

# Touchstones for Jewish Living

*Finding Each Other in Judaism:  
Meditations on the Rites of Passage from Birth to Immortality*

Harold M. Schulweis

(New York, UAHC Press, 2001), 120 pages

REVIEWED BY DENNIS C. SASSO

**T**he founder of modern Jewish Orthodoxy, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888), asserted that “the catechism of the Jew consists of his calendar.” Hirsch was referring to the cycle of Sabbaths, festivals and holy days that punctuate the rhythm of traditional Jewish life. For the majority of postmodern Jews living in the 21st century, this assessment is no longer relevant. Perhaps Passover, Hanukkah and Yom Kippur still claim the allegiance of the majority of today’s Jews, but the Jewish calendar as a whole has ceased to define the contours, the context and the contents of Jewish expression. We live by other schedules. A secular rhythm accentuates the flow of our days.

Most of today’s Jews find sanctity in the flow of time in the occasions that mark the cycle of life from birth through death. It is at these times that we are reminded of our Jewishness, and it is during these transi-

tions that we are open to experience the spirit of holiness and of sacred fellowship. Regrettably, the majority of American Jews come to the synagogue “by invitation only” — for a bar or bat mitzvah, a wedding and, on sadder occasions, to pay their respects at a funeral.

## Powerful Rites of Passage

In his new book, *Finding Each Other in Judaism*, Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis, whose writings have instructed and inspired a generation of rabbis and lay readers, invites us to a deeper appreciation of the spiritual and social powers inherent in the celebration and observance of the Jewish rites of passage. These are the moments when the “I” draws closer to the “we,” to the members of the family and to the community present and past.

In the introduction, Schulweis delineates two obstacles “that dissipate

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the potentiality of bringing the family closer through Judaism: riteless passages and passageless rites.” By the first he means the “secular marking of life’s stages without ritual anchorings to religious meaning or spiritual reflection,” events that are “purely private occasions free of the constraints of communal traditions . . . a birth without benediction, a wedding without sanctifying rituals, a funeral without Kaddish.”

The second obstacle, “passageless rites,” refers to ceremonies where ritual is trivialized and holiness debased. Passageless rites convert “the bar or bat mitzvah into a birthday party; the wedding into a . . . catered meal, the florist’s display and the photographer’s angle.” Quoting the dictionary, he reminds us that the term “ceremony” indeed functions so often as “an action performed with formality but lacking deep significance, form or effect.”

Schulweis’ book is intent on “overcoming the disconnection” between rite and passage. He seeks to “bridge the chasm, to properly hyphenate rite and passage, to connect believing with behaving, doing with understanding.”

## Marking the Life Cycle

Schulweis devotes six chapters to stages in the Jewish life cycle: “Birth and Brit,” “Bar and Bat Mitzvah,” “The Wedding,” “Rites of Conversion,” “In Sickness and in Health” and “Death, Dying and Immortality.” The chapters are neither “how-

to manuals” nor comparative anthropological surveys. Rather, drawing from the vast store of our religious, legal, spiritual and folkloristic heritage, each chapter blends ancient custom and wisdom with poetic imagery to paint a portrait of a stage in life that touches the soul and feeds the mind of contemporary Jews. Prose essays are followed by the author’s own poetic and reflective meditations, a bountiful treasure to be mined by lay folk and clergy alike in composing and enriching meaningful life-cycle ceremonies.

Some of the poetic selections found in this volume are familiar from other Schulweis publications (e.g. “Touch My Heart,” “Holding On and Letting Go”). Sometimes, the poetry is a bit didactic and philosophical, better used for explanation than inspiration. But, as a whole, the meditations are erudite and compelling. They teach as they touch. Schulweis exhibits a Kaplanian passion for rationality and coherence, a Heschelian sense of pathos and a Buberian urgency for encounter. The prose narrative that introduces each section eschews scholarly lingo and is intent upon rendering tradition accessible and inviting for the questioning and questioning Jew.

## A New Chemistry of Faith

Topics of the life cycle, family relations and holiday observance are woven in a seamless continuum. Thus, the section on marriage addresses the theme of divorce by sub-

tly introducing us to other experiences and expressions of family estrangement. Schulweis proposes a ritual of reconciliation that addresses the nuanced distinction between forgiveness and forgetfulness, anger and vengeance. The meditation that ends the section on the wedding, entitled “The Mitzvah of Reconciliation,” is a fitting modern *piyyut* (liturgical poem) for the Days of Awe. In Schulweis’ anthropology, psychology, sociology and theology merge in a new chemistry of faith.

In the section on conversion, Schulweis speaks of outreach in a simple and poignant manner: “We are a family, a growing family, which an increasing number of Americans not born or raised as Jews seek to join.” He reminds us that “Judaism’s birth was through conversion” and invites us to “open the gates.” The narrative portion of this chapter is disappointingly short and lacks a meaningful evaluation of the values inherent in the rituals and practices of conversion (e.g. study, *mikveh*, *bet din*). However, the meditations at the end of the chapter are sensitive and perceptive. They reflect faithfully what so many thoughtful converts have to say about the fruits of their own search and discovery of Judaism.

I found the section on “In Sickness and in Health” to be especially insightful and evocative. Schulweis

shows that a religious humanism grounded in a naturalistic theology can be spiritually fulfilling and pastorally uplifting. Meditations such as “May I Not Forget” (a modern *Birkat Hagomel* [thanksgiving blessing for safety] upon recovery) should enter into every manual for rabbis and be available for home, hospital and synagogue use.

## The Names of God

In the last chapter, “Death, Dying and Immortality,” Schulweis returns to a theme about which he has written before: the distinction between Elohim and Adonai as divine names. Elohim reflects the “reality principle,” the author of all that “is”; Adonai represents the “ideality principle,” the source of what “ought to be.” Schulweis develops these concepts and treats us to a theology that is modest and patient in the need to accept what is, yet at the same time is infused with the *hutzpah* and urgency that moves us to aspire to be partners of the divine in transforming the world for good.

In *Finding Each Other in Judaism*, Harold Schulweis provides for searching Jews and other religious seekers beautiful and meaningful touchstones for spiritual enrichment and interpersonal encounter at every stage in the life cycle.