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A Monk's Gift

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The great German-Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, who himself nearly converted to Christianity as a young seeker, was quoted as saying that we lose the best and worst Jews to conversion. In the context of Germany, circa 1920, he was referring to those, like himself, who sought faith but could not find it in Judaism, and opportunist assimilationists, who thought conversion would improve their prospects for academic or professional careers, which was indeed the case in that generation.

I have always had a great concern for Rosenzweig's "best." Myself a product of the new quest for spirituality and deeper personal meaning that began to emerge in North American intellectual circles beginning around 1960, I was able to find deep satisfaction in Judaism, shaped by my own rereading of mystical and Hasidic sources that I have been studying, teaching, translating, and reflecting on over the course of the past half-century.

But I recognize that I represent a tiny minority among seekers of my generation, so many more of whom have been attracted to spiritual riches derived from other traditions. By the late 1960s the interest in meditation and eastern religion was sweeping the country, especially such hubs such as Berkeley, Cambridge, and New York's East Village. Among the many thousands of followers that the various gurus and Zen masters were accruing was a high percentage of Jews,

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already then the subject of familiar jokes. Some of the most interesting spiritual thought created by Jews in those years were the writings of Baba Ram Dass (aka Richard Alpert), Jack Kornford, and Joseph Goldstein (later joined by my friend Sylvia Boorstein), all of them speaking out of Buddhist and Indian wisdom traditions rather than out of the language that our shared ancestors had inherited and that no one had succeeded in passing on to them.

Of course I did not blame or condemn these good people, and in a certain way I delighted that they had found a sacred path to the same One who is the center of my own religious life (I know they will recoil at that "who"!). But I felt—and continue to feel—a great sadness about it. This large group of Jews, often calling themselves Jew-Bu's ("Jewish roots and Buddhist wings," as I've often heard them characterize it), includes many who could be my own closest Jewish soul brothers and sisters, and I feel their absence. When I pray for inner peace or Sabbath joy for "all Israel," I have these Jewish seeker-souls very much in mind.

Because I felt so richly fulfilled by Jewish symbolic language, especially blessed by the Hasidic reading of them, I never felt much need to experiment with other traditions. I understood that many of the things being written by Vedanta or Buddhist teachers (and not only the Jewish ones) were close to my own inner life experience, and I did enjoy reading them. But I never felt much need to open the door toward further involvement, beyond occasional visits. The same is true regarding post-Christian (allegedly "neutral") philosophy of religion.

People who read my books (especially my recent *Radical Judaism*) sometimes ask me if I wasn't influenced by Process Theology, especially Whitehead and Hartshorne. The truth is that I've hardly read them. My own religious thinking has been shaped over the decades by reflection on the Jewish sources, and I wanted to keep it that way. I recall having been much impressed on reading a comment by Kabbalah scholar Gershom Scholem. He said that the Kabbalists had a deeper and more lasting effect on Judaism than did the medieval Jewish philosophers in part because their teachings emerged from an inner contemplation of Jewish texts and symbols, rather than being a visible import from without, as was the case for Jewish Aristotelianism or Neoplatonism. That felt right to me.

Despite this, I have had some interesting and formative experiences over the years resulting from contact with spiritual traditions other than my own. Let me tell you about two such moments, both of them going back to many decades ago. Interestingly, both take place in Roman Catholic settings. Catholicism, with its active cultivation of a great Western mystical legacy, has always been an important religious "other" for me.

The first took place in about 1969 or 1970; I was a couple of years out of rabbinical school and in the early years of Havurat Shalom, a Jewish fellowship and "counterseminary" that I had taken a leading role in creating in Boston. Fordham University, a Catholic university in New York City, invited me to participate in a "day of spiritual teaching." The topic was to be "The Traditions and the Seasons of the Year." The speakers were Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk very much in the Merton tradition, Swami Sattchadinanda, founder of Integral Yoga, a well-known and much-revered figure, the head of the New York Zen center, and this young rabbi, touted as someone who spoke out of the Jewish mystical tradition.

Perhaps three quarters of the large audience were the Swami's disciples, dressed in uniform white baggy garments. Their master simply ignored the topic and shared a few words of basic teaching, followed by chants, smiles, and silence. The Zen Center head got up and said, "I have fifteen minutes. We will sit," and sat down to do his thing. Brother David gave a lovely talk on the passage from Christmas to Easter, birth to death, rich with liturgical associations. I spoke about the two sacred seasons of the Jewish year, the spring collective experience of coming out of Egypt and standing before Sinai and the fall individual check-in on one's personal inner life and relationship with God. It went pretty well, and refined versions of it are still part of my teaching.

Why was that day so significant to me? Because of two events that happened. During the question period, a bright-faced young man, dressed in the swami's disciples' uniform, raised his hand and said, "Rabbi, what you're saying is very nice; I love the idea of standing before the mountain, of inner hearing, and all the rest. But is that really Judaism? Isn't Judaism really about how God is up there in heaven with a book, keeping score, watching the good and evil that you do, preparing to reward or punish you?"

I looked at this poor young man and said to myself, "Another Jew ruined by the Long Island Hebrew Schools! This is clearly a kid who quit after Bar Mitzvah and only sees the inside of a synagogue on Yom Kippur." So I gave him my best young-rabbi pastoral answer, about how we end our Jewish education too young and need to return to it as adults. I also said something about those people who taught many of us not knowing Judaism all that well themselves. He smiled and sat down. Afterwards he came up to me and said, "I just wanted you to know that I quit [here he named a leading New York non-Hasidic yeshiva] a year before *semikhab* [rabbinic ordination]." That was devastating to me. Here was a product of what in some circles might be called the best of inner Jewish higher education—and he was still left with an infantile level of religious faith! No wonder he looked elsewhere when he grew up. Who could blame him?

The second memorable encounter of that day was a conversation with Brother David. "How is it," I asked, "that these Eastern teachers have such an easy time getting right to the heart of things? They seem totally uninterested in conveying symbolic forms, cultural legacy, or even typical Buddhist or Hindu practices. They simply invite us to close our eyes and open our hearts. Why can't we do that?" When someone wants to study the secrets of Jewish mysticism, I told him, we first expect them to become observant, to learn Hebrew (very little was yet available in translation), and lots more.

"It's too difficult!" I inveighed. "Most people will take the easier path offered by these gurus with their smiling welcomes." His answer was a clever—and perhaps sad—one; "You think you've got problems?" he said. "We Catholics expect them to become monks and promise to remain celibate for the rest of their lives before we allow them access to our secrets!"

Steindl-Rast's answer, perhaps meant as consolation, was little help. I understood that we had to find a way to unpack the religious insights of Hasidism and make them available to a wide range of seekers, both Jewish and non-Jewish. I have spent much of my life working toward that goal, and that young man at Fordham is often on my mind.

The other encounter took place just a bit later, perhaps in the early 1970s. I was invited to take part in a seminar called "Word Out of Silence," dubbed informally as a great "holy man jam" with

representatives of all religions. It was sponsored by the very distinguished Catholic thinker Raimundo Pannikar, himself a product of the revolutionary East-West encounter of that era and an important figure in post-Vatican II Christian consideration of world spirituality. The seminar was held at Mount Saviour Monastery in upstate New York, and the brothers there were most gracious hosts. Participants included Swami Sattchadinanda, Pier Villayat Khan, head of the Sufi Order of the West, Archimandrate Timothy Ware, a British spokesman for Eastern Orthodox spirituality, Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, and many others.

On the second day of our deliberations, the monks hosting us turned privately to Pannikar and challenged him (in my paraphrase, of course), "Why are you talking with these people?" they asked. "They are not saved; they do not have the truth of Christ. What could we possibly have to learn from them? In the end, aren't they all going to hell?"

Very wisely, Pannikar brought their question before the plenum. All of us, it turned out, had such people back home in our own traditions. By the very fact of being present at such a conference, each of us had defined ourselves as belonging to the progressive wing of our respective faith communities. But still, what did we have to say in facing that question? Didn't Judaism have an exclusive claim regarding revelation of religious truth? Didn't we proclaim regularly the words of the Psalmist, "The idols of the nations are but silver and gold; eyes gave they but they see not, ears have they but they hear not. . . . Like them are those who make them and all who trust in them." How could we get away from the notion that religion was a zero-sum game?

In the midst of the heated conversation, a small Japanese monk, head of the Mount Baldy Zen Center in California, got up to break his silence with his first comment of the conference. "A Christian who says 'Christ is the only God' is like a man who says, 'My wife is the only woman.'" He then sat down as abruptly as he had gotten up to speak.

I still remember that moment forty years later, because it broke a bubble for me. By that time I was no longer a believer in the exclusive truth of Judaism, but I didn't know what to do about it. My great teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel had been very involved in the

Vatican II negotiations, but remained quite cautious about validating faith-claims outside Judaism, especially those outside the shared biblical heritage. I was duly afraid of proclaiming a simple flattened-out universal spirituality, to which all the traditions and their symbols might eventually become irrelevant. I still recoil at such a thought; I am a deep Jewish loyalist, representing a tradition that has struggled so long to survive.

But this monk had in a flash made it all clear to me. Of course there is a level where all I see is my own truth. I am fully engaged in that tradition, its symbols, its liturgy, and all the rest, just as a person is fully engaged in (and hopefully fulfilled by) a single marriage. I will never know what it is like to be engaged in any other marriage. Similarly, I will never know what it is like to ingest the body and blood of Christ or to walk around the Kaaba. But I don't need to. As a married person, I am happy to know that there are other good marriages in the world. That confirms the truth of my marriage, rather than challenging it.

I have carried that monk's truth with me for a long time, and I am now happy to thank him for it.

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