

**Vision and Valor:  
An Illustrated History  
of the Talmud**

By Berel Wein  
Maggid Books  
Jerusalem, 2010  
255 pages + xiv

Reviewed by Hillel Goldberg

I can dream. In theory, someday I'll visit the Arch of Titus in Rome to see a depiction of Roman soldiers carrying looted artifacts from the Jerusalem Temple; I'll visit the tomb of Shammai (Hillel's colleague) on Mount Meron in Israel; I'll visit the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg to see the bust of the Roman Emperor Tiberius; and I'll visit the British Museum to see the bust of Vespasian, the Roman emperor who destroyed much of Judea before the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Dream? Actually, not.

I do not even need to make the visits. I hold in front of me beautiful, illustrated histories of the Mishnah and the Talmud, the main works in the canon of Jewish law. I have before me a seemingly countless array of photos of coins, sarcophagi, busts, archaeological excavations and tombs. They're all in *The Oral Law of Sinai* and *Vision and Valor*, the newest books by a worldwide master of the spoken word, Rabbi Berel Wein, who has sold some one million tapes and disks on Jewish history.

Later in his fruitful career, Rabbi Wein turned to the written word. His new books' pictures are but the bonus in the bargain. Rabbi Wein brings his vivid grasp of history to the Mishnah and the Talmud, specifically to the lives of its sages who lived in tumultuous times and made monumental decisions that directly affected the shape of Judaism and Jewish history for all subsequent generations—including our own.

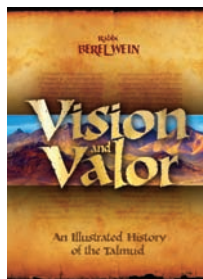
"What caused this critical change of mood from harmony and cooperation to strife and contention in Yavneh?" the author asks at one point in the first volume. I cite the sentence randomly to illustrate that while the author's respect for the sages is without end, this is an honest book. Rabbi Wein hides nothing. The struggles both within and between the sages, and their tricky and often devastating relations with foreign sovereigns, all find their way into Rabbi Wein's primers on the Mishnah and Talmud.

He combines the literary and the historical. How and why the Mishnah and the Talmud were written—a revolutionary concept for a law that had been conveyed orally for centuries—is combined with *realia*, the historical conditions and diverse personalities of the sages.

Rabbi Hillel Goldberg, executive editor of the Intermountain Jewish News, is a contributing editor of Jewish Action.

**The Oral Law of Sinai:  
An Illustrated History  
of the Mishnah**

By Berel Wein  
Jossey-Bass  
San Francisco, 2008  
208 pages



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The relevance of Rabbi Wein's discussions veritably jumps from his pages.

Besides the fact that the Mishnah and the Talmud, as the central repositories of Jewish wisdom after the Torah, are intrinsically relevant, the painful issues that confronted the Jewish community in those times are relevant in our own. For example, how strongly could the Jewish intellectual and spiritual leadership of Mishnaic times confront the Roman rulers of Palestine? Plug in a few name changes—Netanyahu for Yehoshua ben Chananya, for example—and one sees the reflection of ancient struggles in such contemporary questions as: Can, or should, Israel act against Iran independently of the United States?

Another example: How do survivors of catastrophe rebuild a Jewish community? Before the era of the Holocaust, the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE by the Romans was history's worst persecution of the Jews. The Romans killed some one million Jews in their conquest of Palestine. A focused study of the struggles in the ancient period rings with relevance today.

To grasp Rabbi Wein's achievement, one needs to know that there exist no organized records or documents of the kind from which one could construct the Jewish history of an ancient or medieval period. Until the time of Azariah dei Rossi a little less than 500 years ago, Jews did not generally think historically; they kept few records with an eye to history. They kept travelogues, receipts, manifests, poems, Torah thoughts, ethical wills; but what we now call diplomatic, political and social history were foreign to the Jewish mind.

This means that to write his history, Rabbi Wein had to pull together all manner of stray, contemporaneous observations, and extract nuggets of historical significance from legal documents (the Mishnah and Talmud are legal documents par excellence) and from extra-Jewish historical records. What might seem like a straightforward literary agenda really requires a very wide knowledge.

In the end, Rabbi Wein has given us a very readable, even enjoyable, history of the Mishnah and Talmud. Fascinating personalities populate its academies. Tragic personal stories, heart-rending negotiations with anti-Jewish sovereigns, superb minds, but also quirky ones, populate his books.

It doesn't hurt that Rabbi Wein puts matters into perspective with a plethora of beautiful visual aids. Besides photos and art, he supplies precise, clear timelines of both the Mishnaic and the Talmudic sages and a handy table of all of the Mishnaic tractates, the way they are classified into six "orders," the number of chapters in each tractate, and which tractates were commented on by the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, and which were not.

Whatever you do, don't miss the controversy at the end of the volume on the Mishnah over Rabbi Meir and his wife Bruriah, or the modesty and suffering of the main formulator of the Mishnah, Rabbi Judah the Prince. He was the towering scholar of his day: forgiving, loyal, outreaching, humble and wealthy to boot, but he suffered greatly. Writes the author:

"Though we may not fathom the Heavenly ledger, according to the Talmud, Rabbi Judah's suffering and holi-

ness protected the Jewish people, so that no woman died in childbirth or miscarried during the 13 years of his agonizing illnesses."

The Jewish people ever since has regarded Rabbi Judah the Prince as a seminal figure in all of Jewish history. Yet this opinion was not shared by the widow of the son of the famous founder of mysticism, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who rebuffed Rabbi Judah's proposal to marry her with a rhetorical question: "A vessel that served in holiness should now be asked to serve the mundane?"

We have, then, in Rabbi Wein's two volumes, vision and valor, but also the humanity, honesty, and bluntness of the Talmud itself.

A personal postscript: I think hard before I give a Bar or Bat Mitzvah present. I always give a book or a book set, but which one? A *sefer*, and if so, a simple one or a sophisticated one—to challenge a Bar Mitzvah boy for the future? I have some stock favorites, again, depending on the background of the celebrant, but recently I was stumped. A *sefer*, a book of stories, a work by the late Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan—whatever I came up with didn't fit this particular Bat Mitzvah girl, a beautiful combination of innocence and intelligence. Then, I saw Rabbi Wein's volumes. They solved my problem perfectly. They reflect the innocence of the Divine love affair with the Jewish people, and the intelligence of the reader who lives in this world and takes a very different kind of inspiration from the unadorned facts of Jewish history.

Not to mention these two volumes take me to Rome and Mount Meron, to St. Petersburg and London. Travelogue, indeed! ■

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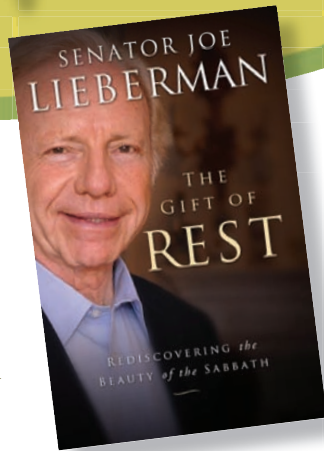
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NEW from OU Press



Senator Joe Lieberman

*The Gift of Rest:*  
*Rediscovering the Beauty of the Sabbath*

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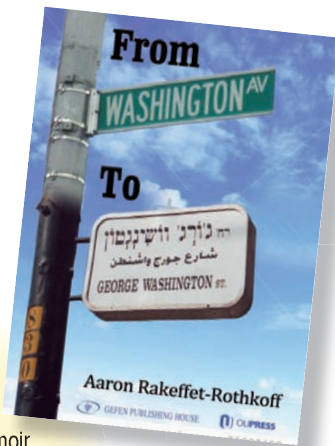
Senator Joe Lieberman, who moves comfortably and confidently in the highest echelons of political office, has maintained his observance of Shabbat throughout his years in the government. In *The Gift of Rest*, he shares his experiences, some humorous and some serious, drawn from a lifetime of public service, as he maintained loyalty to his faith consistent with responsibility to his office. Senator Lieberman's reflections on the profound meaning of Shabbat and how Shabbat observance has enriched his life and the lives of those around him are an inspiration to all.

Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff

*From Washington Avenue to Washington Street*

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Rabbi Aaron Rakeffet, a trained historian who has spent a lifetime teaching Torah in the US, Israel and the former Soviet Union, provides us with his life story in the form of a scholarly memoir. The reader accompanies Rabbi Rakeffet as he describes the historic events he witnessed and the famous personalities with whom he interacted. Written with the precision of a scholar and the liveliness of a storyteller, *From Washington Avenue to Washington Street* is a compelling narrative of a rich and continuing life of Torah teaching in a rapidly changing world.

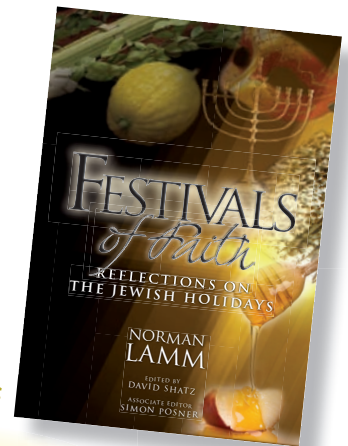


Norman Lamm,  
edited by David Shatz

*Festivals of Faith:*  
*Reflections on the Jewish Holidays*

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The holidays take on new meaning in the hands of this master of Jewish thought and tradition. *Festivals of Faith* is a collection of Rabbi Lamm's thoughts on the Jewish holidays culled principally from his sermons and divrei Torah delivered while he was Rabbi of Manhattan's Jewish Center. Individually, each discourse is a gem; together, they constitute a veritable treasure trove of profound insights and inspiring teachings.



Ari Kahn

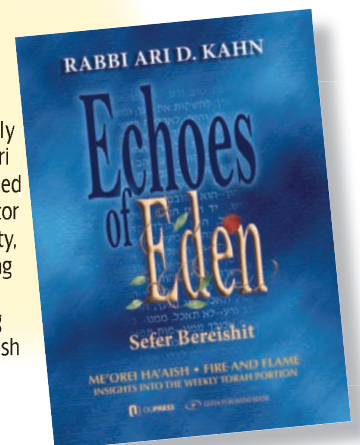
*Echoes of Eden:*  
*Sefer Bereishit volume of Me'Orei Ha'Aish:*  
*Insights into the Weekly Torah Portion*

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What was the world like before the existence of sin? How could God have demanded that Avraham sacrifice his son?

Why would Yaakov favor Yosef when he saw the jealousy it engendered?

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