

Preservation

by chayah sarah cantor

Certain
things
were
made
to last.

"335.4 V447H."

The title leaped onto the screen and flickered.

Human Nature; the Marxian View.

Aliza said the title aloud, unsure if the years behind a computer screen hadn't totally destroyed her ability to read.

One of the cataloguers, Yechezkel, looked up. "Frankly, I think it should be burned." He was hunched rabbinically over a Talmud volume, part of a sleek set that had just come in. To him and his fellow scholars, this volume was a lifeline to G-d. To the Library of Congress, it was BM 497 or other.

Aliza dutifully typed in the accession number found on the lower right-hand corner of the index card. This was the code used to summon a book from the Library of Congress database. Now *Human Nature, the Marxian View* had its home in this forever growing database.

Amazing, she thought, the times we live in. The entire world's wisdom is being compressed into a disk the size of her alarm clock. Yet somehow all that knowledge seemed greatly reduced when left at the mercy of cybernetics, arguably mankind's greatest invention. A mere flick of a switch could wipe out mankind's works from the memory for good.

The library where she worked was integrating its old collection of books - old meaning anything catalogued by the numerically based Dewey Decimal system - into the modern Library of Congress ("LC") databases, in order to prepare for



the coming online service. This process, in library parlance, was called "retrospective conversion," since these books were being changed over long after computers had entered the world, and long after the books' publication date.

Incredible. Soon every holding, down to

the maps, would be summoned by a simple keystroke. Those long card catalog drawers people used to look up Jane Austen would go by the way of Miss Austen's quill pen. Soon she and all her author friends would be a byte at some memory bank in Washington, and all anyone had to do to look her up would be to sit down at some terminal.

Day after day Aliza combed through the old catalog drawers, bringing up ancient titles onto the screen and typing in the Dewey number. Each volume told its own story, of vanished bestsellerdom and topical urgency. But now, half these books seemed little more than museum pieces, relics of an era that seemed as remote to Aliza as a Martian crater. That era had faded long before her parents even met and married, and probably even long before her late grandparents, dazed and haunted, had hobbled onto American shores, victims of a different kind of civilization.

After two hours, not only was Aliza becoming completely bored, but her eyes were starting to ache.

"Oh, no."

Goldie looked up. "What's wrong?"

"I think I entered the wrong edition."

"How do you know?"

"We have two holdings, and one card doesn't say very much."

Aliza did a title search: *Hum, na, th, M.* Instantly several nearly identical lines raced across the screen.

"Different dates and publishers. Wonderful." Aliza held up a blue index card - not the kind used by the venerable Library of Congress, but the kind students might use to crib for exams. This one was darkened by age. Author, title - that was all this unknown and probably long dead librarian had written.

Sighing, Aliza placed the index card in an envelope filled with similar questions. She knew what she had to do - and she did this twenty times a day: go to the stacks to check the publisher and pagination.

Actually, she thought as she pressed the elevator button, she enjoyed the breaks away from the desk. And not only because

of her reddening eyes. She was walking by the stacks of the recent acquisitions. Invariably she grabbed something - a textbook, a bestseller, an ethical or legal work by a rabbi, a pundit wringing his hands over the decline of western civilization - and took it home to add to the piles on her night table. One of these days she'd read them all.

She passed through the employee lounge, where Fyodor had snuggled into the vinyl sofa. As a newspaper rested on his knee, he pulled a sandwich out of a greasy bag and adjusted his glasses.

When he waved at Aliza, she waved back.

"How is school, Fyodor?"

"Is fine, thank you." Yawning, Fyodor rummaged through a dingy backpack, then removed another paper bag.

"Kol hakavod," she whispered. If anyone deserved this traditional expression of encouragement, it was Fyodor. How could anyone tackle the night shift after a full day before a chalkboard? Yet underneath his frail frame lurked a mind like a

giant's. Back home in Moscow, where he had been a medical technician, he had vowed to become a doctor the minute he gained his visa. It was a vow he did not intend to break.

A spiked metal rectangle poked out of the bag, and Aliza recognized it right away - a menorah Fyodor planned to light when he got home.

"What are your plans for Chanukah?" she asked.

"Nothing I work. And I eat."

Aliza frowned. "Why, Fyodor? Aren't there any parties?"

"My uncle might give one. But why? I happy enough without party."

She believed him. If for years Fyodor had lit candles behind a curtained room under the eyes of the KGB, the ability to choose how to spend Chanukah appeared just as liberating as the decision to stay at home. For him a party had once consisted of a few friends sharing greasy potato pancakes and whispering holiday tunes in a rusty Yiddish and a cracked melody. Now a party was simply one of his options.

"And you?" Fyodor asked. "What do you

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*Others
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for
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do for Chanukah?"

"Nothing much, probably." Aliza replied. "My father's in mourning this year. My zaidic died in August."

She hurried away.

The staircase brought her to the Dewey collection, a dingy display of volumes, some of which had the seams falling off the spine. As Aliza's nose tingled, then erupted into a sneeze, she remembered what she hated most about coming here. These dusty old books were worse than pollen.

Human nature; the Marxian View. It should be here. She went backwards in the alphabet. *The Meaning of Marxism. Marxism and Freedom.* When she got to *Bolshevism: An Introduction to Soviet Communism*, she knew she had gone too far.

She'd have to check the card trays; Aliza wondered who on earth would borrow such an antique. Unless it was stolen. Or, more likely, had been placed in permanent storage down in the basement.

She had gone down there only once. The basement was a warehouse for discarded or duplicate items, things no one ever cared to look at anymore, a way station for books on their way to oblivion. Most would languish in neglect and abandonment. But some might be lucky enough to get sold to other libraries or dealers.

It was the preservation project that had brought her there, just about a month ago. That had involved a totally different set of books. She had felt sorry for those books, for some reason.

No regular library would have wanted them. Even collectors might hesitate. But these books were different. They were *sefarim*, Jewish holy books, many rare and some even centuries old, which were being committed to microfilm.

Upstairs, in the main library, she, Aliza, had been placed in charge of proofing the microfilm after the books were returned from the photographer. The librarian had hovered over her at the microfilm reader and pointed to the sheet.

"You're to check each roll, and make sure every page is photographed in order," the librarian commanded. "I'm afraid some of these old books were printed rather cheaply. You might find quite a few pages missing or out of sequence."

As the older woman leaned over and pointed to the screen, her necklace bounced off her chest. "Sometimes you'll find a blotch on it. That could be a stain on the page, or it could be the photographer's error. Make a note of it. If it's his error, then

we send it back to be redone."

Watching the spool of film glide through under the glass, Aliza obediently marked off the sheets for the offending blotches and nicks. Many of the books had missing or permanently damaged pages, which were recorded in her sheets and on the microfilm. Like an old broken toy the book dangled open on her knee while she worked.

How she hated this. The rust from the thick brown covers invariably stained her hands and clothes. And the smell! The bindings reeked of mildew and hinted of treacherous ocean voyages filled with third-class cargo. She imagined peddler pushcarts creaking through muddy, unpaved roads in wheat fields and marsh - destitute and defeated old men chased by screaming children and snarling bloodhounds. The writings, some in spidery Rashi script, told their own story.

After she had finished, Aliza had wheeled the volumes down to the basement. That was her first contact with this vast, subterranean world. And she wondered: After the books were dutifully put away on a long row of metal shelves, what would become of them? So frail and battered did they look; might they at least be discarded with dignity together with the rest of the *sheimos*, the holy writings? Whereas these were voices from the past, perhaps they deserved their own burial place, as a monument to a vanished era.

Shaking herself, Aliza glanced at the index card with the salute to Karl Marx. She laughed at the thought that the old sefarim, which exuded a certain decrepit charm, might actually be down there in that purgatory with this apostate and his kind. Might they?

None was looking. The supervisor was away at a meeting, and the others were eating sandwiches at their desks or exchanging e-mail messages. Aliza decided she would go back to the basement.

Quietly taking the key, she went to the elevator. As she pressed the button, she held the key firmly in the lock, so that she could go to this most secret of domains.

Once Aliza exited the elevator doors, she trembled, either because of the constant air-conditioning or the catacomb stillness that filled the massive room. Rows of books filled the hall, cold and silent. On one side were the discards and duplicates, most without catalog numbers and many with

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old-fashioned drawings on the book-covers.

There was no Karl Marx, only a group of unknown authors. As the smell of mildew touched her nose, Aliza knew the area she was approaching. Sure enough, the sight of the ancient Hebrew volumes loomed in view, volumes that had once seen better days and were now put away to rest.

Something caught her eye, and for some reason she felt she had to stop. A book rested forlornly by itself at the end of the shelf, atop a heap of old journals, like an afterthought. Apparently someone who had also helped on the preservation project had gotten lazy and left it there.

The title, in faded Hebrew letters, indicated some kind of memorial book, one issued in honor of a town leader or scholar. She opened the cover - carefully, of course, but curiously.

"Lvov, 1914."

Lvov. Her zeidie came from there. Hadn't the town changed hands a lot of times? German, Polish - not Polish. Finally it returned with Poland. By then, its Jews were gone. The shtetl lay as ravaged as the pages before her, and the Bolsheviks her zeidie so hated had moved in to stay. Or so it seemed.

The image of her zeidie appeared before her - stooped, ethereal, as if something in him had been extinguished long before his final trip to the hospital. Sometimes, when she was still a child, they had taken walks together, she watching the numbers on his arm and blurting out questions. Tenderly her zeidie answered them. In spite of the history he wore permanently, a strength emanated from him - the strength that comes from knowing right from wrong, the strength of lineage.

The lingering illness had knocked him down when nothing else could. Yet even then, while she and her family stood by his

deathbed, she had watched him give up the ghost diplomatically, as if he were back at the camps, and would fight death on his own terms.

A handwritten inscription crawled off the corner, next to a row of brownish blotches. In Yiddish, someone's name - Yitzchak something or other. No doubt the book had outlived its owner.

Something about the blotches caught her attention, and Aliza peered closer. The blotches could be dirt or mud, or even age, though on the sheets she could only describe them as technicalities. The dry dark brown spots had

deepened over the years, like something that had settled and seeped in. It was the color of blood.

*W*hat's wrong?" Goldie asked as Aliza returned to her desk. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I was just thinking about something," Aliza answered. "I guess since the funeral... you know."

Quickly she held up the index card. "I couldn't find it," she said.

"What? Oh, you're still looking for that book about Marx?" Goldie exclaimed. "It wasn't on the shelf?"

"No."

"Did you check the trays?"

"Yes."

"Not there?"

"No."

"And it wasn't in the main catalog, either?"

"No."

The woman shrugged. "It was probably one of those we removed."

"You mean it was never in the basement?"

"No. It was deaccessed. The library no longer needed it, for whatever reason. We just forgot to remove the shelf list card, that's all."

"Easy come, easy go," replied Aliza, and she regretted the time away from her desk

for a fruitless search. Or maybe not so fruitless. Something was down there that she had to see, although it was definitely not the Karl Marx book.

"Now to get rid of the wrong book," she declared.

She advanced to the terminal. Her hands danced deftly over the keys, until the titles came to an end and she had found the right one.

Then she typed: "Delete from holdings." Judaism survives; Marx was history. ♦

They Call Him Benny

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remembered Benny's parents, and the day - erev Yom Kippur - he and they had been transported to the notorious death camp Treblinka. A day later the Fishoffs were murdered. This old man had been one of the very few to escape Treblinka, where death was usually immediate. It was truly extraordinary that Benny had met him, but then again, nothing about Benny's life has been ordinary.

Last year the Fishoffs went to Shanghai. They visited the one-room Jewish museum, where Benny was surprised to find a Japanese identification card that had once belonged to a young Gerer chassid. Benny recognized himself in the fifty-year-old photograph. The face on the wall represented a young man separated from his family and living tenaciously in a foreign land. The man visiting the museum and viewing himself was a successful businessman and patron of rabbis - yet on the inside, Yechiel BenZion Fishoff still has a foot in the shtetl.

Benny suffered devastating losses - his entire family in the Holocaust, and his wife when she was young. Yet he makes an extraordinary statement of simple faith and optimism. "I've had a very good life, a happy life."

After a life of special experiences, what is Benny Fishoff's message to the next generation? "One should never, ever give up hope, whether in business, in private life, or in health. We have seen so many miracles happen. We live with hope. No matter what happens in life, things can change in one minute. 'G-d's salvation comes in the wink of an eye' [a Rabbinic saying]. We are not alone." ♦

Chanie Gerstner, a frequent contributor to this magazine, is the author of At Mama's Knees, published by BP.



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The implications of the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin for the State of Israel lie well beyond the grasp of these words, written mere days after the tragedy. However, it is not too early to decry the reaction that has followed the attack: the consecration not only of Rabin, but of his ideas as well.

The Israel-P.L.O. negotiations, and the concessions made by Israel in particular, are certainly contentious matters. One can readily see at least two sides here: those who trust the P.L.O. and Syria, and those who are unwilling, after five wars and unceasing terrorism, to take the chance. Between these opposites repose considerable differences of opinion.

Should Rabin's death affect one's thinking on the peace process? The logical answer is no; how can an opponent of the negotiations be expected to now support them, when he believes they are leading Israel to disaster? Conversely, neither should a supporter change his view.

Yet those media and political voices who support the course of the talks - including Leah Rabin - are using the Prime Minister's assassination as a springboard to advance their cause and to challenge the legitimacy of their opponents, resorting even to lies and distortions to achieve these aims. Witness three vituperative Op-Ed articles in the New York Times on just one day last month.

First there is Akiva Eldar, the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz's Washington bureau chief, who questions the popular premise that Shimon Peres will be unable to muster the support for the peace process achieved by Rabin. Eldar asks: Did Rabin truly have support for his program? After all, he could not even muster a Jewish majority in the Knesset to ratify the Oslo II agreement, and had to rely on Arab MK's. Furthermore, says Eldar, Rabin was "obsessed with accommodating right-wing settlers and politicians." And Oslo II was "postponed again and again because Mr. Rabin wished to insure that the interests of the 140,000 settlers would be protected." Eldar finds Rabin's program wanting, and hopes that Peres will move much more rapidly, so that in the next elections "those who prefer having 'greater Israel' to peace will vote against Shimon Peres... Those who want to do away

with the occupation will support him."

Aren't Eldar's thoughts internally contradictory? If there is not a Jewish majority on this critical issue for the Jewish State, why is there such a great desire for a hastened pace? Moreover, Eldar makes it appear that Rabin bent over backwards to satisfy

the settlers. This is untrue; Rabin termed the settlers "vermin" - notwithstanding the fact that many are there at his own behest. In refusing to remove them, he was not possessed of some noble mission, but merely was fulfilling the terms of Oslo I, namely that the interests of the settlers would be protected. Yet did he ever offer to meet amicably with the settlers to discuss their needs?

But most disturbing is Eldar's dismissal of the opposition as preferring land to peace. Who in the Likud or in the National Religious Party does not want peace? The opponents of the process have differing reasons for their stance - security and religious considerations among them. Are these views to be dismissed as so much fluff, as anti-peace? These opponents do not agree with the course set by Rabin and Peres. Should they board a train they feel is headed for disaster as some sort of macabre atonement for the assassination?

Next comes Times columnist Frank Rich. He does at least a minor service by debunking the myth that violence among Jews is unprecedented in modern Israel. Rich notes that Leah Rabin had a flashback to the killing of Chaim Arlosoroff, a Labor Party leader who was done away with "presumably by right-wing Jewish fanatics." True, but very selective. What about Jacob de Haan, who was murdered by Labor Party operatives in 1924? And how about Mrs. Rabin's husband, who many believe ordered the shooting of innocent Jews escaping the *Altalena*, a boat sunk by his Palmach in the War of Independence as revenge for the Arlosoroff shooting? Does she remember Arlosoroff but not the *Altalena*, given the close link between the two?

The worst vitriol, however, emanates from the pen of Thomas L. Friedman, a long-time Likud-basher. Friedman sets his sights on those who believe assassin Yigal Amir was

A TURNING POINT

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