the bushes,
And our voices returned to us
And we wept and laughed deep
inside ourselves.

Searches for a kid or for a son
were always
The beginning of a new religion
in these mountains.

In the poem "In the Mountains of Jerusalem" there are images of thorns,

rocks, ruins, flowers—"Everything here is busy with the task of remembering:/ the ruin remembers, the garden remembers,/ the cistern remembers its water and the memorial grove remembers on a marble plaque a distant holocaust. . . ." But the poem turns to *not* remembering—"But names are not important in these hills. . . . For in these mountains only summer and winter are important,/ only the dry and the wet; and even people/ are just reservoirs scattered around/ like wells and cisterns and fountains."

There are poems about children, Amichai as father peeping into his children's bedroom, showing guests his loved ones "Like a ship's captain, who, after the dinner party,/ Shows his guests the engine room. . . ." Poems about women, desire, the pain of love, especially one poignantly comic poem called "Straight From Your Prejudice" where Amichai writes: "I want to Judaize you with my circumcised body/ I want to bind you in phylacteries from top to bottom/. . . to kiss your thighs./ Like a mezuzah at the door." Ending with—"I almost/ Succeeded./ But when you cried, tears shone in your eyes/ Like snow and Christmas trimmings."

There are many poems of Jerusalem. "Jerusalem is Full of Used Jews" is a poem of bitterness and sorrow: "Jerusalem is full of Jews used by history/ Second-hand Jews, with small flaws, bargains"; and later in the poem, "Jerusalem is full of tired Jews/ Always whipped into memorial days and feasts/ Like bears dancing on aching legs." Another poem is about the families and tensions in Jerusalem: "A mother from a Russian curse, a father from a Spanish curse,/ A sister from an Arab curse and brothers from a Torah curse/. . . They are all mines on fixed fuses." Another poem is about the ironies of tourists who visit Jerusalem where "They weep over our sweet boys/ And lust over our tough girls/ And hang up their underwear/ To dry quickly/ In cool, blue bathrooms."

Perhaps the essential difference between these two, both fine poets, is this: Shapiro's poetry stands out as the work of the quintessential lone American. He is honest, unflinching, but above all else, he is solitary. There is no real union with anyone or anything in *The Light Holds*—not with other poets,

not with nature, not with America, not with history, not with family nor people.

In the poem "San Francisco" Shapiro writes "What is always there, / out the window, is the failure I feel / before America, my inability to make it rhyme / with my interior weather. . . ." In the final poem of *The Light Holds*, "A Jerusalem Notebook," Shapiro says a prayer for himself, hoping for unity, vision, and connection.

Amichai's poems, however, seem emblematic of a voice that writes out of a community. Whatever the tone of the poem—joy, sorrow, bitterness, cynicism—Amichai belongs to a group, a land, and is part of a historical continuity. Thus even his personal pain takes on a larger context and meaning because of his connectedness. His criticisms, too, are voiced as one *within* the many, such as in "For Ever and Ever, Sweet Distortions" where he asks

What's the Jewish people? The
quota that can be killed in
training,
That's the Jewish people,

Which has not yet grown up, like
a child that still uses the
Baby talk of its first years,
And still can't say
God's real name but says *Elokim*,
Hashem, *Adonai*,
Dada, Gaga, Yaya, for ever and
ever, sweet distortions.

Amichai, in an interview I conducted with him on January 22, 1984, after his reading at The Writer's Center in Bethesda, Maryland, said that what he feels when he writes is "a great tranquility." The final poem in this volume, "Great Tranquility: Questions and Answers" is an epigrammatic, compact vision of Amichai's own escape hatch—which is poetry.

Poet Ted Hughes likened Amichai's poetry to "the undersong of a people."

As an American, I understand Shapiro's sad and lonely vision quite well, but as a writer and a Jew, I envy Amichai's.

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