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*American Talmud: the Cultural Work of Jewish American Fiction* (review)

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(Review)

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*American Talmud: the Cultural Work of Jewish American Fiction*, by Ezra Cappell. New York: SUNY Press, 2007, 233 pp.

Oh, the temptations of the Babylonian Talmud! Hundreds of hundreds of pages long, over a thousand years old, written in Aramaic and Hebrew, the Babylonian Talmud is a vast compendium of minutely argued legal discussion, ritual law, exotic speculation, compelling tales, homiletic stories, and superstition. How much do you pay day-workers if they don't finish the job? What is fair medical compensation for someone you accidentally burned? How long after you've moved to a new town should you see yourself as a member of the community and assume communal obligations? *Do* good fences make good neighbors? What are the dangers of living in a gated community?

And amidst all that detailed legal discussion are also the speculations of generations of rabbis about how long God stays angry, the size of the original Adam, and why you should never walk between two palm trees. On the pages of the Talmud is the evolution of rituals practiced to this day: centuries of rabbinic discussions related to the laws, ethics, religious and cultural traditions that gave birth to Judaism as we know it, after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE—the development of the prayers and of the festivals, for example, or of the rituals of the Passover seder. Want to know why the youngest child asks “the Four Questions?” Read the Talmud. Once kissed by a page of Talmud, it is hard, hard, hard, not to fall in love with it, not to want to spend the rest of your life with at least the opportunity to flirt.

So rich a world is the Talmud, moreover, that scholars of modern Jewish literature who are or have been engrossed in Talmud study may find themselves in a dilemma. For if one finds intellectual excitement in making connections, in building bridges, one may seek to build those bridges between radically disparate *Jewish* worlds. And that, indeed, is what Ezra Cappell has set out to do; with the Talmud on one hand and Jewish American literature on the other, Mr. Cappell has sought to argue that the “cultural work” of the latter is most richly understood with reference to the former. Jewish-American writers are actually engaged not merely in the process of producing prose, but in forging, Mr. Cappell argues, that most unexpected of all transtemporal hybrids, an “American Talmud.”

The Introduction explains how rich, multi-vocal, and open-ended the Talmud is; how, in “reinterpreting Torah anew for its own generation,” it is not merely capable of “tolerating dissent,” of celebrating “multiple perspectives,” but how it also “honors radical rethinking, even about its foundational concepts.” And then he takes a fascinating leap, for, as he argues, open-endedness and the “celebration of multiple perspectives” are characteristics not only of the Talmud, but “also a hallmark of twentieth-century and contemporary Jewish American fiction.” There is a vital link in their cultural role, moreover, in Mr. Cappell's view: just as the Talmud was a centering force for the Jewish people (and still is, at least for the thousands of Jews studying in yeshivas throughout the world; for the twenty thousand or so laypeople who rallied in Madison Square Garden after seven years of studying a page-of-Talmud a day, along with rabbis and rabbinical students), so Jewish

American literature is such a centering force today. The goal of *American Talmud* becomes supporting that broad thesis by focusing on two major objects of inquiry: the representation of the Holocaust, on the one hand, and what Mr. Cappell regards as the “concomitant return to Orthodoxy and tradition that has transformed the American diaspora in the postwar years” (22).

In the process of the discussions in *American Talmud*, Mr. Cappell clearly refutes the late Irving Howe’s contention that once the rich mother-lode of the Jewish immigrant experience had been fully mined, Jewish American literature would fade into irrelevance. Instead, as Mr. Cappell points out, given the fine, compelling, provocative, sometimes brilliant, contributions of such writers as Steve Stern, Thane Rosenbaum, Gary Shteyngart, Rebecca Goldstein, Myla Goldberg, Melvin Bukiet—among many others, including those Mr. Cappell doesn’t mention (for example, one of my own personal favorites, the ever-challenging Tova Reich)—Jewish American literature is truly flourishing.

Despite the potential richness of *American Talmud*, however, there are some major difficulties with the book. Unfortunately, in setting out to describe the “cultural work” of Jewish American literature, the author limits his focus to those whose work wrestles with, embraces, or rejects Orthodoxy. The result of that limitation makes the content of the book somewhat quirky. For example, the author devotes two chapters to a minor writer like *Henry Roth*, but not one to Philip Roth, whose literary opus has engaged the most richly varied, social, political, and cultural landscape, Jewish *and* American, of any Jewish American writer. And, in the context of arguing for an *American Talmud*, does Malamud really fit? As Leslie Fiedler pointed out years ago in “The Christianness of the American Jewish Writer,” Malamud’s very tropes were shaped more by the Protestant tradition learned in English literature classes than by anything in Jewish culture. How much more valuable it would have been, from the point of view of strengthening his thesis, had the author devoted a chapter or two to more of the fine contemporary writers whose names he mentions in the last chapter but whose work he does not discuss.

From my point of view, *American Talmud* also suffers from a misconceived organizational strategy. Mr. Cappell divides his discussions into short segments, almost like sound bites; there are new subtitles—in the form of upper-case headlines—at least every couple of pages. “THE HISTORICAL JEWISH RESPONSE TO TRAGEDY,” a title appropriate for a vast thesis, is addressed on a single page, followed by a less-than-two page excursus on “JEWISH FICTION OVER JEWISH HISTORY?” The seven-page discussion of Allegra Goodman and Thane Rosenbaum has eleven subtitles, among them “THE PASSOVER SEDER,” “FOOD AS ETHNIC MARKER,” “FEMINISM,” “ZIONISM,” “SATIRE,” “THE NOVELS,” and “THE CHASIDIC SECTION OF PARADISE PARK.” I can’t quite imagine that I’m the only reader who found this organizational scheme disruptive of a sustained argument; I’m baffled as to why no editor advised the author to rethink it when the book was in its manuscript stage.

The editing problem is also evident in the misquoting of a passage that Mr.

Cappell cites to justify the notion of an “American” Talmud. The famous words quoted by Mr. Cappell and attributed by him to Rabbi Akivah, “That which is hateful to your neighbor do not do. All the rest is commentary,” were spoken not by Akivah but by Hillel (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, p. 31a); for Akivah’s words, a commentary on the line “Love your neighbor as yourself,” see the midrashic text Genesis Rabbah 24:7.

In the end, reading this book left me feeling a certain sorrow that has less to do with the book’s argument than with the cultural role of Jewish American literature. On the one hand, whether they are aware of it or not, Jews are still living according to the Talmud: consider only, for example, the rituals and pattern of the Passover seder. On the other hand, what shaping, lasting impact does *any* novel have on how we twenty-first century folk live our lives? On what we believe or what we feel (for more than the duration of the reading of the novel)? It’s a “great story,” maybe a “great read,” but a novel, in the end, is little more than entertainment. As I discovered in my “Jewish American Literature” class, even Mrs. Portnoy’s uproarious jello with its miraculous suspension of fruit is just *so* last century—what twenty-something today even begins to feel its tone or get its humor anymore? Compared to the impact of the electronic media, Jewish-American novels (or any contemporary works of literature) have very, *very* little impact indeed on shaping the real culture within which Jewish Americans live in our age. Yet, even if you are incredulous that anyone could possibly worry about a slice of Cheddar falling into a pot of brisket, or how far from your home you can walk on the Sabbath—even if the only Jewish religious tradition that remotely interests you is how to light a Hanukkah menorah—you can still turn to the Talmud.

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