

For those of us who developed a deep affection for that mischievous ox of *Baba Qamma* (who can forget the hilarious episode in which, while attempting to gore a blind heathen, he tramples instead a pregnant woman and then escapes to the countryside only to fall into an abandoned pit?), it is a thrill to find him still as precocious as ever, always a tail away from the stones of the Establishment. Similarly, such favourites as the Discredited Witnesses, the Nocturnal Seminal Emission, the Figs of the Sabbatical Year, and especially that inseparable trio: the Deaf-Mute, the Fool, and the Minor — these and many more will return to delight you in the present volume.

Nevertheless, there are a number of characters whose roles in the *Bavli* have been severely cut, or altogether, as-it-were, forgotten. In some cases, one can regard such changes with a measure of justification — for example: the Sacrifice Squad from the Temple was apparently introduced during the height of the Sin-Offering fad of the 'forties; but who these days can really be titillated by such crude sadistic efforts? Nevertheless even here there is cause for regret, for in doing away with the trite sacrificial scenes (apparently yielding to subtle pressures from Vespasian and his henchmen), we are also deprived of one of the most enchanting and enigmatic figures of the *Mishnah*, that of the High Priest (Cohen Gadol), whose previously super-human posture as the Manson-like demagogue of a primitive, but colourful phallic cult, has been reduced almost cruelly to a schlemiel, now preoccupied with marital problems and domestic bickering. Such is the fate of the nonfunctional tradition in a pragmatic world.

It is also disappointing that little that is really new has been introduced to substitute for what has been discarded. Most of the action involves merely repeated elaboration and rehashing, albeit sometimes ingenious, on themes that were well-discussed in the *Mishnah*. Nevertheless new characters are introduced. By far the dominant figures are Abaye and Rava, a team whose persistent slapstick routines, corny as they might seem, mark them as suitable replacements for Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael. Similarly the transference of the greater part of the action to Babylonia (with the exotic names of its places and people — Nahardea, Sura, Pappa, Iddi, etc.) adds a distinct freshness which the *Yerushalmi* could not claim.

One irritating feature of the *Bavli* is particularly unforgivable in view of the *Bavli's* own persistent efforts to remove the same fault from the *Mishnah*; I refer to the problem of unresolved themes. Such dangling prepositions filled the *Mishnah*, and the *Bavli*, with sleuth-work that would put Fearless Fosdick to shame, succeeded in identifying many of the mysterious, anonymous "Tanna Qamma's" (as they whimsically call these shadowy figures, who materialize in scores of identities, taking on plurality at times), as well as to forcefully decide arguments in the most heated of conflicts. Having recognized the editors' uncanny skills along these lines, it is particularly unforgivable that the *Bavli* should stand guilty of the same literary faults. One can only assume that, at the expense of the readers' satisfaction, the publishers are trying to render inevitable the release of yet another tedious but lucrative sequel.

May I suggest that the *Talmud* would make a particularly fitting gift for anyone with three or more arms (or for someone uninhibited in the use of his feet) — such is the nature of the text that he has to keep fingers in a variety of

embarrassing places simultaneously, in order to keep track of the steady counterpoint of kibbitzing that continuously emerges from the margins (cf. apparently a hellenistic Jewish variation on the Aragones cartoons in *Mad Magazine*) in the persons of such proficient backseat drivers as Rashi and the Tosaphot and their stooges. The former usually plays straightman. The latter, actually a well-financed dynastic corporation from France, makes one of the most consistently upheld attempts, since Socrates, to provoke a punch in the mouth.

Moreover it is a work of, to put it succinctly, rare relevance. While avoiding overworked issues, it boldly tackles problems from which most pundits today conspicuously flee: The measure of ritual impurity that results from contact with a gonorrhoeal rabbit in a tent; whether an *eruv* should consist of a plank and a stake or of two stakes; whether it was Rabbi Eliezer or Rabbi Joshua who exempted the High Priest from alimony payments in the case of a kidnapped divorcee — and all the other questions that have been keeping you awake in front of your television.

In short — and the *Talmud* is certainly not — the *Bavli* contains something for everybody, and even a hell of a lot for nobody. Aside from intrigue, action and sex (the more recent editions contain an index of "good parts" by Rabbi Hayyim of Plotsk, the 18th-century pilpulist and lecher), we must not forget that we are really dealing with a glorified "How-To" book, in which the great Jewish minds of hundreds of years fight each other to the death to offer you recipes, legal and medical advice, and, primarily, to order you around till you're ready to cry. This perhaps is the greatness of the *Talmud* — the fact that it has embodied within itself a thousand-year-old monumental tradition of nudnikism, the minutes of countless Sunday-morning bagel-bakery symposia, the nitpicking and vacillation of generations of kvetches. Not for the squeamish.

Roland B. Gittelsohn

"A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE"
A Reply to Mark Winer

It is with extreme reluctance and only after much hesitation that I reply to the article by my young friend and colleague, Mark Winer. For one thing, I am not eager to escalate the polarization within the Reform rabbinate to which he refers and which, I fear, his words have exacerbated. In addition, he has made several and valuable suggestions, which ought not be lost in a forensic haze. Unfortunately, however, the facts on which Rabbi Winer bases his conclusions are less than totally true. If left unchallenged, they can do a great deal more harm than these words of rejoinder.

I do not consider myself competent to comment on Mark's criticisms of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion curriculum. Suffice it to say that those of us who know Dr. Alfred Gottschalk well are fully confident that he is aware of its inadequacies and extremely anxious for improvement.

Happily, Winer approves the selection of Dr. Gottschalk as the new HUC-JIR President, though he is dissatisfied with the methods pursued in making that