

rather surprisingly, came out in support of Section 28, as did the chief rabbi. Even more surprisingly, a millionaire Scottish businessman has put up money and promised to hold “poll tax-style” street demonstrations. The first result of these efforts was seen on February 7, when a packed House of Lords, which voted on the legislation before the Commons, threw the bill out by a substantial majority, 210 to 165. Even government vaporings about how Section 28 would be replaced with sex education which stressed the importance of marriage and family life did not convince many Labour peers.

This result is, however, only a reprieve, as the government has promised that “Section 28 will go,” and Labour’s enormous Commons majority will ensure its passage in the lower House whenever it is introduced there. Like all good “liberals,” Tony Blair will try again and again until he gets the “right” result. But if the peers stand firm when the legislation is introduced in the Lords next time, then the government may have to drop the clause or risk losing a whole legislative package. And then it may be too late to try again before the next election.

Even if Section 28 does get repealed,

Labour should be wary of electoral repercussions. Interviewed recently in the *Sunday Telegraph*, a typical Labour voter in Sedgefield, Blair’s constituency, has finally noticed that “If you’re white, working-class and heterosexual they don’t care about you.”

Derek Turner is the editor of Right NOW!, published in London.

Letter From Inner Israel

by Jacob Neusner

Rabbis, But No Torah



When the religion of Judaism speaks in its contemporary modulations—whether Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, or integrationist-Orthodoxy—we should hear many voices. But instead we hear one: the voice of left-liberal politics.

With the exception of self-segregated Orthodoxy, most (though, happily, not all) rabbis preach a secular doctrine of left-wing orthodoxy. That is puzzling, because the Torah—Scripture (the “Old Testament”) and the Mishnah, Talmuds, and Midrash that record the oral revelation of Sinai—presents a remarkably conservative vision of the social order. “Judaism” favors gay rights—except in the Torah. “Judaism” favors “a woman’s right to choose,” even at the very end of term—except in the law of the Torah, which deems the fetus to have a soul at a specific point in the pregnancy. “Judaism” opposes the death penalty—except in the Torah. Compose a list of liberal shibboleths, and I will cite, chapter and verse, rabbinical sermons and the resolutions of their associations that identify them as “Judaism.” And that is not to mention secular Jews and their organizations.

What explains the gap between the teachings of the Torah and the position of its contemporary masters, the rabbinic of today? The failure of the rabbinical schools to set forth a coherent intellectual structure and system resting on Torah learning has produced a generation of rabbis with little or no Torah to

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teach. By “Torah,” I speak of a basic philosophy—a core theology—that guides the everyday encounter with the crises of life, both public and private, and that accords with the revelation by God to Moses at Mount Sinai. In general, rabbis do not refer back to a common body of learning that marks them as rabbis—not professors, not social workers, not community administrators, not ethnic cheerleaders, nor any of the myriad roles rabbis define for themselves by reason of the intellectual bankruptcy of the rabbinate.

The exceptions today, and they are not few, prove the rule. But in prior generations, one could look to Reform and Conservative rabbis as well as to synagogue-Orthodox rabbis for a distinctively rabbinical message. Prior generations made the effort, at least, to deliver a religious message, and if they took a political position, it was in dialogue with the Torah. Today, they do not even try. The American rabbinate once took for granted that a rabbi is someone who knows specific things and believes them. These specific things always included Scripture as mediated by the rabbis of the Mishnah, Talmuds, and Midrash compilations, as well as the body of received exegesis of Scripture produced by Rabbinic Judaism from antiquity to our own time. Rabbinic discourse reflected two things. The first was sheer knowledge of “the Tradition,” which was defined as Scripture and Talmud, broadly construed. The second was something harder to identify but just as palpable: a certain attitude of mind, a philosophy, a theology, formed in dialogue with Scripture and Talmud. Given the contents of the Torah, this attitude reflected conservative values.

Reconstructionist rabbis are an easy target, since their seminary includes in its faculty so few heavyweight scholars. And Reform rabbis, with their investment in Jewish ethnicity, political liberalism, Israelism, and holocaustism, as well as their frequent substitution of personality for intellectual perspicacity, scarcely care about Torah learning. If the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College sets the low-water mark for scholarly inconsequence, how many important books have come from the entire faculty of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles, Cincinnati, New York City, and Jerusalem? The intellectually rigorous work of Eugene Borowitz does not stand entirely alone over the past ten years from that faculty, but it also does

not occupy a crowded platform.

How the JTSA has fallen! I studied at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America from 1954 through 1960, abandoning my Reform upbringing to get what I then conceived to be a better Jewish education in Conservative Judaism than I believed I could get in the Reform seminary. It was a difficult venture, but worth the anguish because of the galaxy of intellectual and scholarly superstars Louis Finkelstein had assembled. (He would replace them with mediocrities in the next generation, many of them JTSA alumni, who would find their way into the academy and out of Jewish-sponsored institutions entirely.) One need not reach the stratospheric level of an Abraham J. Heschel or a Mordecai Kaplan or a Shalom Spiegel to serve as an intellectual model for generations of young rabbis. Even second-rank players such as Saul Lieberman and Moshe Zucker and Judah Goldin and Chaim Zalman Dimitrovsky made an impact. Today’s JTSA faculty has no Heschel. I consulted the faculty listing on its website, and I was astonished by the low scholarly aspirations of most, though not all, of that mostly mediocre collection of never-wases-pretending-to-be-has-beens (a phrase someone once used of the Boston Hebrew College of a prior generation).

Ah, but what of Orthodox rabbis? Surely, they bring to the Jewish community a deep knowledge of the sources of Judaism? That intuitive judgment is both right and wrong. Yeshiva-Orthodoxy, segregated in its educational world, with its emphasis on Talmud study and on Torah learning, produces large numbers of young men who have encountered the Talmud and know this and that. When I meet such young men and ask them what they are studying, I am usually puzzled by their low educational ambitions. This is summed up by an admittedly extreme case. When I was lecturing in Moscow last year, I was introduced to a young man who told me he was studying Talmud in some yeshiva in that city. I asked, “What chapter?” He didn’t know. “What tractate?” He still didn’t know! “Well, what did you study this morning, what Mishnah rule?” He was not sure. I said, “Could it have been . . . ?” Ah, yes, that’s it!

But there are universities and then there are universities, and the same is so in the yeshiva world. While the alumni of the best of them exhibit certain intellectual deficiencies—they find it difficult

to construct a lucid, logical proposition and argument but are very good at low-brow exegesis of words and phrases—yeshiva-Orthodoxy does meet the expectation that a rabbi will base his teaching on the Torah. I have never heard of a rosh yeshiva (a professor) of a reputable yeshiva lacking substantial mastery of the texts, their theology, or law. And they live by the ideals of what they learn, or try to.

But in the pulpit-Orthodox rabbinate, that part of Orthodoxy that is integrationist and that chooses to address the world of Judaism, the situation hardly proves more promising than the Reform, Conservative, or Reconstructionist rabbinate. A kippah on the head of an Orthodox rabbi does not guarantee Torah inside. More to the point, while the Orthodox rabbinate knows things, it is rare that such rabbis can make a coherent and compelling case for the Torah, viewed as the source of culture and sensibility of the holy community of Israel, God’s people.

Writing in the *Jerusalem Report*, Ze’ev Chafets recently challenged the intellectuals of Judaism to answer a simple and reasonable question: “What’s it good for?” We in the academic humanities have to answer that question every day. Our students ask it, because we are not training them to get good-paying jobs when they graduate but educating them for a long life of the intellect. No one takes the question as effrontery or interprets it as an attack on the fields of philosophy, literature, history, or the academic study of religion. We answer that question not only by what we say but by what we do in the classroom every day. But responding to Chafets, Berel Wein, writing in the *Jerusalem Post* of October 29, 1999, saw his question as an attack on the Talmud. How does he respond to Chafets’ question?

It was and is the study of the Torah, above all else, that has preserved the Jewish people to this day. The impractical, uneconomical, other-worldly study of Torah is the main force that has kept the Jewish people alive, vibrant, creative, and stubborn to the core.

Alas—the argument from ethnicity once more! Rabbi Wein does not argue about the merits of what is studied, only about the results. But such an appeal to the practical consequence—the socially desirable result of keeping Jews Jewish—

surely validates studying many things, not just the Talmud. If Jewish education were devoted to the holocaust, or if it consisted of constant pilgrimages to the state of Israel, the same result might occur—or perhaps even a more satisfactory one, since an appeal to emotions (holocaustism) or the experience of ethnic loyalty (Israelism) demands much less than is required by an appeal to intellect. It is easier to feel than to think, and emotions always trump reason, except among the educated few. Rabbi Wein's incapacity to formulate a compelling answer out of the Torah for the value of studying the Torah exemplifies the intellectual limitations of integrationist Orthodoxy—the Orthodoxy that reads, in English, the *Jerusalem Post* and the *Jerusalem Report* and chooses to engage with the rest of Jewry.

With significant exceptions, in integrationist-Orthodoxy, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and Jewish-Renewal/New Age Judaism, we find rabbis without Torah. That represents the failure of a generation of rabbinical seminary professors. The chain of tradition is as strong as its weakest link.

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Letter From South Africa

by Anthony P. Ellison

Out of Africa



On February 11, 1990, Nelson Mandela walked out of prison and entered the last remaining European colony in Africa: South Africa.

From all sides and nations, the hope was that the 72-year-old Mandela, convicted and imprisoned 27 years before for treason, would bring down the edifice of apartheid and build, in its place, the new Jerusalem. With his gracious, old-fashioned courtesies, mild manner, and tempered pronouncements, he appeared eminently qualified to meet those expect-

tations.

In espousing liberty, equality, and fraternity over tyranny, discrimination, and retribution, Nelson Mandela was to negotiate a place for South Africa in the modern world. Resentment at the injustices of white domination was to be eschewed. All of South Africa's people—the “rainbow people,” not a minority—were to be sovereign.

Mandela's story was irresistible to writers with a Manichaeic outlook. One hagiography after another was delivered to a worldwide public starved for heroes. He was rapturously received everywhere in the Western hemisphere. He was awarded the Nobel Prize. Honorary doctorates fell on his shoulders like confetti; his name adorned streets, squares, and schools in every continent.

The skeptics were party poopers. Professor Donald Horowitz, a constitutional expert, was deemed unduly pessimistic when he judged democracy to be possible “but improbable in South Africa.” Margaret Thatcher, in the twilight of her reign, was rebuked for depicting the communists' utopia as “cloud cuckoo land.” Professor Walter Williams was being politically incorrect when he depicted the African National Congress (ANC) and the National Party (NP) as kindred spirits, opposed to liberal individualism and hell-bent on the continuation of a disastrous collectivism. Joe Slovo, leader of the South African Communist Party (SACP), implicitly rejected Francis Fukuyama's thesis when he said that socialism, having failed everywhere else in the world, “shall be built correctly for the first time in South Africa.” There was outrage when Sir Laurens van der Post, who had been a prisoner of war of the Japanese, visited Mandela and declared that he appeared to have learned nothing “from the school of suffering.” And Prof. George Ayittey, an eloquent witness to Africa's post-colonial betrayal by its emerging elite, was met with incredulity when he counseled Mandela not to accept power.

The skepticism of these informed and perceptive observers was founded on what they knew about the liberation movement and on their observations of the parlous political and economic course Africa had run during the post-colonial period. The elite that came to power in post-apartheid South Africa comprised three groups. The smallest, and the most powerful, were the “exiles”—who, for the most part, had been

educated and acculturated not within South Africa but inside the Soviet bloc or under the strong influence of socialists and communists in Western institutions. A second group had captured the leadership of the trade unions. The third group consisted of assorted anti-apartheid activists ranging from religious leaders to Africanists.

These factions espoused philosophies that had in common an opposition to modernism and its potent transmitter, the competitive market process. Africanists called for a rediscovery of African history. The communists, although they had always been suspicious that the Africanists meant liberation to be enjoyed exclusively by blacks, were careful not to undercut the Africanist myth shaped around Mandela. Their intention was to conflate the Africanist with the socialist conception of liberation that was to spring from the radical transformation of South Africa.

Since 1990, the South African liberation movement has won a dazzling series of victories. It negotiated a political settlement with the white minority and wrote a constitution that serves its transformative goals; it has won two elections with overwhelming majorities; and it launched the transformation program which came to be known as the “national democratic revolution.” The election of 1999, however, was the movement's *coup de grace*, giving the ANC-SACP-COSATU alliance the two-thirds majority which will enable it to proceed toward its one-party goal without having to answer either to an internal or to an external opposition. The constitutional protections of private property, minority rights, and the separation of powers can now be dismantled and the national democratic revolution realized.

These have been pyrrhic victories. Unemployment continues to rise. Accumulated job losses from 1989 to 1999 reached almost 850,000. There has been a marked increase in the emigration of skilled people from all racial groups. Some 20 percent of whites (who total 4.4 million of South Africa's 40.5 million persons) travel on a British passport. A study conducted by Trade and Industry Monitor, an independent research unit at the University of Cape Town, found that 233,609 South Africans had moved to the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand between 1989 and 1997.

With the normalization of relation-