

Books of the People
Revisiting Classic Works of Jewish Thought



Yeshiva University
THE ZAHAVA AND MOSHAEL STRAUS
CENTER FOR TORAH AND WESTERN THOUGHT

BOOKS OF THE PEOPLE

EDITOR

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*Dedicated to members of the Grunberger and Pollack families
of Slovakia who perished, or survived but lost family, in the Holocaust*

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Miriam Pollack*

תנצב"ה

May their memories be a blessing to all future generations

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Editor's Preface

“**E**xactly what kind of eternity *does* a library provide? How likely is it for a manuscript to become a book on a library shelf? How hard is it to stay there?” In her 2014 book, *The Shelf: Adventures in Extreme Reading*, author Phyllis Rose explored these and other questions as refracted through her experience reading a randomly selected group of books in the New York Society Library.

In the Jewish tradition we believe that our books are what define us as a people – our library of texts, beginning with the Tanakh, followed by the Mishna and Talmud, is what make us who we are. These ancient but timeless works have inspired an ever-growing number of subsequent works of Jewish provenance, despite the warning of Ecclesiastes 12:12 that “of making books there is no end.” These writings are the keys to our eternity, both as religiously committed individuals and as a nation. To this day, a family’s library of Jewish books is a source of pride in countless homes and volumes are passed down from generation to generation.

In thinking about which works of Jewish thought can and should be an essential part of every Jewish library, I conceived of the volume you hold in your hand. Each chapter in this book features a scholar of Jewish studies revisiting a particularly foundational and salient work

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of *maḥshevet Yisrael* (Jewish thought), from medieval to modern, and discussing its themes, its historical context, the circumstances and background of its author (the “person of the book”), and, most importantly, its contemporary relevance. My hope is that this volume inspires you, the reader, to make each of the works featured in these chapters a permanent part of your personal library, if they aren't already, and if they are, to dust them off the shelf and revisit them with a new perspective. The chapters in this volume can also serve as useful guides for those looking into more extensive learning projects covering each of the books systematically.

While the list of books discussed in this work is not exhaustive, nor does it represent a formal canon in any way, it reflects the changing priorities and religious sensibilities of readers and students, whether in the academy or among the general population. Whereas a discussion of Jewish thought only a generation ago might have focused almost exclusively on the *Rishonim* (medieval rabbinic scholars) who wrote volumes focused on Jewish philosophy, today there is a much greater emphasis on mysticism and Hasidism and a developing awareness that Jewish theology might be embedded in biblical commentary or other texts. If this collection sparks debate as to what should have been included but was not, *harei zeh meshubah* (this would be praiseworthy).

The authors in this volume faced a fundamental methodological challenge; namely, explaining how contemporary readers might find meaning and relevance in texts written in intellectual and religious climates so different from our own and utilizing categories of thinking that seem, on the surface, foreign to contemporary readers. Yet, as religious Jews wedded to our ancient traditions, we cannot let this challenge paralyze us. The very project of an intellectually and spiritually vibrant Judaism has no choice but to face this task head-on – and indeed, so many religious people have found inspiration in these works, despite the contexts of their original composition. I fervently hope that this volume contextualizes while contemporizing, losing neither the vitality of the original works nor the concerns of today's readers.

Special thanks are due to the Director of the Straus Center, Rabbi Dr. Meir Y. Soloveichik, for his support of this project, as well as to our dedicated benefactors, Zahava and Moshael Straus, and to Yeshiva

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University President Richard M. Joel. I would like to also express my gratitude to the Maggid team, particularly Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, for his always appreciated guidance, as well as to Dr. Yoel Finkelman for his insightful review of the manuscript and Nechama Unterman, Shalom Dinerstein, Tomi Mager, and Rabbi Daniel Tabak for their diligence and warmth in preparing the book for publication. The care the Maggid team took in ensuring the beauty of this work is, as always, appreciated. Having the honor of Rabbi Lord Sacks writing a foreword for this book is a priceless privilege, given that he himself has composed his own library of timeless Jewish classics. Lastly, I would like to dedicate this book to my maternal grandfather, Martin Wagner, for, among many other things, instilling in me a love of Jewish books of all kinds.

Dr. Stuart W. Halpern
Winter 5777

Foreword

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

The Koran calls Jews people of the book, but they were so long before. Already at Sinai, the Torah tells us, Moses wrote the laws in a book and read them to the people as they made a covenant with God. Deuteronomy tells us about a king that “he should write a copy of this Torah for himself as a book” and that “it should be with him and he should read it all the days of his life” (Deut. 17:18–19). Blessing Moses’ successor Joshua, God charged him: “This book of the Torah should not leave your mouth and you shall think about it day and night, so you may be careful to do all that is written in it. Then all will go well with you” (Josh. 1:8). Other religions had holy places, holy times, and holy people. Judaism was the first faith to focus on holy words, on a book and its power to transform the lives of those who learn and live its teachings.

Judaism is the supreme example of a faith, a civilization, predicated on books and bookishness, education and the life of the mind. Aristotle’s pupil Theophrastus searched for a way to describe this to his fellow Greeks: he called the Jews a nation of philosophers. So fundamental is this bookishness to Jewish identity that something of it persists even among lapsed or secular Jews. Heinrich Heine famously called the Torah the “portable homeland of the Jew.” George Steiner wrote a fine article entitled “Our homeland, the text,” describing dedication to literacy as “the open secret of the Jewish genius and its survival.”

The text, he said, is “home” and each commentary “a return.” The novelist Amos Oz called the book he wrote with his daughter about their own secular Jewish identity *Jews and Words*.

What created this remarkable affinity between Jews and books, Jews and study, Jews and words? We hear it in the several commands of Moses urging parents to educate their children, speaking of the Torah and its laws “when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up” (Deut. 6:7). We hear it again in the penultimate command of the Torah instructing the people, men, women, and children, to gather together as a nation every seven years to hear the Torah read in public. We encounter it in the great assembly convened by Ezra and Nehemiah, rededicating the people after the Babylonian exile by means of a collective Torah reading. We hear it yet again when Rabban Yoḥanan b. Zakkai, just before the destruction of Jerusalem, wins a concession from Vespasian: “Give me Yavneh and its sages” (Gittin 56b). The result was the salvaging of the academy, the *beit midrash*, as the carrier of Jewish education and identity. Paul Johnson memorably called rabbinic Judaism “an ancient and highly efficient social machine for the production of intellectuals.”

This is a history that turns time and again on learning and literacy, and there is nothing quite like it in the annals of any other nation. I have argued that one of the shaping factors in the religious history of Israel was that it coincided with the birth of the alphabet – the word “alphabet” itself comes from *aleph-bet*, later adopted by the Greeks as *alpha-beta*. This created the possibility, for the first time in history, of a society of universal literacy. The move from orality to literacy was itself a monumental shift in the direction of the abstract thought essential to the monotheistic mind.

At the heart of this history is the Book of Books itself, the Torah. For a thousand years, from the days of Moses to Malachi, Jews wrote commentaries to the Torah in the form of *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim*, the prophetic books and the holy writings. For another thousand years, from late Second Temple times to the era of the *Geonim*, they wrote commentaries to the commentaries in the form of the vast literature of the Oral Law, *Midrash*, *Mishna*, and *Gemara*. For the next thousand years, they wrote commentaries to the commentaries to the commentaries in the form of

biblical interpretation, and the clarification and codification of Jewish law. Jewish thought has been a series of ever-wider circles at whose center is the Book, the Torah, that forms the text and texture of Jewish life.

What lies behind this extraordinary set of phenomena is the basic premise of Judaism that our relationship with God is defined by a covenant, a document, a written text, detailing the pledge our ancestors took at Mount Sinai and the history that surrounded it. Everything we know as a people about the divine acts of Creation, Liberation, and Redemption, everything sacred about the structure of the society and the shape of the moral life, is contained in the words of the Torah. The Book became our constitution of liberty as a nation under the sovereignty of God, and its words were “our life and the length of our days.”

In the modern world, for complex reasons, while Jews made signal contributions to scholarship in almost every field, in economics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, physics, chemistry, and medicine, the connection between Jews and Judaism, and between books and the Book, was broken. Early in the twentieth century, Thorstein Veblen, in an article entitled “On the Intellectual Pre-eminence of Jews in Modern Europe,” argued that it was specifically the alienated quality of the Jewish intellectual that was the source of his creativity: “He becomes a disturber of the intellectual peace, but only at the cost of becoming an intellectual wayfaring man, a wanderer in the intellectual no-man’s-land, seeking another place to rest, farther along the road, somewhere over the horizon.”

After the Holocaust, Jewish intellectuals struggled with the question of whether it was possible to write books any more, whether words could ever be adequate to describe that black hole in human history, and whether language had been broken beyond repair. Theodor Adorno said it was barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz. Jacques Derrida, one of the architects of deconstructionism, wrote that “a text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game.” The image of a ghostly, surreal book haunts the work of the Egyptian-French-Jewish intellectual Edmond Jabès. “The fragment,” he wrote, “the exploded book, is our only access to the infinite.” We exist, he said, in the infinite space “where all we write is erased, even as you write it.” Each of these figures testifies in

some way to a loss of faith in literature, and in the power of civilization to civilize. One of the first acts of the Nazis against the Jews – following in the footsteps of Christians in the Middle Ages – was to burn Jewish books, and, as Heine had warned, when people begin by burning books, they end by burning people.

Even so, most Jews kept their faith in books and writing as a form of redemption of a world gone mad. In December 1941, the 81-year-old historian Simon Dubnow was shot and killed. It is said that his last words were, “*Yidn, shreibt un farschreib*,” “Jews, write and record.” It is what many of them did, writing their last memories on scraps of paper they then buried in the grounds of the ghettos and concentration camps. The poet and Holocaust survivor Paul Celan said that “only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech.”

To a remarkable degree, then, Jewish sense and sensibility, whether in ages of faith or crisis of faith, is bound to a book. That is what makes this work so valuable and illuminating. It is about a series of very special books, from Saadia Gaon’s *Emunot VeDeot* to Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s *Halakhic Man*, in which outstanding Jewish thinkers from the tenth to the twentieth centuries wrestled with the relationship between Judaism and the wider culture of their day. To what extent were they compatible? Where and why did they conflict? Could Judaism be translated into the concepts and categories of the world outside, and if not, why not?

Jews tend not to philosophize. Philosophy is a Greek mode of thought more than a Jewish one. Greeks thought of truth in terms of system; Jews thought of it in terms of story. The Greeks sought the truth that is timeless; Jews pursued the truths that unfold through the course of time. The Greeks perfected the logical imagination, Jews the dialogical and chronological imagination – truths that emerge from conversation and from the ticking clock of history. The great Greek thinkers put their faith in reason; Jews had access to revelation also, and thus to truths that cannot be arrived at by reason alone.

Western civilization was to a large degree formed by the tension between these two ancient ways of thinking, mediated at times by Christianity, and at others by the great philosophers of Islam. But the Jewish contribution was an important one, and it should remain so to us as we seek to meditate on our faith and understand its role in the conversation of humankind.

The works that emerged from this encounter are the “great books” of Jewish thought, and a familiarity with them is essential to Jewish literacy. For while the codes of Jewish law and the commentaries on the Torah are about the details – and God is in the details – the works of Jewish philosophy and mysticism are ways of standing back and, in Matthew Arnold’s phrase, seeing life steadily and seeing it whole. Saadia, Judah Halevi, Maimonides, Albo, Maharal, the Alter Rebbe of Chabad and Rav Nachman of Bratslav, Hirsch, the Netziv, Rav Kook, Rav Soloveitchik, and Rav Hutner, these are the great-souled Jewish thinkers who scaled the mountain of thought and described the view from the heights. To be sure, you cannot live on a mountaintop, but no one, at least some time in his or her life, should miss the climb.

So congratulations to Stuart Halpern for editing yet another outstanding collection of essays on Jewish thought by today’s modern masters, and to all the contributors themselves. This is a wonderfully enlightening work, testifying to the ongoing vitality of Yeshiva University as a center of contemporary Jewish thought at the highest level. This is where the work begun by Saadia ten centuries ago continues today: the dialogue between Judaism and the world, captured in books about the Book that enlarge our intellectual horizons and lift our engagement with God, our people, and the world.