

Jewish Ideas Weekly

www.jewishideasdaily.com

February 17-24, 2012

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 17

Redefining Religious Activity

By Meir Soloveichik

Last month the administration ruled that U.S. health insurance plans must generally cover contraceptive services. The ruling exempted religious employers—but not those that employ or serve many people who are not of the employers' own faith. Thus, Catholic hospitals, colleges, and charities were not exempt. Last week, responding to opposition, the administration announced an accommodation under which these organizations' insurers, not the organizations themselves, would cover contraception.

There have been reactions on both sides. Some challenge Catholic charities' right to the exemption. Others ask whether, accommodation or no, the charities will have to fund services to which they object.

In testimony yesterday before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Rabbi Meir Soloveichik of New York's Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, and Director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University, emphasized a different problem. The accommodation, he noted, treats some religious organizations as entitled to First Amendment protection and others—those that serve other faiths—as not meriting protection. This distinction is alien not only to Christianity, but quintessentially to Judaism, whose essence lies not only in “wrapping oneself in the blatant trappings of religious observance such as phylacteries” but in morally engaging with the world, Jewish or not. It would follow that Jews should be among those most disturbed by the compromise. The present storm over Catholics and contraception, it seems, exposes more fundamental fault lines in the current political accommodation to religion in America. —The Editors

In August of 1790, Moses Seixas, a leading member of the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, composed a letter to then-President George Washington, who was visiting Newport. In his letter, Seixas gave voice to his people's love of America and its liberties. “Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free citizens,” wrote Seixas, “we now (with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty disposer of all events) behold . . . a Government which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance.” Washington responded with sentiments that Jews hold dear to this day. “The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves,” wrote Washington, “for giving to Mankind . . . a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.”

On Friday, in an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal*, I joined Catholic and Protestant leaders in protesting a violation of religious freedom stemming from the Department of Health and Human Services' new directive obligating religious organizations employing or serving members of other faiths to facilitate acts that those religious organizations consider violations of their religious tradition. Later the same day, the administration announced what it called an “accommodation”: not religious organizations but rather insurance companies would be the ones paying for the prescriptions and procedures that a faith community may find violative of its religious tenets. This putative accommodation is, however, no accommodation at all. The religious organizations would still be obligated to provide employees

with an insurance policy that facilitates acts violating the organization's religious tenets. Although the religious leaders of the American Catholic community communicated this on Friday evening, the administration has refused to change its position, thereby insisting that a faith community must either violate a tenet of its faith, or be penalized.

What I wish to focus on this morning is the exemption to the new insurance policy requirements that the administration did

carve out from the outset: to wit, exempting from the new insurance policy obligations religious organizations that do *not* employ or serve members of other faiths. From this exemption carved out by the administration, at least two important corollaries follow. First: by carving out an exemption, however narrow, the administration implicitly acknowledges that forcing employers to purchase these insurance policies may involve

a violation of religious freedom. Second, the administration implicitly assumes that those who employ or help others of a different religion are no longer acting in a religious capacity, and as such are not entitled to the protection of the First Amendment.

This betrays a complete misunderstanding of the nature of religion. For Orthodox Jews, religion and tradition govern not only praying in a synagogue, or studying Torah in a *beit midrash*, or wrapping oneself in the blatant trappings of religious observance such as phylacteries. Religion and tradition also inform our conduct in the less obvious manifestations of religious belief, from feeding the hungry, to assessing medical ethics, to a million and one things in between. Maimonides, one of Judaism's greatest talmudic



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scholars and philosophers, and also a physician of considerable repute, stresses in his *Code of Jewish Law* that the commandment to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart” is achieved not through cerebral contemplation only but also requires study of the sciences, and engagement in the natural world, as this inspires true appreciation of the wisdom of the Almighty. In refusing to extend religious liberty beyond the parameters of what the administration chooses to deem religious conduct, the administration denies

people of faith the ability to define their religious activity. Therefore, not only does the new regulation threaten religious liberty in the narrow sense, in requiring Catholic communities to violate their religious tenets, but also the administration impedes religious liberty by unilaterally redefining what it means to be religious.

Washington concluded his missive to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport by saying: “May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and

enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants—while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.” Benefiting from two centuries of First Amendment protections in the United States, the Jewish “children of the stock of Abraham” must speak up when the liberties of conscience afforded their fellow Americans are threatened and when the definition of religion itself is being redefined by bureaucratic fiat. Thank you for the opportunity to do so this morning.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 20

Rose-Colored Glasses

By Allan Arkush

Jacqueline Rose, a noted professor of English in the United Kingdom and the author of many works of literary criticism, has stepped beyond the academic precincts where she first made her name to produce, over the past decade or so, a substantial opus dealing with Zionism and Israel. Her books on these subjects possess the veneer of expertise and have been published by prestigious university presses. Princeton brought out *The Question of Zion* in 2005 and now Chicago has published her *Proust among the Nations: From Dreyfus to the Middle East*. Jacqueline Rose has consequently acquired the status of an authority.

This is unfortunate, since she often doesn't know what she is talking about. The thinness of her learning is most apparent when she writes in venues where she is not subject to any serious fact-checking. Take, for instance, her article “The Zionist Imagination” in the *Nation* in June of 2006 where she describes Menahem Begin recalling “the moment he issued the order for the revolt in 1937 against the British authorities in Palestine.” She's off by seven crucial years. In a 2005 interview with openDemocracy, she sagely reports what Ahad Ha'am was saying in the 1930s and 1940s (many years after his death). In the original version of *The Question of Zion* she cites a 1947 utterance of Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky (who died in 1940), but this blunder was somehow corrected in the subsequent paperback edition.

If you think this is mere nitpicking, take a look at Alexander Yakobson's exhaustive and devastating analysis of *The Question of Zion*, and you'll see that it's just the tip of the iceberg. The real problem with Rose, however, is not her factual errors but her bad

arguments. And they haven't been getting any better.

She is not, to be sure, the worst sort of anti-Zionist. In *Proust among the Nations* she reminds us of her refusal in 2008 to sign a letter protesting Israel's sixtieth anniversary celebration because the letter equated Zionism with Nazism. Instead, she tells us, she signed a different letter, one that merely “noted Israel's continuing oppression of the Palestinians as a reason not to celebrate.” But even if Israel were to pull back from all of the territory taken in the Six-Day War, it's unlikely that we would find Rose dancing in the streets on its Independence Day.

From her point of view, things went awry not in 1967 but in 1947, when the United Nations partitioned Palestine. In the longest chapter of *Proust among the Nations* Rose lambastes the very idea of territorial partition as a solution to ethnic crises. She approvingly cites historian Aamir Mufti's description of its imposition in Palestine as a repetition of “the very mode of thought, the historical process which, in the case of the Jews of Europe, it was intended to resolve.” In practice, she contends, partition had dire consequences, the ethnic transfer of masses of Palestinian Arabs and the subjugation of others, which amounted to the creation of “a new, still unresolved injustice.”

In *The Question of Zion*, Rose strongly regrets that this injustice was not forestalled by the creation of a bi-national state in 1948. In her new book she doesn't dwell on this matter at length, but seeks to undermine the idea of Jewish statehood by other means. Re-examining what is generally taken to be one of chief impetuses of Zionism, the

Dreyfus Affair, she concludes that it is not the journalist Theodor Herzl who drew the right lesson from it but the novelist Marcel Proust.

As Rose correctly notes, recent scholarship has shown that what happened to Dreyfus did not really play as large a role in converting Herzl into a Zionist as he himself

later claimed it did. But since there is after all “some truth” to the idea that “because of Dreyfus, so Israel,” Rose endeavors to turn the tables. Her “different version of the story” takes “from Dreyfus, a warning—against an overfervent nationalism, against infallible armies raised to the level of theocratic principle, against an ethnic exclusivity that blinds a people to the other peoples of

the world, and against governments that try to cover up their own crimes.” These are all things of which Israel is guilty, according to Rose, and in ways that are strongly reminiscent of the nefarious forces arrayed against Dreyfus.

As for Marcel Proust, who took up his pen against these same forces, he, it seems, brings to Rose's mind the combatants of the excesses of Zionism whom she admires, such as Jean Genet and Edward Said, and no doubt, herself. Fortuitously enough, Proust also lined up against Zionism! Admittedly, there are “only two references” to the movement “throughout the whole of *À La Recherche*,” but they are “unsympathetic to the point of disparagement.” We need hardly doubt that his opposition to Zionism was deep-seated, since he was a man “longing for a world of permeable boundaries,” not partitions between peoples. He is thus someone worthy of being claimed as a precursor.

Rose's eagerness to enlist Proust in her



cause reminds me of the way some Zionists have done much the same thing with Spinoza, who can be credited with only one vaguely proto-Zionist utterance. Neither claim holds water. Nor can either of them

serve as the anchor for a serious analysis of Zionism or Israeli policy—something with which it would in any case be unreasonable to expect Jacqueline Rose to provide us. In the meantime, we can take a little bit of

solace, however, from her refusal to equate Zionism with Nazism, even as she writes a book with no other purpose than to enumerate its similarities to what she herself identifies as “protofascism.”

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 21

Material World

By Michael Carasik

When is a text not a text? When it is an object. When a Torah scroll is held up in the air so that congregants can view its columns of words, it is not being read. The words that the congregation chants—“And this is the Teaching that Moses put before the Israelites, at the command of the LORD through the hand of Moses”—are indeed found in the scroll, but in two different places. The first phrase comes from Deuteronomy 4:44; the second occurs four times in the book of Numbers (as well as once in Joshua). The combined sentence is not found in the Torah at all. In any case, it is not a statement of fact or a textual citation, but something quite different: a pledge of allegiance.

The importance of this sort of observation is the premise of a growing scholarly field that examines the “materiality” of texts: not just how new technologies (e.g., moveable type) change the ways texts are produced and read, but also the role the objects containing the texts—from scrolls to screens—play in the lives of those who encounter them. Harvard University and the University of Pennsylvania, and perhaps others as well, have ongoing seminars in “The History of the Book” to examine just such questions. Penn Press has a “Material Texts” series centered on this growing field of study.

Peter Shteynberg, the director of Penn’s “History of the Book” seminar, was a fellow at Penn’s Center for Advanced Judaic Studies (now the Katz Center) in 2001–2002. Though his work does not focus primarily on Jewish texts, his participation that year encouraged each of the other fellows to think about the material component of their own

texts. Those seeds were planted in fertile soil; by now, studies on the materiality of text have established a solid foothold in Jewish studies.

This is a major change. Jewish scholars in the past, whether in religious settings or, since the 19th century, in the academic world, have been obsessed with the words of Jewish texts, sometimes even to the exclusion of the physical world described in those words. But newer studies are beginning to recognize that the words of a text do

not convey its entire meaning. A recent book called *Jewish Studies at the Crossroads of Anthropology and History* (University of Pennsylvania Press), edited by Raanan Boustan, Oren Kosansky, and Marina Rustow, provides an opportunity to sample the new approach:

- In “Judaism and Tradition: Continuity, Change, and Innovation,” Albert Baumgarten

and Marina Rustow look at how the scroll, originally a standard medium for all texts, changed to a format “reserved as the vehicle for books that made special claims on tradition.” Ironically, Torah scrolls containing all five books of the Pentateuch were unusually rare in the ancient world, perhaps existing in the Jerusalem Temple alone. Only one fragment of the Dead Sea Scrolls contains as many as three of the five books; only five contain as many as two. (It goes without saying that “the Teaching that Moses put before the Israelites” was not written in the same script as modern Torah scrolls. The Aramaic letter forms used today replaced the original paleo-Hebrew alphabet only in the middle of the first millennium B.C.E., a technological as well as a cultural change.)

- In “Words, Images, and Magic: The Protection of the Bride and Bridegroom in Jewish Marriage Contracts,” Shalom Sabar looks at the *ketubah* not in its contrac-

tual aspects but as “an object with a conspicuous physical presence.” Maimonides notes that if a woman is not in physical possession of her marriage contract, her husband is not allowed to spend “a single hour” with her. It is the object, not the words of the agreement, that is paramount. The designs that accompany the language of the text, too, are not merely esthetic. They also reveal the preoccupations and cultural connections of the Jews who create or purchase the *ketubot* containing them. (The tradition of drawing in the stem of a ך just before the signing of the *ketubah* so the contract can be said to have been written at the time of the ceremony—is another aspect in which materiality trumps content.)

- In “Prayer, Literacy, and Literary Memory in the Jewish Communities of Medieval Europe,” Ephraim Kanarfogel uses the lens of a talmudic statement—that verses from the written Torah may not be recited from memory but must be read from a text—to examine everything from levels of literacy through the availability of prayer books to the logistics of synagogue lighting. (In this case, materiality also opens a window on spirituality.)

Work of this kind is beginning to shed light not just on the major thinkers of the Jewish past but on the ways in which the lives and practices of ordinary Jews have changed through the ages. Some, no doubt, will take advantage of this new field to avoid the hard work of philology and history that serious scholarly examination of texts entails. But those skills remain essential if studies of the materiality of texts are to prove fruitful. If the recently announced Afghanistan genizah scrolls are authenticated, textual scholars of the first rank will be needed to interpret them—not just as texts, but as objects too. If the studies described above are any indication, Jewish scholars are ready for the task.



Do Jews Have a Mormon Problem?

By Elliot Jager

The religious values of presidents seldom satisfactorily explain their attitudes toward the Jews. Franklin Roosevelt's Episcopalian faith could not have foretold his hard-hearted policies during the Holocaust. Harry Truman and Jimmy Carter, both Baptists, went in opposite directions, with Truman quick to grant Israel diplomatic recognition and Carter conspicuous in his anti-Israelism. Who knows to what extent Barack Obama's affiliation with the United Church of Christ provides any insight into his administration's erratic, often disquieting policies toward Jerusalem?

Still, it is hard to disregard completely the religious and moral values of the leading presidential candidates. The narrowing of the Republican nomination field to Mitt Romney and Someone Else has made barely a ripple in Israel to date. Israel's media dutifully covered Romney's complaint that Obama has been too quick to chasten the Jewish state and his pledge to make Israel his first foreign destination if elected. However, should Romney capture the nomination, Israelis, as Americans have done, will probably find themselves getting a crash course on his Mormon faith.

They might begin at the strikingly handsome campus of the Jerusalem Center of Brigham Young University, run by the Mormons (more properly, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) and situated on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. On the campus, Sunday evening classical concerts and Thursday night jazz *divertimentos* take place in a congenial auditorium offering panoramic Jerusalem views. But the well-bred Mormon students and staff do not draw much attention—and that is the way everyone likes it.

It was in 1841, within a few decades of its founding by Joseph Smith in New York State, that the Church dispatched Apostle Orson Hyde to Jerusalem on a fact-finding tour. But only with the city's liberation in 1967 did the Church begin routinely sending believers to the Holy Land for religious studies. Mormonism was last spotlighted in Israel in 1985, when Brigham Young University first sought to establish a presence there. It drew vociferous hostility from the ultra-Orthodox because of the Mormons' earlier missionary

activities in Israel. But the facility had the support of the late mayor Teddy Kollek and then-prime minister Shimon Peres; and after Church authorities pledged in writing not to engage in missionary activities in Israel, the campus opened in 1988.

Nowadays, 160 students can be accommodated at the Jerusalem campus (it closed for six years during the second intifada because of safety concerns). There is every reason to believe the Mormons have honored their commitment to "show Israeli Jews what the Church is about by example rather than by proselytizing."



Mormons see themselves as Christians, although to the consternation of Christian fundamentalists, some of them identify Jesus with the God of the Hebrew Bible and hold a schismatic view of the Trinity in which God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost are three distinct deities. Like Christian Zionists, Mormons believe that the Jewish return to the Land of Israel is a precursor to the second coming of the Christian messiah.

Mormon theology is particularly philo-Semitic. The faithful consider their Church part of the House of Israel. They deem themselves spiritual descendants of the Israelite tribe of Ephraim—which escaped Babylonian captivity by migrating to North America around 586 B.C.E., though their civilization disappeared around 400 C.E. (The Book of Mormon has the tribe fleeing Jerusalem prior to the Babylonian conquest.) Mormons believe their scripture, revealed to Smith by an angel, contains writings by ancient prophets including Lehi, whom God commanded to lead those Israelites to America.

Mormons attribute significance to the Jewish calendar. Many of their spiritual milestones parallel Jewish festivals. There are also dietary laws: Eating meat is restricted, while alcohol, tobacco, and coffee are prohibited. The cross does not commonly adorn Mormon houses of worship.

But in some ways, Mormons are unique. Polygamy has been forbidden since 1890; but unlike either Christians or Jews, Mormons believe that the canon remains open and God still communicates directly with the righteous.

And Mormonism is emphatically a missionary faith. Romney was almost killed while a missionary in France, in a bizarre traffic accident involving a head-on collision with a vehicle driven by a Catholic priest. To this day, Mormons take what will strike some Israelis as an unnerving delight in converting American Jews. Moreover, in a rite that drew Jewish ire, the Church once engaged in virtual baptisms of Jews murdered in the Shoah in order to allow their souls salvation. Once Mormons learned of the depth of Jewish objections to this practice, they agreed to stop it (and they generally have, with some recent controversial aberrations).

None of this should present a problem for Jews comfortable with their Judaism. Theologically, Jews tend to be libertarian about other faiths; politically, by September 2011, a third of Jewish voters were disposed to vote for Romney over Obama.

What might this mean for the pragmatic Romney? Utah State University historian Philip Barlow argues that Romney's faith might inform but would not determine his Mideast policies: "His character was in part shaped by Mormonism, but one only needs to compare Romney, Jon Huntsman, and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid to note that Mormons are not made from cookie cutters." Regarding Romney's profession of friendship to Israel, Barlow points out that "Mormons' history, popular culture, and theology really do give them a sense of regard for Israel's role in history and world affairs, and a sense"—from the Mormons' perspective—"of shared identity."

As a former governor, Romney has no real foreign policy track record. How does he understand the Islamist threat to Western values? What are his thoughts on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's approach to a two-state solution? Does he back President George Bush's 1967-plus approach to Israel's boundaries? Much remains to be revealed.

Other presidents have entered the White House with an innate sympathy for Israel only to see their policies towed in the opposite direction. But in the course of the unfolding presidential campaign, Americans—and, from afar, Israelis—will learn something of the Mormon Romney's politics, values, and understanding of the world.

Evil Genius

By Alex Joffe

Very little anti-Semitic literature is new; most of its tropes seem ageless, continually recombined and updated by haters reacting only dimly to their actual circumstances. Few anti-Semitic works exhibit literary or lesser, sociological gifts. The one exception is *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

What we know as the Protocols was created in late 19th-century Czarist Russia from French prototypes and purports to be the minutes of a meeting at which Jewish 'elders' laid out their comprehensive plan for world domination. The text is deviously adaptable to dramatically differing circumstances spanning the three centuries from its creation until today. No other anti-Semitic myth has spoken so insinuatingly to the political left and right, to societies as fundamentally contrasting as those of Europe and the Middle East. Nor has any other such text been so widely studied.

Three new books examine the *Protocols*. Two scholarly works, *The Global Impact of The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, edited by Esther Webman, and *The Paranoid Apocalypse: A Hundred Year Retrospective on The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, edited by Richard Landes and Steven T. Katz, analyze the text's origins, spread, and influence. In Colombia during the 1930s and 1940s, the *Protocols* were introduced by Jesuits and used by the right against liberals, who were accused of belonging to a Judeo-Masonic conspiracy. In South Africa, the *Protocols* made the predictable shift from radical-right to radical-Islamist text. The *Protocols* play a role in the conspiracy theories of Lyndon LaRouche, neo-Nazis, 9/11 Truthers, and the Nation of Islam, to name only a few.

We can now chart the impact of the *Protocols* on anti-Semitism in places like Turkey, where it is promoted by right-wing nationalists lately aligned with Islamists, or even places without Jews, like Japan, where right-wing circles developed a fascination with Jews and "revelations" of Jewish control were tinged with respect, even admiration. A perhaps-more-benign version is the current Korean vogue for Talmud, another variation of Secrets of Success of a Small, Dispersed People.

But explaining the intellectual and sensual appeal of the Protocols is difficult for academ-

ics, who frequently resort to vague constructs like "secular religion." Fortunately, Umberto Eco's novel *The Prague Cemetery* has filled the void with the panache and cunning we would expect from the singular historian of symbols and author of *Foucault's Pendulum*. The protagonist of *Prague Cemetery*—Simone Simonini, a Piedmontese forger, agent provocateur and, ultimately, author of the *Protocols*—is fictional. But all the other characters are factual, brought to life from historical texts by Eco's imagination.

Simonini is genuinely animated by his hatreds—especially of Jews, a sentiment he learned at his grandfather's knee. He is also the ultimate opportunist. He uses his gifts for forgery, conspiracy, and bomb-building to satisfy his own cupidity and gluttony; along the way, he will serve any master. He is enlisted by the Jesuits and their enemies, Italian nationalists and monarchists, the French, Prussians, and Russians to spin tales and plots that stoke the history and hatreds of the 19th century and prefigure Europe's 20th-century cataclysm.

These tales and plots come to a point around anti-Semitism. At the direction of his employers, Simonini spins all the contradictory anti-Semitic variations, harmonizing them into fictions that illuminate the "higher truth" about the Jews. They also serve higher purposes—Simonini's pursuit of pleasure and his masters' efforts to manipulate the masses.

The known history of the *Protocols* continually overlays Eco's imaginary one. Simonini winds his way through a 19th century depicted in lavish historical and gastronomic detail by a peerless scholar. Garibaldi and Dreyfus appear as pawns. Jews move up and down the pantheon of villains according to the needs of the day. The fictional Simonini—as Eco imagines him in consultation with real anti-Semitic authors like Maurice Joly and Hermann Goedsche—moves from the anti-Semitism of the socialist Paris Commune to the late 19th-century anti-Semitism of the right. Finally, his pursuit of what he calls the "Universal Form of every possible conspiracy" reaches its culmination in his authorship of the grand unified anti-Semitism of the Protocols.

The evil genius of the *Protocols* is that it

successfully unites the otherwise-mutually-exclusive fears of pre-modern, industrial, and post-modern worlds. In the Protocols, Jews devise capitalism and industrialization—but also Socialism and Communism. Domination-seeking Jews are easily transferred from their original venue, the crumbling kingdoms and fractious nation-states of 19th-century Europe, to 20th-century America or 21st-century anywhere.

That these contradictions should have had such purchase testifies not only to the genius of Simonini's historical counterparts but the rapacity of the secret services and other political conspiracists dishing up fantasies to the masses and the psychological needs of masses themselves, who moved from religiosity to secularism and nihilism within mere decades.

There are ironies. Animated by the *Protocols*' Jewish aspirations to world domination, Nazis and Communists came perilously close to achieving the same. The *Protocols*' Jewish schemes for press control have been implemented by

the Jews' enemies. The *Protocols* depicted Jewish Socialism; Socialists now rail against Jewish capital. The Protocols is not simply mythology but a veritable all-purpose totalitarian's handbook.

The *Protocols* are also a Mobius strip of inspiration and repetition: Denial equals not just confirmation but renewal. Almost from the beginning, scholars and statesmen have tried to expunge the work and break the chain. But they have failed; and today's scholars, despite their industry, seem unlikely to do better.

Simonini himself points to one way out. Bored with life after having delivered the *Protocols*, his masterpiece, to the Russians, he undertakes one final mission for the French; he will perpetrate one finale outrage and, thus, provide himself with one final opportunity to feel. So Simonini, carrying a bomb, makes his way into the tunnels that will become the Paris Underground—and disappears. The thread is finally cut, and the anonymous narrator begins to extract himself from Simonini's web.

In this way, perhaps Eco's turning the *Protocols* from mythology to fiction is a necessary step in disarming it.



English translation (U.S., 1934.)

Trumah: Furnishing God's House

Exodus 21:1–24:18

By Michael Carasik

Suppose you had super powers.

Suppose you could appear anywhere on earth instantaneously. Suppose you could paralyze the leader of the world's most powerful nation so that he was helpless to act while you launched disaster after disaster against his country and its people. Suppose you could take 600,000 enslaved men—not to mention women and children—out of that leader's nation, and rescue them from slavery in a single day. Suppose you could move them into an uninhabited wilderness and still make sure they all had enough to eat and drink. Suppose you could appear in a tiny fire in a bush, or in a tremendous thunderstorm, accompanied by an earthquake, whenever and wherever you liked.

If you had such powers . . . what would you be looking for in the way of home furnishings?

That is the question answered by this week's portion, in which God instructs Moses to tell the Israelites to gather materials and "make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them" (Exodus 25:8). (In a couple of weeks, it will become clear to God that He needs to hire a professional decorator—Bezalel, son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, after whom Israel's most famous art school is named.) Yakov Meir calls this sanctuary "a project that is much more radical than all the miracles that have been depicted up until now, entailing construction of God's house on earth." God has chosen the family of His friend Abraham to be His long-term human companions, and they must build a suitable residence for Him.

Not content to wait until the Israelites actually get to Canaan and build a temple, God wants a "Tabernacle"—in Hebrew, a *mishkan*, a "dwelling place"—and He wants it now.

The Tabernacle is the topic of all but three chapters of the rest of the book of Exodus:



first the instructions for building and furnishing it, and then (after the interlude of Exodus 32–34) the actual construction of it. Its completion, and God's arrival to take up residence, provide the climax of the book. The Israelites are still a long way from home, but the story of the exodus is complete when God moves into *His* home.

Given that this Tabernacle must accompany the Israelites on their journey, it is not a permanent house but a tent that can be dismantled, transported, and set up again quickly at a new location. Nonetheless, it is to be made of the richest materials: gold and silver, acacia wood, fine linen, even "dolphin skin." But what does it contain?

In fact, it contains more or less what we would expect to find in a house made by a well-to-do Israelite for a holy personage, as we learn from the biblical story of the prophet Elisha:

One day Elisha passed through Shunem. There was a well-to-do woman there who insisted he stop in for a meal. Eventually he would stop in for a meal whenever he passed by. The woman said to her husband, "I know he is a holy man of God, and he passes this way all the time. Let us add on a little room on the second floor and put a bed, a table, a chair, and a lampstand there for him, so that he can stay there whenever he visits us." (2 Kings 4:8–10)

And indeed, we find that the Tabernacle has a table, to be used for the bread of display (Exodus 25:23–30), and a golden lampstand (Exodus 25:31–40).

It is not quite so obvious—the word is never used in plain Hebrew—but the Tabernacle has a chair as well, and a dramatic one, as befits the Creator of the Universe. It is not so much a chair as a throne (and that is what the Hebrew word used by the woman from Shunem means everywhere else it is found in the Bible). Unlike the table and the lampstand, it is inside the Holy of Holies rather than in the outer room; for it is formed by the cover of the Ark, the gold-plated wooden box containing the Tablets of the Covenant, and the mysterious creatures, the cherubim, who spread out their wings over it. The God who cannot be represented by an image of any creature on land, in the sea, or in the air, is given a dramatic, empty throne to serve as His home on earth.

Just one thing is missing in the Tabernacle from the furniture provided for Elisha. There is a table, a chair, and a lampstand—but no bed.

It will not be necessary. "The guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps" (Psalms 121:4).