

Perhaps “People of the Ear” is as appropriate a designation for Jews as “People of the Book” and “People of the Mouth.” For both the canon and the conversation – the sacred text and its ongoing elucidation – go back to the primary experience at Sinai: “witnessing the sounds of the thunder ... and the shofar.” Whatever that strange overpowering sensory experience was, it had listening at its core, listening to the divine voice and word: *Na’aseh ve-nishmah*, “We shall do and we shall listen.”

Ever since that commitment was put in writing as the Torah, meant to serve as an eternally valid teaching, there has been a tension in Judaism between the text and the ensuing conversation about it, the Oral Torah, or Oral Tradition. The fluidity and spontaneity of orality were meant to complement the firm fixity of the written text. But, ironically, the conversation of commentary did not remain oral; it was written in yet more canonical texts, the Mishnah, Talmud, and all their offshoots.

The tension between tradition and that which is yet to be developed is persistent and abiding. And it is vital. To “converse with each other” and produce “common great books of their own,” modern Jews will need to converse not only with one another, but also “with tradition.” The best Jewish thinking combines respect and daring: authentic speaking that challenges and is challenged by the traditional canon and conversation.

— Lois Dubin

I am reminded of Jorge Luis Borges’s extraordinary story, *The Library of Babel*. “Like all men of the Library,” his narrator says, “I have traveled in my youth; I have wandered in search of a book....” That Borges’s narrator searches in anguish for the one book to unify all, we can understand. That he cannot find it or, more to the point, cannot identify one as all-meaning’s center, this too we understand. Imperfect and mortal, he reads, and moves on.

Great books — the result of movement — effect movement. To readers: no guarantees of securing unity, separation, silence, or conversation. We read to keep searching.

I read *The Library of Babel* when I was twenty-one and an aspiring novelist. Thirty years have passed, but its opening words still haunt me. “The universe (which others call the Library)....”

— Marcie Hershman

Those Jews who are committed to a normative canon frequently find it difficult to imagine adding to it. A canon by definition is sacred — who could add? Yet things do tend to sneak into the canon over time. The Gemara was once an “on-going non-canonized set of ideas.” Now it’s a holy text studied by Jews everywhere. Rabbis of the Middle Ages inveighed angrily against “*Zochreinu lechayyim*” (Remember us for life), now a sacred part of the High Holiday liturgy, because they believed Jews were wrongly adding to canonized prayers. The dichotomy between “canon” and “conversation”

is more slippery than we think.

Whether or not we decide to do it, this generation of Jews will create a few works that have staying power. Jews will disagree about the sanctity of these works, and this does present a threat to Jewish unity. Jews who see newly composed egalitarian prayers and wedding contracts as holy, for example, may find themselves in theological conflict with Jews who do not. It’s scary to think of arguing over a canon. But we can take comfort: it’s a threat we’ve faced many times before.

— Jill Hammer

Looking specifically to the schisms that occurred in the late second Temple period, Jews did in fact agree to a large extent on what texts were considered sacred, and they could and did converse (without necessarily agreeing) about these texts. The breaking points in the various schisms that occurred at that time were not books, but rituals. Pharisees, Zadokites, Qumran sectarians, early Christians, and Hellenized Jews not only practiced different rituals but often argued that their own versions were the only correct rituals.

Some ritual theorists claim that the significance of ritual lies in its power to symbolize or maintain hierarchy within a society. If this is so, then the struggle over ritual reveals a deeper struggle for power, for supremacy within the Jewish hierarchy, and for the ascendancy of one’s own particular vision.

If history has a lesson, then this particular episode in history demonstrates that conversation – whether about books or not – is not sufficient. Modern Jews must learn to respect other Jews’ books, ideas, and rituals. But perhaps even more, we must respect every other Jew’s right to self-determination.

— Naftali Cohn



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