

COMMUNITY

By Rabbi NEHEMIA POLEN
GUEST TORAH COLUMNIST

IT WAS NOTICED, perhaps for the first time some 675 years ago by JACOB BEN ASHER (c.1270-1340) in his commentary *Ba'al ha-Turim al ha-Torah*, that MOSES' name does not appear in parshat Tetzaveh.

The name of this central person of the biblical narrative figures prominently in each Torah portion from the moment of his initial appearance at the beginning of the book of Exodus, so its absence in this week's parsha is indeed conspicuous.

To explain this phenomenon, Rabbi ben Asher calls attention to Exodus XXXII:32. The children of Israel have just worshiped the golden calf, and G-d threatens to destroy them and make Moses the new patriarch of a "great nation."

Moses insists that G-d must forgive their sin, "and if not, erase me, please, from Your book which You have written."

Moses, in offering to surrender his life and his very spiritual identity for his people, uttered a curse, which, willy-nilly, left its impression, achieving at least partial realization — as we find here in the Torah reading of Tetzaveh, where his name is absent.

This explanation sees the absence of Moses' name as punishment.

But why should Moses have been punished for his



DISCOVERING TORAH



— MSC ILLUSTRATION

breathtakingly courageous defense of the children of Israel, at the risk of his

own spiritual destiny?

And why was Tetzaveh specifically chosen for the

omission of Moses' name?

FOR THE ANSWERS, we must look at a trend in the biblical narrative up to this point.

The Torah is, in large measure, the story of the rivalry of brothers: CAIN and ABEL, ISAAC and ISHMAEL, JACOB and ESAU, JOSEPH and his brothers. This pattern is broken by the relationship of Moses and AARON.

Aaron, the older brother, is overshadowed by Moses, the leader and teacher of the people. Yet they both work together without a trace of rivalry or animosity.

Indeed, the Midrash suggests, it is precisely because Aaron bore no jealousy toward Moses that he was chosen to be high priest.

WHY PARSHAT TETZAVEH? Because Tetzaveh tells of Aaron's elevation to the high priesthood, specifies the garments he was to wear as high priest and — most significantly — describes the dedication ceremony installing Aaron and his sons as priests.

The irony is that the officiant for this dedication service was none other than Moses himself.

BREAKING THE PATTERN

The Torah contains many stories about the rivalry between brothers, a pattern which is broken when we come to the relationship between Moses and Aaron.

That these two brothers are able to work together, as seen in our Torah reading of Tetzaveh, provides a clue as to why Moses' name does not appear here, although his presence is very much in evidence. □

While his name indeed does not appear in the parsha, he is the one being addressed throughout.

He is the one charged with carrying out all the details of the service.

He is the priest for this rite.

The very first word of the parsha — "וְאַתָּה" ("And you") — is addressed to Moses. Nowhere is Moses addressed more directly than in the parsha from which his name is absent.

THE TIME WHEN MOSES rose to the defense of his people by asking G-d to remove his name from His book was a moment of supreme self-sacrifice, a surrender to martyrdom not of the body, but of the soul.

At that moment Moses was rewarded with a kind of immortality which transcends the mere remembrance of his name.

Moses was granted a parsha of the Torah in which his name would not be mentioned, but in which his presence would be most acutely felt, in which he alone would serve as high priest.

Moses' wish that his name be erased was indeed fulfilled, but its fulfillment was transformed into a blessing.

Here we encounter the silence not of absence and forgetfulness, but of presence and remembrance. Such is the reward of those who surrender themselves in service to G-d and G-d's people. □

National Havurah Committee

"Inside Scoop" is an occasional column about material which has appeared in the JEWISH STAR.

By GILA WERTHEIMER
LITERARY EDITOR



INSIDE SCOOP

AS SOMEONE WHO LOVES to read and also to write, who has an interest in and commitment to Jewish life in its diverse expressions, there could hardly be a better assignment than reviewing newly published Jewish books. I've been engaging in this professionally for (dare I confess it) more than 30 years now and I continue to enjoy it, to find it fascinating, and to believe in the enrichment that reading Jewish can bring to one's life.

From the beginning, I followed the broadest definition of "Jewish" that I could possibly apply to the great variety of books that are published. So for review purposes, a Jewish author writing on a non-Jewish subject, or a non-Jewish author on a Jewish topic, both qualified.

As for form: fiction, biography, history, poetry, politics, memoir, translations — all have, in greater or lesser numbers, been reviewed. Oftentimes I was introduced to subject matter I didn't even know I would find interesting.

Within that subject matter, there was always the Holocaust, and its expression and examination in all forms.

One of my special long-time reviewing pleasures has been Jewish children's books. It started with my own children, and several decades later it continues with my grandchildren. It is heartening to see the range, the diversity and the high quality of material available today, especially for young children.

Then as now, there were too many books to review — the people of the book produces stacks of books! In fact over the decades I have seen the number of Jewish books (in their broadest definition) dramatically increase, having

now become part of any trade or academic publisher's list.

The selection for review is, in the end, a subjective one, based on my own personal choices.

THE FIRST BOOK I ever reviewed in the JEWISH STAR, in 1980, came with some of the challenges I would encounter over the coming decades.

A Jewish reviewer, reviewing Jewish books, in a Jewish publication wasn't quite as straightforward as I had imagined.

That first book was a memoir, its author a community figure who was well known to my parents. I remember opening it, curious to learn something about Jewish life in Western Canada in the 1920s, when this individual had arrived there from Russia.

But the book was terrible! Poorly written, unedited and with little insight. What was I to do?

Well, I used variations of the word "disappointing" several times, found something positive to say about the beginning and the end, and was critical of the middle.

In later years, if I encountered a similar situation I would usually put the book aside and not review it. But that first time, I felt committed not only to reading it, but to

writing something about it.

So, I had to ask myself: Just how truthful should I be in my reviews? Did I have an unspoken obligation to tread lightly when assessing the books?

That led me to a related question: What was my intent in reviewing Jewish books?

Was I a cheerleader, a promoter, or a reviewer? I knew my role was the last-mentioned one.

NOTWITHSTANDING my answer to myself, the dilemma would reappear over the years, especially when it came to Holocaust memoirs.

The value of every survivor writing down what he or she experienced is not to be denied; all are witnesses offering testimony. The intrinsic merit of each story takes precedence over its literary qualities.

So I try to be gentle when it comes to Holocaust memoirs.

Not everyone can be a PRIMO LEVI, an ELIE WIESEL or an AHARON APPELFELD, writers whose stories sear themselves into a reader's consciousness and are critically acclaimed as works of literature.

A notable pleasure in reviewing is being introduced to a writer I am not familiar with, and the ensuing excitement of dis-

covery.

One such discovery occurred early on, in 1981, when I reviewed a new book titled *Badenheim 1939* by AHARON APPELFELD.

I had not heard of the author, but when I closed the last page of this short novel, I was stunned by its impact. Through quiet story-telling and unembellished language Appelfeld writes of European Jews at a spa in 1939 who refuse to see what is coming. The story itself is fiction; the truths it conveys are not.

It was the first book of the European-born Israeli writer and Holocaust survivor to be translated into

In love with reading, writing and reviewing

English. I have gone on to review many more of his books, including his own memoir, *The Story of a Life* (reviewed Nov. 26, 2004).

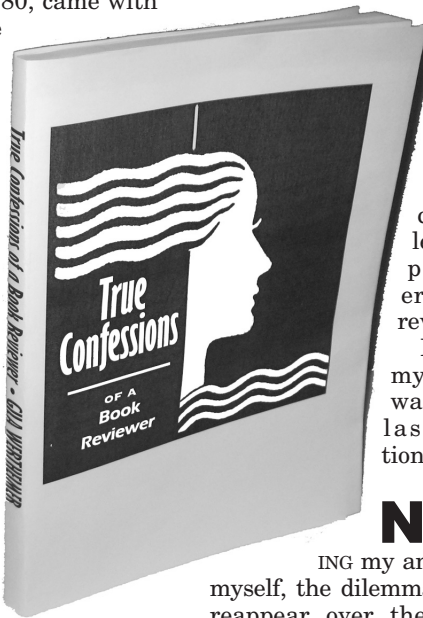
Subject matter, too, can bring surprises.

Take, for example, the Cairo geniza. It's esoteric material and (except for a general interest) is beyond my expertise.

But then I encountered *Sacred Trash: The Lost and Found World of the Cairo Geniza*. Telling the story for a general readership, authors ADINA HOFFMAN and PETER COLE bring the discovery of the geniza to life, "with the drama of any good mystery," as I said in my review (May 27, 2011).

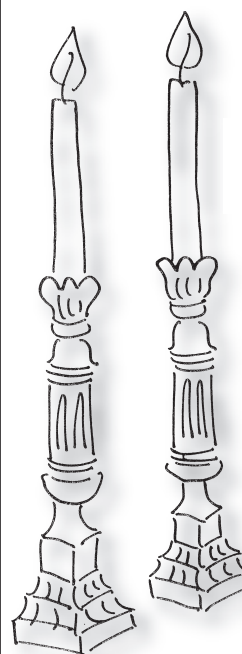
I look forward to sharing more reviews and notices of new books, and I hope that readers will enjoy reading the reviews as much as I enjoy reading, and writing about, the books. □

During nearly 34 years as Literary Editor at the JEWISH STAR, award-winning journalist GILA WERTHEIMER has reviewed more than 1,000 books. "Sporting Jews" returns with the February 28 issue.



When rivalry stopped

פרשת תצוה
Exodus 27:20 - 30:10
Shabbat, February 8



שַׁבַּת שָׁלוֹם
Shabbat Shalom!

LIGHT SABBATH CANDLES:

Friday, February 7 » 4:55 pm

Friday, February 14 » 5:04 pm

Friday, February 21 » 5:13 pm

Friday, February 28 » 5:21 pm