

An Elder among the Rabbis

Dennis Rasmussen

I

Why should a Mormon be interested in Judaism?¹ I can speak only for myself. In Judaism I have found a part of my religious heritage, handed down from the ancient prophets of Israel, through the Rabbis of the Greco-Roman Era, to the Jews of today.² This essay is an account of my experience among the teachings and teachers of Judaism—how my interest began, what brought me to a Jewish theological seminary, who my teachers were, and what I learned about Rabbinic history and teaching, together with some reflections and comments about these, and about the Talmud, the great compendium of Rabbinic law and lore which we studied so diligently.

My interest in Judaism began at the Institute of Religion in Salt Lake City. I went there every Wednesday evening to hear Elder Marion D. Hanks teach two courses, Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants. For three hours I rejoiced in the opportunity to study the scriptures under his guidance. On one occasion Elder Hanks read to us segments from a radio script called "The Song of Berditchev." It had been presented on an NBC weekly series, "The Eternal Light," produced in New York City by The Jewish Theological Seminary of America. The script was the story of Rabbi Levi Yitzhak, an eighteenth-century leader of Ukrainian Jews. Surnamed "the Compassionate," he is still remembered by his people as one of their kindest and most beloved rabbis.³ The story of this man touched me deeply. My thoughts returned to it often in the years that followed, and it was, eventually, to lead me to its source.

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²For a fascinating account of Joseph Smith's study of Hebrew with Professor Joshua Seixas, see Louis C. Zucker, *Mormon and Jew: A Meeting on the American Frontier* (n.p., n.d.), Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

³Samuel H. Dresner, *Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev: Portrait of a Hasidic Master* (New York: Hartmore House, 1974).

About three and a half years ago I learned of a special institute which was to be held at The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, entitled, "Institute for the Teaching of the Post-Biblical Foundations of Western Civilization." It was to last for eight weeks during the summer of 1978 (with one additional week the following summer) and would be taught by five rabbis on the faculty. College teachers in the humanities and social sciences were invited to apply. Twenty would be selected as fellows of the Institute. Their studies would concern the contributions of the Rabbinic or Post-Biblical Period of Judaism to Western civilization. The hope was that greater awareness of the Jewish tradition would help the fellows to be better teachers of Western civilization in general. I labored diligently on my application. Six weeks later I was notified that I had been accepted.

The Seminary's primary purpose is to train rabbis for synagogues in the Conservative branch of present-day Judaism. But it offers the doctor's degree as well and is dedicated to the vision of its first president, Solomon Schechter, who hoped to bring together the best in both sacred and secular scholarship. Over the years some of the world's most distinguished Jewish scholars have taught at the Seminary, including President Schechter, Louis Ginzberg, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Saul Lieberman. Located on 122nd Street and Broadway, the Seminary is just two blocks from Columbia University and Barnard College. Across the street is Union Theological Seminary where Reinhold Niebuhr, the distinguished Protestant theologian, taught. A few blocks further is Grant's Tomb, overlooking the Hudson River. Surrounded by such a setting, I was exhilarated at the prospects before me.

II

Our schedule called for two-hour sessions, morning and afternoon, Monday through Friday (except that there was no class on Friday afternoon). At the beginning of the first session we were told that in order for us to become acquainted more quickly with at least one member of the faculty, we would be divided into groups of four, each of which would accompany one of the teachers to his office where the group could get to know one another. With three of my colleagues, I soon found myself in the office of Rabbi Yochanan Muffs, a wonderful man with sparkling eyes and an expansive love for people which he communicated with every word and gesture. Think of Elder LeGrand Richards fifty years ago, and you will have some idea of the presence of Rabbi Muffs. We sat in a row in front of his

desk and he talked to us, one by one. He asked such questions as why we had come, what we hoped to learn, what courses we usually taught, and so on.

He finally turned to me. I was third in line. I told him my name and university. "You're the Mormon!" he boomed.

"Yes."

"Do you wear the garment?"

"Yes."

He turned and pointed out his window. Against the blue sky we could see, framed in the window, the spire of the chapel at Union Theological Seminary. On the top was a figure, blowing a trumpet. "People around here think that's Gabriel," he said. "You and I know who it really is, don't we? That's Moroni."

You can imagine how I was beginning to feel. As Rabbi Muffs continued, the others seemed somehow to fade from my consciousness so that there were only two in the room—the elder and the rabbi.

"Do you pay your tithing?" Here I almost became confused. Was this a dream? Was I being interviewed for a temple recommend? Was it Bishop Muffs, or Rabbi Muffs?

"Do you pay your tithing?"

"Yes."

"Do you pay it with a joyful heart?"

"Yes."

He leaned back in his chair and spoke more softly, but with even greater intensity. "I believe," he said, "that joy is the essence of religion. There is nothing more fundamental to religious living than joy. That is its heart. I am working on a book about joy. I want to trace it not only through the Bible, but through the literatures of the ancient Near East generally."

Now I had decided before I left Provo that I would be discreet about discussing Mormonism; my purpose in coming was to learn. But I had also resolved that if a good opportunity presented itself, I would not be shy. Here was this good man, telling me about the importance of joy. What verse do you think was racing through my mind? Then I heard myself speaking: "You know, there's a passage in the Book of Mormon about joy that you might like. It says, 'Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy'" (2 Nephi 2:25).

"Oh, my God," whispered the rabbi. "I've found the text I've searched for all my life . . . in the Book of Mormon. I can teach from the Book of Mormon." Turning to me, he said, "Say it again, but not so fast."

As I repeated the familiar words, phrase by phrase, his eyes glowed. When I had finished, he offered to provide a midrash, which is an imaginative and frequently extended interpretation of a text. He said something like this:

“According to the Rabbis, when the Holy One, blessed be he, decided to create the world, the angels became jealous, and said to him, ‘Why do you want to create man when you have us? We are always with you. Why, then, do you need man?’ The Holy One replied, ‘Yes, you are always with me; hence, when you obey me, I never know if you obey me because you love me or because you see me watching you. But if I create man, it will be different. Adam will fall, for only by being outside my presence can man exist as man, making choices in freedom. I will give him my Torah; if he obeys it he will have joy, and I will know that he obeys because he loves me, and not because he sees me watching him.’ ”

Then Rabbi Muffs asked, “How do Mormons interpret the verse?” I replied that I saw little to add.

“You must sit by me at lunch,” he said.

It was, in fact, getting close to noon, and there was still one other person for him to talk to. For the moment, our dialogue was over, and the presence of the others in the room demanded his attention. Soon, however, we were seated at a long table talking in each other’s ear about everything from the Word of Wisdom to higher criticism of the Bible. At the end of the meal, the person in charge called us all to order and announced that each one of the five teachers would now stand and introduce himself to the entire group. When Rabbi Muffs arose, he uttered the following words: “Ladies and gentlemen, I have had a shattering experience this morning.” All eyes became more intent. He continued, betraying a smile, “My colleague to my left, from Brigham Young University, has given me a text from the Book of Mormon that I have searched for all my life.” Placing his hand upon my shoulder, he said, “Stand up and say it for them . . . and watch the Jews.”

And so on the first day of my experience at the Seminary, I stood and recited for all the fellows and the faculty a verse from the Book of Mormon. I would later learn to appreciate more fully why Rabbi Muffs had claimed it for his own.⁴

⁴Rabbi Muffs told me later that he had studied Mormonism as a history student. Needless to say, he was delighted to receive the Book of Mormon which I presented to him. On the concept of joy, see “The Joy of the Law” in Solomon Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (1909; reprint ed., New York: Schocken, 1961), pp. 148–69.

I cannot take the time to describe all the faculty who taught us. All were rabbis, all held doctor's degrees as well, all were deeply committed Jews. But I must mention just one other, Rabbi David Weiss Halivni, a renowned Talmud scholar who was the director of our Institute.⁵ Perhaps less exuberant than Rabbi Muffs, more quiet, he was endowed with a gentle and profound spirit. Rabbi Muffs had been born in the United States, but not so Rabbi Halivni. He, like his childhood friend, Elie Wiesel,⁶ had entered the world in Sighet, Romania. A Talmud prodigy at five, at fifteen he had stepped out of a boxcar into Auschwitz. The last words which he heard from his family were those of his aunt, "May the Torah that you have studied protect you." All except him perished. He wrote his witness in the dedication to his first book on the Talmud. This witness was later reproduced near the entrance to the Yad Vashem Memorial in Jerusalem: "I survived alone, to tell, to remind, and to demand."

How can I explain what it was like for me, born and reared in the safety of a small city in the American West, to look into eyes which had seen what his had seen? Or to feel the indomitable faith that inspired his teaching? Or to watch him, seated on the floor of the synagogue according to the tradition, chanting the Lamentations of Jeremiah on *Tishah B'Av*, the fast day which commemorates the destruction of the Temple?⁷

Thou, O Lord, remainest for ever; thy throne from generation to generation.

Wherefore dost thou forget us for ever, and forsake us so long time?

Turn thou us unto thee, O Lord, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old.

[Lamentations 5:19-21]

III

The theme of the Institute can be indicated by two statements: first, Judaism is not simply the religion of the Old Testament. I had once supposed that it was, and I was surprised to learn that Judaism, like Christianity, had an additional creative period after the time of the Old Testament (or, for the Jew, after the time of the Bible). In

⁵The others were Rabbi David Wolf Silverman (philosophy); Rabbi Joseph S. Lukinsky (education); Rabbi Shaye J. D. Cohen (history). Rabbi Muffs taught Bible; Rabbi Halivni, Talmud. The Institute's assistant director was Rabbi Gordon Tucker.

⁶Elie Wiesel survived the concentration camps and has written some of the most moving accounts of the Holocaust that one can read. He has also written works concerning the tradition of Hasidism, from which he is descended. *Night*, *The Gates of the Forest*, *Souls on Fire*, *Messengers of God*, *Legends of Our Time* are a few of his books.

⁷Hayyim Schauss, *The Jewish Festivals: History and Observance*, trans. Samuel Jaffe (1938; reprint ed., New York: Schocken, 1962), pp. 96-105.

fact, Christianity itself emerged during this same Post-Biblical Era. These considerations lead to the second statement: Judaism today is a product of the Rabbinic Period, roughly 200 B.C. to A.D. 500. Understanding these two statements led me to see a parallel between the two faiths. As Christianity is the Old Testament mediated by the teachings of Jesus Christ and his apostles, so Judaism is the Bible mediated by the teachings of the Rabbis. Jesus himself is called *Rabbi* in the Gospels (John 1:38, 49; 3:2, etc.). So, as a result of the Institute, I was able to find, between his teachings and those of the Rabbis, important similarities as well as the differences which before had tended to dominate my thinking.

Who were the Rabbis, and what was the nature of their teaching?⁸ How was it related to the teaching of the prophets? How did the Rabbis accomplish the task of creating the Judaism which would endure for two thousand years? I certainly cannot provide a fully adequate answer, but I can, at least, suggest a brief orientation. The Rabbis saw themselves as inheritors of an ancient tradition which they traced ultimately back to Moses. The tradition itself is called the Oral Torah or Oral Law. God gave to Moses his Torah or Teaching or Law (the word *law*, I learned, does not capture all that is implied by *Torah*). According to the Rabbis this Torah, given to Moses, had two divisions. The Written Torah is what is contained in the first five books of the Bible, the books of Moses. But in addition to the Written Torah, God gave to Moses the Oral Torah. This second Torah, by definition, was not written down but was transmitted orally from generation to generation.

What did the Oral Torah contain? Simply stated, it contained commentary, application, and interpretation of the Written Torah, as well as statutes, rituals, and teachings more or less independent of the Written Torah. Its basic role struck me as being similar, within the Jewish tradition, to the role of continuous revelation in the Mormon tradition. The purpose of each is to clarify, elaborate, and explain the commandments of written scriptures, and even, on occasion, to supplement them. The difference is that the Rabbis believed that such interpretation was given in advance.⁹ According to my own faith, it is given through the prophet, as the situation demands.

⁸The most thorough study of the early Rabbinic Period is George Foot Moore, *Judaism*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1927). The definitive one-volume anthology of Rabbinic teaching is C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (New York: Meridian, 1960).

⁹"In all religions which profess to be wholly and solely based on a revelation, fixed and final, embodied in certain books, tradition is necessarily called in to interpret and supplement the scriptures; the origin of this tradition must lie in the age of revelation itself; and to be authoritative it must ultimately derive from the fountain-head of revelation" (Moore, *Judaism*, 1:257).

There is a passage in the Book of Nehemiah that illustrates the kind of activity in which the Rabbis engaged. The time is the middle of the fifth century B.C.E. (When using the "Christian Calendar," Jews write B.C.E., or "before Common Era," instead of B.C. They write C.E., or "Common Era," instead of A.D.) Ezra, the priest and scribe, has returned to Jerusalem from the Babylonian captivity.¹⁰ In chapter 8 he appears as a prototype of Rabbinic procedure:

And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded to Israel.

And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding. . . .

And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law. . . .

So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.

[Nehemiah 8:1-3, 8]

In this passage, the Written Law is read and then interpreted orally. In later Rabbinic practice, interpretation of the Law was most often based upon earlier interpretation or tradition. Innovation did occur, but it was guided by an elaborate set of rules and was usually regarded as a development of something already implicit in the established tradition, whether written or oral.¹¹

I had studied the passage from Nehemiah before I went to the Seminary, and I had studied something else, which immediately came to my mind. Half a world away, and more than a century earlier, a scene almost identical had occurred:

Now it came to pass that I, Nephi, did teach my brethren these things. . . .

And I did read many things unto them which were written in the book of Moses . . . for I did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning. [1 Nephi 19:22-23]

In both cases, the teacher turned to the Torah of Moses in order to instruct the people of his own day. The purpose was not just to impart history, but the will of God to the present generation.

¹⁰"The re-establishment of normative Judaism after the Exile is connected by both Jewish tradition and modern scholarship with the name of Ezra, who restored the Law of Moses" (Elias Bickerman, *From Ezra to the Last of the Maccabees: Foundations of Postbiblical Judaism* [New York: Schocken, 1962], p. 9).

¹¹Specific rules of interpretation were developed and followed by the Rabbis. Their hermeneutic methods are discussed in depth in Moses Mielziner, *Introduction to the Talmud*, 4th ed. (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1968), pp. 3-62, 117-87.

The Rabbis were teachers and still are today. In addition to religious devotion and righteous living, what qualified one to be a rabbi was knowledge of the Torah, both Written and Oral. Such knowledge was to be obtained by study. The distinction between the rabbi and the prophet is, therefore, clear. Whereas the rabbi must study to gain his knowledge, the prophet receives it directly from God. While the rabbi takes his authority from the tradition which he studies and interprets, the prophet speaks as one having authority in himself. The Rabbis were fully aware of this difference. They said that when God took the Garden from Adam, he gave him instead the gift of children; when God took the prophets from Israel, he gave them instead the gift of the Talmud (the collection of Oral Law and Rabbinic teaching).

As the passage from Nehemiah makes clear, the role which the Rabbis played can be found in the Bible; nevertheless, the Rabbinic Period, as it is called, is essentially a post-biblical period.¹² And while this segment of Jewish history includes two centuries before the Common Era, its essence can be captured in the Rabbinic reaction to a later event, the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E. Here Judaism faced its supreme crisis. The Rabbis were responsible for its survival. In Israel's golden age, Israel had had prophet, priest, and king—representing revelation, Temple, and land. In these terms the identity of Israel as a nation and as a religion had been largely expressed. But by the time the Temple was destroyed in the year 70, these had been lost. There was no prophetic revelation, no priestly service in the Temple, no independent kingdom. The Romans ruled all. Who, at the time, would have supposed that anything of this tiny, helpless people called the Jews could survive? Who would have supposed that long after Rome and all her gods had died, Israel and Israel's God would yet live?

During the siege of Jerusalem, while David's city and its people waited, an old man and his disciples devised an audacious plan. The Romans had surrounded the city; there was no way to get out alive. But if not alive, then dead. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai had his disciples place him in a coffin. They then appealed at the gate for permission to carry the dead beyond the city walls, in accordance with the requirements of their religion. They were allowed to do so. Later, under the cover of night, the old Rabbi, like a symbol of his faith, arose from the semblance of death and made his way, somehow, to the tent of the Roman general, Vespasian. Throwing himself upon

¹²An interesting brief account is Judah Goldin's "The Period of the Talmud," in *The Jews: Their History*, ed. Louis Finkelstein, 4th ed. (New York: Schocken, 1970), pp. 119-224.

the Roman's mercy, he begged permission to take his disciples to the small nearby community of Yavneh, in order to establish an academy of study. The general granted his request. He went and taught. There was no king, no prophet, no priest, only a Rabbi and a book. But they were enough.¹³

In pondering this story I came to see new depths in the story of my beginnings. For my people, too, are the people of a book. They are named after a book. With my vision of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai hiding in his coffin, there merged the vision of Nephi and his brothers hiding in the cavity of a rock, hoping to obtain the plates (1 Nephi 3:27). How profound was the wisdom that guided both men! Facing ruin and loss, they knew what could be abandoned, but also what must be preserved: "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8). This word, as Nephi later taught, is the rod of iron which leads to the tree of life (1 Nephi 11:25). Without it there can be no life. And therefore, wherever Israel may be found, the record, the account of the Covenant, will be with them.

How were the Rabbis able to preserve the heritage of Israel with just the means of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai? The answer may be stated simply: they transformed necessity into virtue. Or, to put the point in another way, they were already prepared, by their own tradition, to offer Israel what was needed. After the destruction of the Temple, the family table became the altar of Israel; the father became the priest. Instead of merely longing for what was gone, the Rabbis formed something in its place, a faith which could endure by being built upon the ultimate foundation of all human institutions, the family. In the days of the Temple, glorious as they were, the primary functions of Israel's worship had been performed by a small minority, the priests. They held their office by heredity. The king and the prophet were single individuals. So the basis of Israel's identity had been relatively narrow and, as history was to demonstrate, far from permanent. Without an independent land, there could be no king; without the Temple, no role for the priests; and the prophets had ceased to speak. But there were Jewish communities and families. They became the basis of Rabbinic Judaism.

The Rabbis strengthened past traditions and also built new structures, based on study, deeds, and hope.¹⁴ They took the holiness

¹³Jacob Neusner, *A Life of Yochanan ben Zakkai, ca. 1-80 C.E.* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962), pp. 157-66.

¹⁴"They taught the adult members of their communities but received therefor neither salaries nor gifts. Instead of forming a separate professional class, the Rabbis were bound up with the life of the people as a whole, and members of every economic group were to be found among them." (Max Kadushin, *The Rabbinic Mind*, 3d ed. [New York: Bloch Publishing Company 1972], p. 85.)

which the Temple represented and infused it into everyday life. They developed the synagogue as a place of teaching and worship for all.¹⁵ They created from the ancient Mosaic commandments one of the most glorious spiritual achievements of the human race, *Shabbat*. For a people without a Temple in space, the Holy Sabbath became a Temple in time, into which Israel could enter each week. Sabbath delight, like the Sabbath candles kindled by Jewish mothers at sunset, would lighten Israel's way for two thousand years. And what of the many kinds of labor that are forbidden on the Sabbath? What is the significance of these restrictions? I learned that according to the Rabbis, they are all those acts which were required to build and furnish the Tabernacle in the desert. But the Sabbath is itself a Tabernacle, sanctified by the Holy One himself as he ended his work of creation. The Rabbis taught that we turn from the acts needed to construct a physical Tabernacle to acts of joy and worship that will honor the Tabernacle in time, sanctified by God to surround all Israel everywhere.¹⁶

As I sat at the Sabbath Eve table of my friends, a couple whom I had met in the Seminary library and who had invited me to share the Sabbath with them, I heard the husband chant the words of Proverbs 32 in honor of his wife: "Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies." Each week he does this, following the tradition set by the Rabbis. The entire poem is recited. If there are children, each one receives a blessing under the hand of the father, and then bestows a kiss upon the mother. The following night, as the Sabbath draws to a close, all members of the family in turn sniff from the Sabbath spice box. Its fragrance reminds them of the sweetness of the Sabbath which, though it is now departing, will come again. As I pondered these precious traditions, my mind turned to the words of William Butler Yeats in his poem, "A Prayer for My Daughter": "How but in custom and in ceremony / Are innocence and beauty born?"

IV

The opening words of the Talmud are these: "From what time in the evening may the *Shema* be recited?" The *Shema* is a prayer composed of passages taken from the Pentateuch which the Jew recites every day, morning and evening: "Shema Yisrael, Adonai

¹⁵Salo W. Baron, *The Jewish Community*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1942), 1:55-156.

¹⁶Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1951), p. 29.

Elohenu, Adonai echad . . ." These words have spanned millennia. They have spoken the faith and mission of Israel for countless faithful Jews. The first few verses of the Shema are from Deuteronomy:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.

[Deuteronomy 6:4-7]

Under the Rabbis, the task of teaching and learning the Torah became an essential aspect of Judaism. Study became an act of worship. For a person like me, whose life is one of teaching and study, this was a profound idea. Possibly I should already have possessed it. I knew the familiar words, "And as all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith" (D&C 88:118). And I believed study was an important means to an end; I believed that its purpose was to obtain knowledge, especially useful knowledge. The Rabbis did not deny this view. But they did supplement it. They taught that study, especially study of Torah or divine revelation, was itself an act of worship, or, as they often put it, "a sanctification of the Name of God." I could now see why a book should be so important, not for its own sake, but for the sake of those who study it. The holy words were not given simply to be deposited in books: "These words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart." To study sacred or edifying words is to turn the heart to God. The scholar's task becomes a prayer.

Teaching was not to occur just in the synagogue and house of study, but in the home, and throughout all activities of life. The Shema thus embodies the central religious insight of Rabbinic Judaism: religion is a matter of daily teaching, daily study, daily living. It is to guide and nourish and strengthen and comfort human beings during every moment of their lives. Its ultimate purpose is expressed in Leviticus 19:2—"Ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy." The Rabbis attempted to provide patterns for living that bridged all moments of time, leading each person to holiness. Humility, restraint, and discipline became for the Rabbis gates of love and peace. Of course they would have smiled with approval at the words, "Men are, that they might have joy."

For centuries the Rabbinic teaching remained oral to distinguish it carefully from the Written Torah. (The feats of memory implied by this fact are incredible, but real, even today.) But finally, intense persecution of the Jews led to the decision that the Oral Torah must be committed to writing or be lost, for if one generation of Rabbis were destroyed, the chain of the oral tradition would perish. The mammoth codification of Rabbinic teaching that resulted is called the Talmud. (The root of the word is Hebrew for "study.") Two versions were completed, the Jerusalem or Palestinian Talmud and the larger, more authoritative Babylonian Talmud.¹⁷ Within what scholars call "the sea of the Talmud" are the records of ancient Rabbinic discussions on almost every imaginable topic. Statutes, stories, commentaries, and commentaries upon commentaries, all weave together the remarkable fabric of Rabbinic thought. The Talmud is not a book written by someone. It is a compilation of the teachings of many men, a record of a Rabbinic conversation continued over centuries. Most intriguing for me and for those who can follow them are the legal discussions. Countless young minds from Talmudic times to the present have been tempered and sharpened by Rabbinic logic and dialectic.

Without attempting to provide an account of the way in which the Talmud is organized (it has six basic divisions), I should note the basic distinction which sorts its contents into two kinds, legal and nonlegal. The legal portion is called *halacha*; the nonlegal portion, *agada*. (The first word suggests a way or a path; the second, a narration or a story.) Halacha, just because it is legal, does not have the same immediate appeal to the non-Jew that *agada* does. Perhaps it is too technical. I found *halacha* difficult, but I nevertheless came to appreciate its fundamental importance. *Halacha* constituted, within Rabbinic Judaism, the stability and order of Jewish life, for the Rabbis were judges as well as teachers. They had to decide cases relating to torts, contracts, criminal actions, and so on. Their legal discussions, therefore, frequently had practical purposes. (These were not always practical, however; the study was enjoyed for its own sake as well.) But in every case the purpose of the Rabbis was religious, for the law they discussed was the Law of God.

As opposed to *halacha*, *agada* has the power to captivate anyone. If *halacha* is the law of Israel, *agada* is its song. If *halacha* is the letter of the law, *agada* is its spirit. The two are ultimately inseparable. Within the riches of *agada* I found midrash, allegory, parable,

¹⁷*The Babylonian Talmud*, ed. Isidore Epstein, 18 vols. (London: Soncino, 1935-52).

legend, tale, myth, poetry—all the creations of Israel's soul which helped to make life bearable and even beautiful. The teachings of Christ contain a large measure of agada. Wherever wisdom responds to human need in such words as these, "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho . . ." (Luke 10:30), we find agada. And not only aspiration and admonition find utterance in agada, but also humor, without which Israel could hardly have borne its trials. For example:

R[abbi] Nehemiah said: When the Israelites did that wicked deed [built the golden calf], Moses sought to appease God, and he said, "Lord of the world, they have only made for thee an assistant; why shouldst thou be angry with them? This calf which they have made will assist thee; thou wilt cause the sun to shine, and the calf will cause the moon; thou wilt look after the stars, the calf after the zodiac; thou wilt cause the dew to fall, the calf will make the winds to blow; thou wilt bring down the rain, and the calf will cause the herbs to sprout." God said, "Moses, do you err like them? In this calf is there any reality?" Then Moses replied, "If not, why shouldst thou be angry with thy children?"¹⁸

Here are just a few further examples from the agada. The first is from Hillel, one of the most revered of the ancient sages:

If I am not for myself, who is for me? If I care only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?¹⁹

Everything is foreseen [by God], yet freedom of choice is given [to man]; and the world is judged by grace, yet all is according to the amount of the work.²⁰

The Holy Spirit rests on him only who has a joyous heart.²¹

For me one of the most poignant teachings of the agada is the legend of the *Lamed Vav*, the Thirty-six.²² This tradition states that God always maintains upon earth thirty-six just men. Hidden in the silence of anonymity, known not even to themselves but only to God, these righteous few in every generation—by their deeds of goodness—protect the world from ruin. For their sake the Lord extends

¹⁸Montefiore and Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology*, pp. 242–43. The most exhaustive collection of agada is Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold, et al., 7 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1909–38).

¹⁹*The Daily Prayer Book*, trans. Philip Birnbaum (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company 1977), p. 482.

²⁰Montefiore and Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology*, p. 36.

²¹Ibid., p. 203.

²²Ibid., pp. 231–32. The idea recalls Abraham's search for a righteous remnant in Sodom (Genesis 18:32). It also appears in the Book of Mormon: "Yea, wo unto this great city of Zarahemla; for behold, it is because of those who are righteous that it is saved" (Helaman 13:12).

his mercy to all. Quietly, outside the centers of power and influence which the world recognizes, they perform the works which preserve the children of men. In these thirty-six just is embodied the heart of Jewish religion: holiness to the Lord. As the rivers are sent from the mountains to the valleys, from the high places to the low, so are these, bearing the waters of life, for holiness and life are one.

According to the Talmud, "All is in the hand of heaven except the fear of heaven."²³ Man may grant or withhold his fear or worship as he chooses. The meaning and goal of his life depend upon this choice. And for me, as my experience at the Seminary reached its end, I began to see that the entire structure of Rabbinic Judaism rested, for the Rabbis as for Moses, upon the simple teaching which Christ himself reiterated, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. . . . Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." (Matthew 22:37, 39; Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18.) The Torah is a law of love. Obedience is a life of love. And always at the center of love, of peace, of joy, is the Holy One of Israel.

I came to see that the ultimate source of the closeness between Judaism and Mormonism is their common commitment to the covenant which they have received by revelation from God. Because the Jews have preserved and transmitted their covenant through the ages, it was possible for me, as a student at the Seminary, to feel that I had returned to an ancient and holy source of teachings which my own faith had taught me already to love. As I studied the Rabbinic books, attended the synagogue, and shared the Sabbath meal in the homes of my teachers and friends, I felt that I was not just a guest but a family member in "a house of prayer, a house of fasting, a house of faith, a house of learning, a house of glory, a house of order, a house of God" (D&C 88:119). In my brief time there, modern Israel met and embraced ancient Israel. The stream which had flowed for thousands of years mingled with the spring which had burst forth anew just a hundred and fifty years ago.²⁴

²³Montefiore and Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology*, p. 291.

²⁴If I were to read only three books about Judaism, I would recommend, in order: Milton Steinberg, *Basic Judaism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1947); Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1955); and Chaim Potok, *The Chosen* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967). Several of the works mentioned in these footnotes have helpful bibliographies for those who are interested.