

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

choice. But why does he insist on regurgitating Eugene Borowitz's canard that the faculty vetoed "any strong personality" despite the fact that he quotes my subsequent denial of this assertion? If he doubts my word, let him question any other members of the Selection Committee. They will assure him, as I already have, that the official faculty representative on the Committee brought in one name and one name only, to which his colleagues expressed objection as a candidate for the presidency. He was specifically asked, moreover, by the Committee, whether there were any others with whom the faculty felt it would be difficult for them to work, and he decisively replied in the negative. Rabbi Winer does no service to the College-Institute or to our movement as a whole by casting doubt on this incontrovertible truth, then using his own doubt as ammunition to reinforce his attack.

Because I have known and admired Mark Winer since his undergraduate years at Harvard, I am genuinely saddened at his disappointment in me. He writes: "Perhaps most tragic is the apparent fate of the former prophet now in power, defending the status quo. What Borowitz did which disturbed Gittelsohn so profoundly was to reveal that Reform Judaism is as fraught with tension as all other contemporary institutions." This is not what disturbed me at all; rather the fact that Dr. Borowitz saw fit to ventilate his personal pique by making an unfair and untrue accusation which unfortunately reflected on the honor of the HUC-JIR faculty, of the entire Selection Committee and of the newly-chosen president. I see nothing prophetic in this kind of behavior. Nor do I agree that prophecy requires one to attack *everything* in the status quo or uphold *all* attempts to undermine it.

It is the Central Conference of American Rabbis, however, which I know best among the major institutions of Reform Judaism, and on which I am therefore most qualified to comment. What really bothers Mark regarding the election procedures of the Conference? First he declares that they are "conducted in an autocratic manner," that the "choice was clearly made before the procedures, and was dutifully rubber-stamped under a cloud of legitimacy." In the next breath he complains that the nominee duly named in this "autocratic manner" was *not* "rubber-stamped" by the convention, that instead another man, nominated from the floor in accord with the democratic procedures of the Conference, was elected. Is it the method of election which bothers Rabbi Winer, or the fact that the candidate he preferred was not victorious?

It is blatantly untrue that Leonard Beerman was not elected because he is *only* 50 years of age or that he will now automatically "have to wait another ten years (until he's over 60)." Only within my own lifetime in the Central Conference there have been at least three men elected to the presidency when they were closer to Leonard Beerman's age than Robert Kahn's: James Heller, Philip Bernstein and Jacob Rudin.

I am curious, by the way, as to where or how Winer learned that "Gittelsohn assured the press and membership that there are no divisions in the CCAR." Unless I was in an hypnotic trance at the time, I recall giving no such wholesale assurance to anyone.

The one person to whom Mark Winer owes a profound apology is Rabbi Robert Kahn, Vice-President of the CCAR. Where is the integrity of asserting that "Kahn was elected not because he promised to offer inspiring leadership but

because he 'deserved' it, after decades of hard work."? Is it impossible that a man can both deserve and be eminently well-qualified for a position of leadership? In the sentence immediately preceding his inexcusable insult to an older colleague, Winer acknowledged that he sees Kahn "as a man of immense integrity, energy and intelligence." On what basis, then, is he not likely to provide inspiring leadership? Simply because he happens to have passed the age of 60? I have deep affection and high regard for the defeated candidate, Leonard Beerman. He would be the very first to acknowledge that his opponent is not only deserving but promises to provide the Reform rabbinate with superb leadership. The two candidates behaved as gentlemen during the electoral debate. They spoke words of genuine respect and praise for each other. How sad that an honest difference of opinion—faced openly, resolved democratically—must now be misinterpreted as betraying "a tight ruling clique unrepresentative of the American rabbinate."

Rabbi Winer errs also in his accusation that rabbis ordained at any seminary other than HUC-JIR "enter the CCAR and attain stature with great difficulty." The By-Laws of the Conference clearly provide that any rabbi ordained at a seminary whose curriculum and standards are judged at least equal to those of the College-Institute may be admitted quite easily. It is only those who received private *s'meechah* or who graduated from seminaries of questionable academic stature who are required to go through a more cumbersome procedure before being admitted to membership.

Finally a word about the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. Rabbi Winer's history is rusty. He states that the Union was organized "as the fund-raising institution for HUC." The fact is that the founding of the Union preceded that of the College. An earlier failure in attempting to organize a Reform seminary in this country convinced Isaac Mayer Wise that such a school could succeed only if there were first established a body of congregations which would have an immediate existential need for rabbis trained on these shores. Historically and legally the UAHC is the patron and organizer of HUC-JIR.

Had Winer known a little more about the methods of the Commission on Jewish Education, he could not have made so egregious an error as to state that "because the UAHC publishes textbooks, it must develop curricula to utilize these books, regardless of their quality." Wrong again! Most of the books commissioned and accepted by the Union are the outgrowth of curricular studies which indicate the need for them in order successfully to implement the kind of curriculum previously projected. The Commission on Jewish Higher Education, moreover, has for many years recommended the books of other publishers where it felt they could add to the quality of instruction offered in our schools. Indeed, if the UAHC in fact followed the course of which Rabbi Winer accuses it, its Publication Department would not now be faced with so severe a financial emergency.

Reform Judaism needs constructive comment and criticism from its best and most reliable minds—of all ages, from every faction. Our movement and its institutions are far from perfect. But they will be improved not by indiscriminately firing buckshot in all directions and certainly not by falsifying the record. A little knowledge is still a dangerous thing.