
individual lives...Contemporary Midrash...has been a life-long pursuit, even before I called it by that name...I had no other viable path within Judaism.”

Now consider another, quite different story:

The editor of the “Living Religion” page of a large urban newspaper needed a reporter to cover a bibliodramatic course on Genesis offered by a major synagogue. Following union rules, he assigned the next reporter in line at the city desk to the story. However, as he briefed her, the reporter objected that she would have no idea how to prepare. He offered her a copy of Peter Pitzele’s book, *Our Fathers’ Wells*, and suggested that she also read the biblical passages that the course would be covering on the night she attended.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “I draw the line at having to read the Bible.”

What a wound her response betrays! Can we imagine a reporter responding to a research assignment on any other subject, “I’m sorry, I draw the line at reading...” We can only guess at what the Bible has come to signify for this young woman.

She is not alone in her suspicion and alienation. Yet, the Bible is one of the key underpinnings of Western language and culture; its language, images and stories permeate our speech, literature and art. It is an invisible glue that holds our diverse civilization together, but an adhesive that is fast rigidifying and deteriorating through disuse—and abuse.

Even “the People” are, on average, sadly ignorant of “the Book” and conflicted about their relationship to it. If ever there were a threat to Jewish continuity, this alienation would signify it. If the community is to survive, it must heal this rift between itself and its core myths, its sacred texts. In contemporary midrash dwells the potential for that healing: a re-animation of sacred text for this generation, the restoration of religious imagination to individuals, and, in an often painfully fragmented society, a profound opportunity for engagement and meaning. ✦

Metivta

■ Jonathan Omer-Man

Metivta is an unaffiliated adult academy and community based in Los Angeles. It is an unusual institution in several respects, in the content of its activities, in its

RABBI JONATHAN OMER-MAN is founder and president of Metivta.

form, and in its relationships with other Jewish institutions. I believe that some of its characteristics may be of value to others seeking new modalities for the exploration of Jewish identity. I shall describe these, but because Metivta has always been an entity in which content precedes form, we will be better served if I start with origins and go on to evolution to the present. Perhaps the story will tell it all.

It began in 1981, when I was invited by the Los Angeles Hillel Council to work with young Jews who were involved in what in those days we called cults. The program was based on a perceived need, a generous host organization with a visionary leader—Rabbi Richard Levy—and a very modest budget. Apart from that, there was no fixed form and little formal structure. Indeed, in the first couple of years there wasn’t even an appropriate space in which I could work, and I acquired a certain notoriety by conducting my counseling work over cups of coffee in the McDonald’s in the Pico-Fairfax area. The program was called “religious outreach.”

Redefinition Of Mission

This “light” structure made possible what in another, more formal setting would have been a ponderously slow process—a rapid and radical re-definition of the nature of the project. In fact this has happened on several occasions over the years, but the first was about four months after my arrival. I presented my first report to the Council on Jewish Life of the L.A. Federation, in which I made the case that the “cults” were not the problem, but were a symptom; and that the deeper issue was that many Jews experienced what they called a “lack of spirituality” in the Jewish world.

The response was remarkable and dramatic: my thesis was immediately accepted, and it was strengthened by being re-articulated in the language of communal service—that the people I was working with were not random “victims” of nefarious enemies, but were, rather, highly conspicuous members, a subset, of a much larger segment of the Jewish population, the religiously under-served. This larger group was not just 20-year-olds who had joined the Moonies, but included adult Jews of all ages who desired to explore spiritual questions, to deepen their search for meaning, and had found no way to do this in the Jewish world.

My charge was broadened, and became “ministering to the spirituality alienated.” In this context, the spiritual seekers weren’t wrong-minded or gullible fools. They were people who had never been provided with the Jewish tools that could validate and deepen their experience. And many of them, as I discovered over the years,

though ignorant of things Jewish, were often spiritually wiser than the gatekeepers by whom they felt repulsed. They were important resources that we were wasting. My task was to help them return, both as educator, by drawing them in, and as advocate, by making other institutions more hospitable to them.

My work expanded in three directions. First, the scope of the clientele grew, and I began to offer spiritual counseling to Jews of all ages who had experienced serious crises of the meaning of their lives—sometimes explicitly religious, and sometimes following encounters with catastrophe. Referrals came by word of mouth, from rabbis, and from the larger Jewish community. Secondly, I began to teach more classes, focusing on different aspects of Jewish spirituality. And thirdly, I began to work with a number of rabbis who felt that the training they had received did not satisfy their own spiritual needs.

Branching Out

Concomitant with the success of the program came the fiscal crunch of the late 1980s. This in fact became a blessing in disguise, as it precipitated a need to examine the work more systematically and less anecdotally, and forced me to find alternative sources of support. First this came from the Nathan Cummings Foundation, as part of their vision to seed and then to strengthen alternative Jewish institutions. With their encouragement and help I established what was first called the School of Traditional Jewish Meditation. I had studied traditional meditation in Jerusalem, but had taught it only to individuals. I started systematic instruction in groups, and by now about 3,000 people have taken the introductory course (about half through the continuing education department of the University of Judaism).

The meditation school flourished, and became Metivta, which now seems to be firmly based. There is a part-time faculty of eight, including the staff of our incipient healing center. We are active in the following areas:

- ▶ Service to individuals: this remains for the most part spiritual counseling.
- ▶ Cultivation of the local community: most of our “members” have acquired a practice of meditation, and desire to combine a contemplative life with an active urban existence. Nevertheless, Metivta does not offer regular religious services, and our people attend various synagogues, where they are a recognizable presence.
- ▶ The academy. This focuses on the more rigorous and demanding experiential and textual study of Jewish spirituality, but includes such diverse subjects as “spiritual counseling for therapists” and “spirituality and parenting.”

▶ Advanced students: Clearly our future lies here. Four of our students now study at rabbinic seminaries while maintaining a close connection with their home base, and four more are applying next year.

▶ Nationally, attempting to re-legitimize rigorous Jewish spirituality through seminars and networking. This is particularly important given the immense popularity of the word spirituality today and its co-option in the most unlikely places. There are of course many kinds of spirituality, and no-one owns the term. What we are promoting, and protecting, is a transformative practice that holds that, for some people, a primary way of knowing the divine is passive; truth is found in silence.

This is our story. What then is unique about Metivta?

Primarily I would say that it is that we have managed to maintain an institution with a narrowly defined mission, one that sets out to serve in depth only certain specific, special needs of a limited group within the larger community. Our members receive satisfaction for their other needs elsewhere, through formal and informal coalitions we have established. Thus we have a highly cohesive membership and can relate to its needs on a consistently high level. Our population is defined not by denomination, demography, or indeed, by any other characteristic than a desire for what Metivta has to offer. It's a system that seems to work. ✦

Jewish millennialist ruminations: suffering and the pedagogy of ethics

■ Joshua Saltzman

I wanted to write about suffering; the way in which suffering informs the human condition.

Yet, the words which make up my personal story had been covered over by finely layered sediments of denial and escape. They reemerged when I allowed myself to experience my own hurt. Then I was able to become what Arthur Frank calls “a wounded storyteller.”

My story begins with the singularity of my suffering which elicited in me a profound responsibility to share with others. The wounds of my life are a litany, reaching from the trauma of childhood through the war fought in Lebanon, the haunting faces of the dead, the depressions,

RABBI JOSHUA SALTZMAN is Director of the New York Kollel at HUC-JIR and working on a book exploring adult Jewish learning.