

BOOK REVIEWS

English in their *t'filot*? Or will the passages be a silent commentary that worshipers can encounter on their own, to do with as they would? Regardless, for our own Reform prayer, *Lev Shalem* is a remarkable and valuable supplement to *Mishkan T'filah* and the worship that so many of us are called upon to facilitate. *Lev Shalem* most certainly deserves a spot in the liturgical section of our rabbinic libraries for us to consult as we do that sacred work.

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Eight Questions of Faith: Biblical Challenges that Guide and Ground Our Lives

Niles Elliot Goldstein

(Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2015), 188 pp.

As a matter of disclosure I have known Rabbi Goldstein for a long time. His parents are members of my former congregation, and Niles and I edited a book together. I am one of his admirers and have read most of the ten books he has written. His latest book, *Eight Questions of Faith: Biblical Challenges That Guide and Ground Our Lives*, is a powerful and learned exploration of eight questions that each of us faces at some moment in our lives:

1. How do we live when we know we are going to die?
2. Why is humility so important?
3. Are we responsible for other people?
4. What is the purpose of human life?
5. Is some knowledge too dangerous to possess?
6. Has God abandoned us?
7. How do we return when we have lost our way?
8. What happens to us after we die? (p. xiv)

We are told if we are going to write a book we should write about something we know. This book as well as his other books is autobiographical. The questions emerge from his reflection on his own experience, his own life, and his extensive study of Judaism as well as literature, philosophy, and theology. There is a brutal honesty that pervades his writing. He is a fierce critic of what he perceives to be wrong in the Jewish world, and he is no less brutally honest about himself. His writing style allows the reader to feel his

emotions and connect directly with the existential questions that haunt every thinking human being. The book does not provide answers to the questions he poses, but using his own life and material drawn from a broad range of sources both Jewish and non-Jewish, he offers guidance for individuals to seek their own answers. *Eight Questions* is not a work of academic scholarship but it demonstrates Niles's deep understanding of complex and diverse material drawn from his ever-growing pursuit of wisdom wherever it may be found. It should be clear that this is not a self-help book but a work of literature that seeks to confront the crises each person confronts at various stages of their lives.

Each chapter begins with a vivid description of an event in his life that presented him with a fundamental dilemma. His descriptions of his own pain and angst are starkly compelling. The reader is drawn into his life and through the words on the page feels present with Niles as he confronts one crisis after another. In each instance the reader wonders how Niles will resolve the crisis and find the ability to utilize the crisis to find the wisdom that enables him to continue his journey. After describing each crisis Niles turns to a biblical verse to begin his ruminations. Niles's choice of a biblical verse reminds the reader that what Niles is experiencing has been experienced before. These are the eternal questions. His own struggle is unique in that it comes out of his own autobiography, but it is not unique because other people before and after have and will in their own way ask the same question that is raised by the biblical verse. The book therefore belongs to a genre of literature that asks the reader not to read the *Tanach* as an ancient artifact but to read it as the story of his/her own life.

In chapter 1 Niles tells the reader that his despair had become so profound that he contemplated flinging himself off a cliff into the churning waters below. Instead of suicide he chose life. When your life is falling apart to whom do you turn? Niles turns to the prophet Jeremiah who cries out in despair, "Why did I ever issue from the womb?" (Jer. 20:18). Niles explores Jeremiah's dark despair then turns to *Kohelet*, then to the poet Shelly, then to the philosophers Franz Rosenzweig and Maimonides, then to the artist Paul Gauguin, then to the *Mishnah Pirkei Avot*, then to Shakespeare's Hamlet, and finally to Samuel Beckett. Each chapter has a broad range of sources. At the end of the chapter Niles writes, "When all seems lost, when the burden of our story seems too

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great for us to bear, our ungraspable drive to endure has the power to carry, preserve, and ultimately rescue us" (p. 25). The chapter as with the book as a whole has intellectual and emotional integrity. The goal is not to talk a potential suicide off the cliff but to help the reader to find a way to contextualize his/her struggles with the wisdom gained from the struggles of some of the giants of the Bible, philosophy, and literature. Niles uses texts to speak to himself, with himself, and for himself in the hope that others will be drawn into his personal conversation and it will become his/her conversation as well.

In chapter 2 Niles's encounter with nature becomes an experience of the transcendent that leads him to Moses' response to God at the Burning Bush, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" (Exod. 3:11). He explores the concept of humility. Moses' own sense of unworthiness and his fear and trembling are the starting point of his ability to accept God's charge. Niles describes Moses' reaction as "radical humility." Strength and courage can come from humility. The chapter challenges the reader to contemplate how at every stage of life there are opportunities for growth. The theme is that in self-diminution there is the potential for greatness. As Moses faces Pharaoh, so each of us is called to face the Pharaohs and the *Mitzrayim* the narrow constricting moments in our lives.

In chapter 3 Niles offers a new way of looking at Cain's famous question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen. 4:9). His is a refreshing and creative take on what many perceive as a simple question or perhaps a simple accusation by God. At this early stage of creation why should one assume that Cain would know the correct response? Perhaps God bears some of the moral burden? How do human beings develop a moral conscience? For me this was the most interesting and creative interpretation of the age-old, well-known story.

Chapter 4 deals with the concept of being called. Beginning with his own decision to become a rabbi, Niles turns to a quotation from Deuteronomy:

And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God demand of you? Only this: to fear the LORD your God, to walk only in His paths, to love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and soul, keeping the LORD's commandments and laws, which I enjoin upon you today, for your good. (Deut. 10:12-13)

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He does not parse all elements of the demands but turns his attention to the demand to fear God. The chapter is about a quest to find meaning and purpose in one's life. He ends the chapter by returning to the question "What does God demand of you?," concluding that God demands "an open heart. And a brave soul" (p. 85). In this chapter, as in the others, the journey to conclusion is provocative and profound. He draws constantly on diverse sources.

Chapter 5 deals with Adam and Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit and God's question "What have you done?" (Gen. 3:13). Niles explores the question of whether there is knowledge that humankind should not pursue because it is too dangerous. His conclusion seems to be yes but he reminds the reader that "Forbidden knowledge is as dangerous as it is seductive" (p. 98) and for that reason the reality is that humans will always seek to know more without necessarily understanding the potential consequences. Since one cannot stop the pursuit of knowledge, humankind needs to develop an ethics of anticipation. Niles provides a stark warning and a necessary caution. The final words of the chapter are, "In the end, we take our chances whenever we embark on the pursuit of knowledge, since we can never be fully certain where our discoveries will take us. Whether our actions result in a revelation of light or a disclosure of darkness is not ultimately in our hands" (p. 106). This is true but it does not mean that humans should not seek to control the uses to which knowledge is applied.

In chapter 6 he utilizes Psalms 22:2, "My God, my God why have You abandoned me?," to describe the apparent absence of God at crucial moments in history or in one's life. How does one cross the abyss? Intellectualizing alone does not alleviate the profound loneliness nor fill the void. However he discovers in profound encounters with others something powerful can happen. Engagement with others is a path to one's own spirituality.

In chapter 7 Malachi's question "How shall we return?" (3:7) concerns one's sense of being lost and finding the correct path to return home. Niles explores the concept of *t'shuvah* as journey. After exploring the concept in Jewish sources he turns to Homer and Coleridge. Tying diverse sources together gives a universal dimension to the book. Niles takes the reader on an unexpected journey. In this chapter he offers the notion that returning home is not necessarily going to a place where one once was but a place where one will arrive to renew one's life.

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Chapter 8 begins with Job's question "If a man dies, can he live again?" (14:14). It is an exploration of life after death. There is physical death and there is spiritual death that occurs while one is still living. Rebirth can be a reality in the face of spiritual death but what about in the face of physical death? In one of the most provocative lines in the book, Niles writes, "If rebirth and resurrection are possible in this world, why is it far-fetched to imagine they will be possible in the world-to-come?" (p. 161).

This is an important book. Individuals will profit from reading *Eight Questions of Faith*. There is much wisdom to be gained from Niles's thought process and uses of sources. His combination of autobiography and textual analysis is a model that allows the wisdom of texts to interact with the realities of living. His writing style is engaging. Niles has a gift of taking one to the place where he is, physically and emotionally. His thinking offers wonderful insights into how one can process his/her existential dilemmas. As much pleasure as I had from reading the book alone, I can imagine how much more rewarding it would be reading together with others in an adult study class or a men's book group. The book is a genuine contribution to contemporary explorations of the intersection of Judaism and real life issues that every person faces.

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