

The People of the Book

We are termed "the people of the book," in Hebrew *'am ha-sefer*, in Arabic (where the term first appeared in the *Qur'an*) as *Ahl al-kitab*. The question today is which book? David Roskies, a professor of mine, recently offered this understanding: We have a *sefer* and a *buch*. A *sefer*, the Hebrew word for book, is "a book you can't read in the bathroom or outhouse" due to its holy status, while a *buch*, the Yiddish word for book, is everything else. The former, *Torah* (religious literature), is studied in the traditional study house (*beit midrash* in Hebrew, *bes medrash* in Yiddish), the latter, *sifrut* (secular literature), everywhere else.

The first book was *Torah*. This is what Yohanan ben Zakkai asked for when he fled Jerusalem in a coffin and prophesied that General Vespasian would become the next emperor, and from it came its commentary, *Mishnah*, followed by its commentary, *G'mara*. Eventually came other works—of law and legend, philosophy and *piyyut* (religious poetry), and commentary galore on everything. With the encounter in Spain came secular poetry and books, including medicine, science and math. With the encounter with Germany came secular books and novels, satire and politics. Ruth Wisse writes, "An ignorant Jewry inhabits even the knowledgeable Jewish writer." She points out that Sholom Aleikhem assumed his readers knew Bible and liturgy, and some Talmud. Today, Tova Mirvis "feels obliged to explain one Jewish ritual per chapter to educate a potential readership of Jews who may know as little as gentiles about their religion."

So which book do we follow? That depends on who you ask. Only a Karaite follows the Bible. The Orthodox of today venerate the *Shulkhan Arukh*, the Code of Jewish Law (literally the "Prepared Table"), or the latest commentary on it with the most up-to-date rulings. The rest of Jewry read just books. Ari Goldman, a Columbia Professor of Journalism and former NY Times religion reporter, writes, "Jews are not just reading Jewish books; they are reading all books—Oprah's book list more than their synagogue's list." For the rabbi, it used to be the Talmud. For the populace, the prayer book, the *siddur*, because you could find everything in it. (The other alternative was *Tse'ena U-r'ena*, a book based on the *Humash*, (Five Books of Moses) to teach (originally both men and women, and later primarily women).

No book is more powerful than the *Mahzor* (originally any holiday prayer book, now commonly the High Holiday Prayer Book). If you spend time with it, you will never run out of ideas on which to contemplate, and actions to undertake. I close with the following poem by Yaakov Cahan adapted from the Morris Silverman edition of the *High Holiday Prayer Book*:

This old prayer book, stained with tears, I take into my hand. To my ancestors' God, their Rock and Shelter from of old, I call in my distress. In these ancient words, singed with the pain of generations, I pour out my bitter words. May they ascend, knowing heaven's paths, my complaint to God in heaven. From that terror-filled oppression which curtails my ability to express, and that hides my heart, they speak with their

simple and trustworthy phrases before God, they entreat mercy. To God in heaven who heard my ancestors' prayers and endowed them with courage and strength to bear with suffering all trouble, reproach and insolence in the world and to hope for redemption, perhaps the Divine also will hear my prayer, and will take my cry under protection and be a shield to me....For there is no help and support for me, except for God in heaven.

Mi-bayit l'bayit, from house to house and family to family, *l'shanah tovah tikkatevu v'tehatemu*, may you be inscribed and sealed for a good and healthy year. Michael