

## The Going | Reading Religion

*Leon Wiener Dow*

Outsiders to the world of Jewish practice are often puzzled by certain of its fundamental features: Why and how is Torah study more than merely a means of adjudicating questions of practice? What is the role of human creativity in Jewish law and study? Where does fixed prayer fit in? What is place of Shabbat observance? How does Jewish religious practice connect with a personal relationship to God? Wiener Dow's aim in this short book is to explore these issues and others from the viewpoint of an outsider finding his way in. He offers the outsider the perspective of a tour guide with the hope that natives will recognize the landscape and perhaps see it in a new light.

The framework is primarily that of German-Jewish dialogical philosophy, with special indebtedness to Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929), himself a returnee to Jewish practice. Autobiographical reflection plays a significant role. Dow also devotes attention to the interpretation of several classic rabbinic texts, Hasidic homilies, and more recent anecdotes. Dow's own perspective is pertinent to a wide range of Jewish practice, ranging from ideas conformable to traditional Jewish theology and practice to more liberal orientations, with Dow's position tilted toward the liberal side. He names the late Rabbi David Hartman as his primary mentor.

Overall the book succeeds in its aims, meaning that the outsider will come out with a better grasp of the distinctive aspects of Jewish spiritual life in general, even if it is not a fully differentiated analysis of the outlook of particular thinkers and groups.

This leads to a caveat: the strength of this book is also a potential weakness. Many of the interpretations of sources are subjective and not compelling. For example, Dow quotes the well-known remark by Ernst Simon, a Rosenzweig disciple and later Hebrew University professor, that he cannot pray with the people he talks to and cannot talk to the people he prays with. This is universally understood to mean that academic people are deficient in religious passion, while those who pray well are likely to lack philosophical sophistication. Dow takes this wistful witticism against the grain as a statement about different perspectives suitable for prayer and conversation respectively. In examining old texts, the danger of over-reading is surely greater. For this reason one must be wary of talking Dow's interpretations as mainstream.

With this concern in mind, many of Dow's interpretations are highly suggestive and reward the attention of the "insider" student. For example, he mentions the Talmudic dispute about whether Moses wrote the last eight verses of the Torah, those that narrate his own death. The conventional reading is that this dispute is about the degree to which the unique agency of Moses is required to sanctify the canonized Torah. Dow proposes that the view, according to which it was necessary for Joshua to complete these verses, recognizes death as "the line of demarcation between the infinite possibilities of the spoken word and the finite structure the word can assume in its written form" (29), while the other view asserts a more robust notion of communicability. Such intriguing ideas abound.

A concluding note: Dow recently published for Bar-Ilan University Press a Hebrew book with a similar title—*U've'Lekhtekha vaDerekh*. This 300-page volume offers a theory of halakha (Jewish law) on the basis of Rosenzweig's philosophy. As can be expected, it is much more detailed than the English book. Nonetheless I believe that even Hebrew readers would benefit from perusing the English first because the briefer presentation provides a better understanding of the combination of subjective and scholarly considerations that motivate the author.