

Rabbi's Reflections: Summer Reading

My summer reading began on Shavuot. Among others, I read issues of *Conservative Judaism* magazine, *Reform Judaism* magazine, and *Commentary*. I try to relate everything to life, and it is one reason I became a pulpit rabbi.

Two issues keep recurring: continuity and outreach. Before I join them, I want to look at continuity in two odd topics: translation and literature. Translation entails choices. Do we translate literally or idiomatically? Do we convey puns and double-entendres, and, if so, how? Picking one word's meaning, excludes others. Do we fill in the blanks when translating, and, if so, how? To whom does the ambiguous pronoun refer? Etc. The translator must pick, and the reader never knows the missed options.

Franz Rosenzweig wrote an essay on these issues almost a century ago, and Hillel Halkin wrote one in June's *Commentary*. Halkin muses on the history of Hebrew translation into English. He was on the ground floor of the explosion that began in the early 1960s. Today, almost everything is available in English, and Hebrew writers often have a contract for an English translation before they begin to write. Gone are the days when Eldad the Danite in the 9th century traveled the Jewish world communicating in the only language possible, Hebrew, even though it was not native to anyone. Halkin comments that if Eldad returned today, he would not get far in this world without speaking English, even in Israel. Gone are the *shtetl* days when the tailors, water carriers, and coach drivers learned *Mishnah*. In that world, even the uneducated, considered knowing Hebrew a sign of being educated. Forced religious studies started them on that track. Halkin observes that Hebrew also gave us privacy, a way to prevent others from understanding us, where we could be ourselves without worrying whether someone would misunderstand, and as such provided the strongest of communal bonds. On the positive side, translation makes texts accessible to many more people than ever before. Even Rabbinic writing discusses this ambivalence.

In the same issue, Cheryl Miller writes about the eclipse of Bernard Malamud. Philip Roth articulated the decline of his mentor by writing of Malamud's "victimized Jewish men" as "innocent, passive, virtuous, and this to the degree that he defines himself or is defined by others as a Jew," in contrast to the "corrupt, violent, and lustful" gentile. Roth beckons us to "dare the unknown," to indulge the appetites, to be free of constraints, unlike Malamud's characters who find freedom in a "demand of utter obligation," and in becoming part of the chosen people. What is continuity when we no longer understand or want basics, including community, and must rely on translations to figure them out?

Now to Reform Judaism. Besides having a fascinating ongoing series on the synagogue's development, the Winter 2007 issue has a "Focus" on outreach, and the Summer 2008 issue begins a series on 30 stories to begin a personal and candid movement-wide discussion on various topics. Within each discussion is a quotation from the 1999 Platform. The common thread in both major topics is continuity by defining oneself. The issues they raise are serious. Two flaws are generalizations based on specifics even as they try to define who they are, and how broad the parameters can go. A methodological problem is that their overall numbers come from the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-2001, while the statistics to define

themselves use an unrepresentative survey of 10,250 subscribers to “10 Minutes of Torah” and the URJ’s “Weekly Briefing.”

Jack Wertheimer’s article in June’s *Commentary* is, “What Does Reform Judaism Stand For?” He notes their return to tradition, and that radical change is not new to them. He bases his questions on more sober and less selective statistical demographic surveys using self-reported Reform Jews. Men are drifting from the synagogue and from raising children Jewishly in Reform Judaism; 15% of Reform Jews report no involvement in Jewish organizational life; 70% of Reform-raised Jews now have no synagogue affiliation; 17% of them no longer identify with the Jewish religion; and among the intermarried, the figure is up to 28%. One study cites a lack of child education, a high youth drop-out rate, and that the effort to recruit more adults has not succeeded. Fewer than 10% attend a service weekly. Rabbi Eric Yoffie, President of the Union for Reform Judaism, remarked that in a *Shabbat* morning service, “worship of God gives way to worship of the child.” Their growth, Wertheimer finds, results more from others joining Reform than keeping their own. How do Reform synagogues deal with education and outreach, especially since 62% of intermarried families who affiliate (most do not) choose Reform, so they must educate both Jews and non-Jews (unless they assume that both groups know nothing)? Rabbi Yoffie’s proposal to encourage gentile partners to convert was dropped due to the huge outcry. Wertheimer wonders how the movement can respond to these issues and justify its turn towards tradition when the one truly accepted doctrine of personal autonomy actually discourages an appeal to community and tradition? 44% of Reform Jews disagree with the statement that they strongly belong to the Jewish people, and only 21% feel very emotionally attached to Israel. He remarks that they agree to exclude religious obligation, Humanistic Judaism and Jews for Jesus, but beyond that do not agree on much (the Platform required many years to form a consensus, as did the new *Mishkan T’filah* prayerbook). While Reform is growing, their biggest parallel seems to be the declining mainline liberal Protestant denominations. If so, they stake their future on shaky grounds. While they keep people Jewish for longer, there seems to be no clear view of what it means for Jewish continuity. (I actually support outreach, but we need to be attuned to the larger issues.)

The same is true in the Reconstructionist Movement, as, for example, in its renewed call for ritual. Typical is the debate about how to encourage *kashrut* when one accepts personal autonomy: can one appeal to obligation, community, and civilization (Hebrew and chosenness). The same problems face the Conservative Movement, though to a lesser extent (space and time preclude a lengthy discussion). The issue of continuity is: continuity of what? Our choices, and our non-choices guised in fancy rhetoric, still must answer this question. Living in a *shtetl* also is no answer. Judaism is a whole, and while we can pick any piece/s, anybody who sees only him/herself and wishes in the choice diminishes the whole. The more we choose to emulate others without thinking critically about the larger picture, the greater the damage we do to the Jewish people, to our unity, and therefore to Judaism. Do our actions and words really foster the continuity we say we desire? Why should we continue if we are not distinctive?

— Rabbi Michael Rascoe