

Milton Steinberg, American Rabbi—Thoughts on his Centenary

JONATHAN STEINBERG

IN JANUARY 2000, I returned to the United States to take up a teaching post at the University of Pennsylvania. Like Spencer Brydon in Henry James's "The Jolly Corner," I had lived in England for much of my adult life, when I made my "so strangely belated return to America." Like Brydon, for me too, "everything was somehow a surprise."¹ The oddest of these was that in my mid-sixties I had taken on an identity that I had not had for fifty years. "You must be Milton Steinberg's son," people would say to me on first meeting. They would press my hand or touch my arm with evident emotion and explain how much my father's books or memory meant to them. Nor was this confined to the old. In February 2000, a potential graduate student, age twenty-two, came to see me about doing a Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania. When she saw *As a Driven Leaf* on my desk, she looked startled and said, "That was our assigned book for confirmation." These spontaneous confessions from students continue to occur under implausible conditions. A student approached me in late October last year at the history department's open meeting to display our courses for spring 2004 and said in the now familiar formula, "You must be Milton Steinberg's son." He told me that five of the twenty-five interns at the American-Israel Political Action Committee in the summer of 2003 had announced that *As a Driven Leaf* had changed their lives. In April 2003, *As a Driven Leaf* was the assigned book for all the reform congregations in Orange County, California. I was asked to answer questions about my father and the book on a late-night chat-line. Clearly, *As a Driven Leaf*, first published in 1939, continues to find readers, old and young, observant and not.

At Amazon.com, the new edition, with an introduction by Chaim Potok and published by Behrman House in 1996, enjoys a five-star rating and

1. Henry James, "The Jolly Corner" (1910), *Selected Stories* (London, 1957).

has a sales status that has fluctuated in the last few years between 5,000 and 15,000 copies; that is to say, it has been consistently among the five-to fifteen-thousand best-selling books out of the two million that Amazon.com lists. Nor is *As a Driven Leaf* my father's only literary legacy. The 1986 edition of *Basic Judaism*, published by Harcourt Brace, also gets a five-star rating and fluctuates between 10,000 and 40,000 sales, which is below *As a Driven Leaf* on the best-seller list but still very high. *The Making of the Modern Jew* and *A Partisan Guide to the Jewish Problem* are still in print, along with *A Believing Jew*. An audiocassette of *Basic Judaism* is on the market, and one of *As a Driven Leaf* read by George Guidall was published by Jewish Contemporary Classics, Inc. in an abridged edition in July 2000. The collected theological essays, *Anatomy of Faith*, edited by Arthur A. Cohen, is the only major work of Milton Steinberg not in print. Milton Steinberg still lives in his books and in a kind of diffuse folk memory, passed down in families. If anything, he lives more vividly today than in the 1960s or 1970s.

As a historian, I found myself intrigued by the phenomenon, and that is how this article (based on an earlier lecture) began—as an attempt to understand the pervasive influence that Milton Steinberg still exercises on contemporary Jewish life. I approached the task as an exercise in historical reconstruction, and that meant going to the documents. The Milton Steinberg archive, superbly cataloged and organized by the American Jewish Historical Society in New York, provides evidence of his participation in the conflicts of the day, his attack on Irving Kristol (like father like son in that case, I think), his row with the *New York Times*, his differences with his revered teacher, Rabbi Modercai Kaplan, on the future of Reconstructionism, the dispute over the text of the Reconstructionist Sabbath prayer book, his Zionism, and his clash with Louis Finkelstein over the Jewish Theological Seminary. All those issues have become history, interesting to the professional but not the public, and they gave me little insight into the problem I had posed: why is Milton Steinberg as influential today, more than fifty years after his death, as he was then? The sermons live on in a collection of outlines, which has been published. Acknowledged or not, they have no doubt saved many a hard-pressed rabbi who, erev Shabbat, had yet to compose his sermon. There are one or two complete texts in the files, which still catch the cadences of a great preacher in full flow.

The lists of sermons in the papers covers the deepest questions of faith but also political and social issues of the day. It was from the pulpit of the Park Avenue Synagogue on 50 East 87th Street in Manhattan that Milton Steinberg preached his jeremiads against those trends in Ameri-

can Jewish life to which he objected. The pulpit served as his place of thought and reflection. What the twenty or thirty elderly men and women dotting the vast sanctuary on a typical Friday night in November made of Steinberg's sermon "Power of Faith," in which he referred to Tolstoy, Pappini, Schlegel, Novalis, Goethe, Hardy, Anatole France, Bertrand Russell, Descartes, Hume, Royce, and Bergson within one thirty-minute sermon, has not been recorded.²

That not everybody was listening can be seen in his exasperated outburst in a letter of June 1945 to the board of trustees of the Park Avenue Synagogue, who had objected to the new Reconstructionist *Siddur*, about which, in fact, he had privately expressed serious reservations:

If the congregation is not accustomed to the ideas embodied in these changes it cannot have been paying much attention to my preaching. All the years of my ministry it is just these ideas that I have been expounding, just these changes that I have been advocating. I have consistently taught (1) that as modern Jews we have outgrown animal sacrifices as a form or religious expression; (2) that while we believe in the immortality of the soul we modern Jews do not believe in the future raising to life of the bodies of the dead; (3) that while we believe in the future redemption of Israel and mankind, we no longer believe that that redemption is to be brought about by a single person, armed with supernatural powers, who must be a descendant of King David. Times immeasurable I have asserted that God's kingdom and the Messianic age will be achieved not by a mystical messiah but by the efforts of all men of good will.³

There is in this irritated outburst an important clue to one element in what I now think may explain the extraordinary survival of Steinberg's influence. In a letter of 1958, Arthur A. Cohen, who edited *Anatomy of Faith* as a labor of love in the midst of his busy life as novelist, theologian, and publisher, put it very well to Gerald Gross of Harcourt Brace, who was considering the possibility of an edition:

Steinberg, perhaps, alone among modern pastors and preachers, was an intellectual. Unlike Niebuhr or Tillich, Steinberg was a rabbi. The

2. Simon Noveck, *Milton Steinberg: Portrait of a Rabbi* (New York, 1978), 291, n. 13.

3. MS to Board of Trustees, Park Avenue Synagogue, June 21, 1945, Steinberg Papers (hereafter SP), American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS), box 17, folder 7, "Reconstructionist Prayer Books (1933–1950)."

classic tradition of the rabbinate was, however, taken seriously. The rabbi must first learn and then teach. Only lastly is the rabbi's task to preach. When he preaches it is because he has learned and is prepared to teach. It is this which characterizes Steinberg's own thinking—the agony of self-understanding and the effort to communicate.⁴

Steinberg combined in a very unusual, possibly unique, way the daily duties of pastoral care of a large congregation—the round of weddings, bar mitzvahs, funerals, daily services, the visits to and from the troubled and ill—with an intense, powerful, and disciplined intellectual life. Myron M. Fenster put it well in a 1960 review of *Anatomy of Faith*: “The concern with prayer, worship and ritual, the hope to revitalize home and synagogue observances, in a word, Steinberg's activity with the life of the Jew. . . . This was his way, and is to our mind his genius: the ability to fuse religion, culture and people-hood with denigration of none of the three and equal passion for each.”⁵ Daily prayer and Jewish ritual rested, in Steinberg's mind, on an intellectual foundation. Observances depended on thought and theology, not habit or guilt.

But that by itself cannot be the full explanation. It was who he was that made him really special and for that we need to introduce his biography.

Milton Steinberg was born in Rochester, New York, on November 25, 1903, to Samuel and Fanny Steinberg, née Sternberg. He never spoke like a New Yorker nor did his accent convey the characteristic speech music of Yiddish, because he came from an English-speaking, not a Yiddish-speaking, home. Fanny Sternberg had been born in the United States and spoke correct English, including abbreviations now obsolete like “dasn't” for “dares not.” She was much too good for a greenhorn like the immigrant Shmuel, a boarder in her mother's large boardinghouse on Baden Street. Alas, she had a clubfoot, and in the cruel marriage market of traditional Jews, she counted as damaged goods. Her mother, a tyrannical and dominant woman, arranged the marriage for want of better matches. Fanny had a sharp tongue and a carping, unsatisfied nature, and Shmuel, who lived to be ninety-four, once told me that when she died he found that he missed her constant scolding. He also told me that he knew she would ruin her daughters' lives (which she duly did) but he

4. Steinberg Papers, AJHS P-369, box 14, folder 10, Correspondence “Questioning of Faith,” Arthur A. Cohen to Gerald Gross (June 2, 1958).

5. Myron M. Fenster, review, *The Reconstructionist* (June 10, 1960), 27. AJHS, SP, P-369, box 14, folder 11.

intended to save his son, the middle child. He used to prop books in front of the little boy to prevent his hearing his mother's uninterrupted nastiness. I recall a dramatic scene right out of a Eugene O'Neill play some years after my father's death, when Fanny Steinberg screamed at her husband, "You stole my son." That too was true.

The books propped in front of the young Milton were English books, not Jewish ones, because Shmuel, though an alumnus of the great yeshiva at Volozhin in Russian Poland and a proper talmudic scholar, had lost his faith somewhere between the shtetl of his birth in Lithuania and Ellis Island. He had become a socialist and waited for the coming of Eugene Debs in the Rochester Labor Lyceum the way his forefathers had awaited the Messiah. Milton had the conventional Jewish rites of passage—bar mitzvah and so forth—but no intensive, serious Jewish education. He had neither Yiddish nor more than a Sunday school level of Hebrew. He went to an old-fashioned American high school where Latin, English literature, and grammar were taught. In 1919 Fanny moved the family to New York, convinced that her eldest daughter must have an operatic career unavailable in provincial Rochester. Milton completed his high school at Dewitt Clinton where a classmate, the subsequently famous literary critic Lionel Trilling, thought him "a prig" but also "a person conscious of his powers . . . separated from the boys and already no longer boyish."⁶ He was first in his class, valedictorian, editor of the literary magazine, and so on. His record at City College, that hothouse of poor Jewish intellectuals on the make, was even better. His class yearbook entry simply said: "prodigy of prodigies, genius of geniuses."⁷ At City College he excelled in literature but also in philosophy, where his teacher was the terrifying Morris Raphael Cohen, whom Steinberg years later recalled in a letter on Cohen's death as "a very great man, and a very gifted teacher, perhaps the most gifted and inspiring teacher it has been my fortune to encounter."⁸ In 1924, when Steinberg graduated summa cum laude from City College, there were no academic jobs in philosophy for Jews. His "formation," as the French put it, had been that of an English-speaking, philosophically trained intellectual but he had no professional future in that persona. That is the second key factor in our explanation. Milton Steinberg became a Conservative rabbi from outside traditional Judaism; indeed, he had never experienced the yeshivah, that walled-in world, which Chaim Potok describes so vividly in his novels.

6. Noveck, *Milton Steinberg*, 12.

7. Noveck, *Milton Steinberg*, 24.

8. Arthur A. Cohen, Introduction to Milton Steinberg, *An Anatomy of Faith* (New York, 1960), 26.

As a mere twenty-year-old he had begun to feel a “call” to become a rabbi, a story of great interest in itself but well told in Arthur A. Cohen’s introduction to *Anatomy of Faith* and in Simon Noveck’s admirable, if slightly uncritical, biography, *Milton Steinberg: Portrait of a Rabbi*, published in 1978. He fell in love with Edith Alpert, the daughter of a wealthy importer, a woman of great beauty and uncontrolled passions whom he married in 1929. Herman Wouk once told me that he took Edith Alpert and her younger sister, Rena, as models for his novel *Marjorie Morningstar*. The story of the tumultuous, complicated, and in many ways tragic marriage of Milton and Edith has never been properly told, but it too has only a peripheral impact on the question of this essay. Milton Steinberg eventually entered the Jewish Theological Seminary, in which he was, he declared, “miserable,” surrounded by many who were “Rabbinical oxen.”⁹ He revered the scholarship of his teachers, though much of it was utterly unrelated to the pastoral responsibilities of the rabbinate, but it was Mordecai Kaplan, with his philosophic breadth, who kept Steinberg going. Kaplan observed that Steinberg was the only pupil he ever had of philosophic genius¹⁰.

In Kaplan Steinberg found a philosophic disposition that rested on a sociological rather than an epistemological foundation. Kaplan had gradually moved from Eastern European orthodoxy to a Durkheimian understanding of religion as a social fact and a doctrine of truth that rested on the insights of American pragmatism. Truth for Kaplan was, in effect, what worked in the world. By 1914 Kaplan had arrived at a truly revolutionary position. As he wrote in his diary on February 12, 1914, “the chief difference between religion in the past and religion in the future is that while the former made belief in God essential, the latter will make the search for God essential.”¹¹ In February 1916, Kaplan published an article in the *Menorah Journal*, which set out the basic propositions of his new system of thought:

- 1) Religion is not essentially a means of salvation;
- 2) every existing religion is the collective consciousness of its adherents;
- 3) in the collective consciousness of any stable group we have the makings of a religion;

9. Ibid., 34–35.

10. Ibid., 38.

11. Richard Libowitz, *Mordecai Kaplan and the Development of Reconstructionism* (New York, 1983), 38.

- 4) a religion can maintain its distinctive character though it be based upon universally accepted principles of experience.¹²

As Kaplan put it in his wonderful lapidary style, “individual salvation is no more the chief purpose of a religion than the color of the leaves is the purpose of the life of a tree.”¹³ Clearly, Steinberg found in Kaplan a mentor as philosophically and literarily gifted as he could have wished. He signed up for the new program and became one of the first members of the Reconstructionist movement.

It is obvious that Kaplan, already the exponent of a fully considered system of thought, widely read in the classics of modern philosophy and sociology, should have deeply impressed the young seminarian, Steinberg, twenty years his junior. But there was, I think, always a basic incompatibility between master and pupil, which became clear as Steinberg developed his own systematic thinking. As he wrote to Rabbi Jacob Kohn in 1942,

It is one of Kaplan’s limitations that he has almost no metaphysical interest, perhaps no metaphysical sensitivity. To him God is a concept, at least so he always speaks of God, rather than existential reality, the reality of all realities, the *vrai vérité*. Or, to put it otherwise, to Kaplan God represents the psychological and sociological consequences of the God-idea rather than the cosmic *Ding-an-sich*. It is for its sociology of Jewish life that I am a Reconstructionist, not for the clarity or utility of Kaplan’s theology. I have often challenged Kaplan on that point. His response is that metaphysics is “personal” religion as opposed to the tradition-sanctioned group expression. I have never been able to see the value or validity of the distinction he makes.¹⁴

The problem was that, in my view, Steinberg’s “God-idea” was not all that much more persuasive. In April 1942 he published an important article in *The Reconstructionist*, titled “Toward the Rehabilitation of the Word ‘Faith.’” It conveys something of the peculiar aridity of Steinberg’s approach at that time. Faith is defined as that which cannot be proved, the equivalent of scientific postulates. Steinberg poses the following question: “Can theological beliefs survive the same disciplines to which scientific beliefs are subjected?”¹⁵ and gives an unequivocal answer:

12. Libowitz, *Mordecai Kaplan*, 69.

13. Libowitz, *Mordecai Kaplan*, 71.

14. Noveck, *Milton Steinberg*, 141.

15. The essay is reprinted in Steinberg, *Anatomy of Faith*, 70. Page references are to that version.

This then is the intellectual structure of religious faith: it is a hypothesis interpreting the universe as a whole as scientific hypotheses describe aspects of it. It is posited on the same grounds on which all hypotheses rest, namely, superior congruity, practical cogency, simplicity.¹⁶

This view, which turns God into the idea or mind of the universe, may have logical properties that perform similar functions to that of a hypothesis in a scientific theory, but Steinberg distorts both the nature of science and the meaning of faith. Scientific hypotheses are not substantive statements about reality but ways of asking precise questions. Physical science, after Heisenberg, is not tied to any sort of essentialism nor even to human logic. God, on the other hand, must exist if religion is to mean anything. The principle of order in the universe cannot be equated to the God of religion. Steinberg offers no statement about the nature of God. How and why the mind of the universe should care for me or hear my prayer is ignored. The essay is lucid, elegantly written, and extraordinarily unsatisfying. In a superb review of *Anatomy of Faith in Judaism: The Jewish Quarterly*, Louis Silberman of Vanderbilt University pointed out this feature of much of Steinberg's theology:

Now here is just the point at which he misses the whole content of the commitment as exhibited in the continental thinkers he criticizes. They are not committed to the theistic hypothesis; they are committed to God revealed to them in the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and Lordship of Jesus Christ. Thus divine possibilities are not open to them.

As theologian he was defender of the theistic hypothesis not Judaism. He was therefore unable to get from the theistic hypothesis arrived at by reason to the concreteness of Judaism.

What he left us with was an intellectualist defense of the theistic hypothesis that seemed to be moving toward a modified concept of a non-absolute God. But there was not, as yet, a clearly articulated structure of thought that would enable one to bridge the chasm between the hypothesis and the God of Israel.¹⁷

The concluding paragraph is, I hope to show, wrong, but the rest of the critique hits the mark exactly: Steinberg's peculiar attitude to faith as a

16. Steinberg, *Anatomy of Faith*, 77.

17. Louis Silberman, review, in *Judaism: A Jewish Quarterly* 10.1 (1961): 88, AJHS, SP, P-369, box 14, folder 11.

branch of logic. Yet oddly it is the professional philosopher's logical faith that constitutes the core and much of the appeal of the most successful of Steinberg's works, his novel *As a Driven Leaf*. The plot is set in second-century Palestine under the Romans just before and during the Bar Kokhba rebellion of 132 to 135 C.E., and tells the story of a real historic figure, a rabbi and member of the Sanhedrin, Rabbi Elisha ben Abuya, who was excommunicated as a heretic. Some of his sayings have survived, as has the story that he belonged to a group of four rabbis, Simeon ben Azzai, Simeon ben Zoma, Akiba, and Elisha, who dabbled in forbidden wisdom. One died, one went mad, one became an apostate, and one a saint. Out of these slender shreds, Milton Steinberg created a historical novel about a man seduced by the promises of Greek wisdom who ends up betraying his own people when the Romans crush the Jewish rising in 135 C.E.

The central image, the leaf driven by the wind, comes from Job's first cycle of speeches, Job 13.25–26:

Wilt thou chase a driven leaf,
 Wilt thou pursue dry chaff,
 Prescribing punishment for me
 And making me heir to the iniquities of my youth?

The book is full of metaphors of wind, trees bending in gales, and swirling clouds of dust. Nature provides a vivid and constant background to the vicissitudes of the protagonist. Even after he dies, the natural world pursues him and in an epilogue sends a bolt of lightning to strike his grave, the grave of the apostate Elisha ben Abuyah. Yet on reflection, the title does not fit the story. Elisha ben Abuyah is not like Job, a righteous man who without fault is struck unjustly by a series of calamities, but is rather a man who has everything—wealth, good looks, status, and respect—and, through his own obsessions, throws it away. The wind blows through the novel like mad, but Elisha is not distracted from his self-destructive course, not by natural events, nor love, nor loyalty, nor friendship.

The thing that most startled me as I reread the book after many, many years was how romantic it is. The characters have an unsullied nobility of nature and treat each other in the language of high romanticism. Two quick examples: after saying goodbye to Elisha, "Akiba stood looking after him, an affectionate smile lingering in his eyes like the afterglow of sunset" (p. 52). Elisha ben Abuyah is a kind of rabbinical movie star of the 1930s, whom all women immediately admire: "He stood before her, slender and erect, handsomer than ever in spite of his tortured eyes and the faint sprinkling of gray in his hair at the temples" (pp. 255–56). Al-

most every cliché of the romantic novel can be found in the plot somewhere. Half Danielle Steel and half Spinoza, *As a Driven Leaf* combines a rigorous logical theology and popular fiction in a unique and evidently successful amalgam. The romantic plot and the descriptive images are not there for their own sake; they reveal a theological discomfort, a terrible and painful attempt to link tradition with its obligations to the twentieth century and its freedoms.

The theology centers on the contrast between faith and reason. The Jews represent faith, and part one of the novel covers Elisha's first identity as a pious Jew. The story begins when Elisha's mother dies in childbirth and the boy is brought up by his wealthy and cynical father as a Hellenized Jew. When the father dies, the boy is saved by his fanatical uncle and turned into a youthful prodigy of rabbinic learning. He rises almost effortlessly and becomes one of the sages of the Sanhedrin, the governing council of rabbinic sages who ruled the truncated kingdom of Israel after its Temple and monarchy had been shattered. As he reaches maturity, his faith begins to crumble. He watches the twin boys of his most beloved disciple die meaninglessly, and his already tottering faith collapses completely when a child, obeying the commandment to free the mother bird when a nest is taken, falls to his death before Elisha's eyes. Elisha bursts out that there is no God and rather than stand trial for his heresy, flees to Antioch to find wisdom among the Greeks.

In part two, Elisha arrives in Antioch to learn Greek and find certainty. Here he struggles with reason, which rests on knowing things through deductive logic. Elisha becomes infatuated with the idea that proofs for the existence of God might have the form and tight logic that Euclidian geometry achieves. The difficulty seems to lie in the problem of premises. Late in the book he realizes that premises rest on faith and too late understands that his quest for the ultimate proof of divine existence has been a chimera. He has sacrificed everything, his love for the beautiful courtesan Manto, his loyalty to his friends and people, in the quest for the final certainty. He works himself literally to death and all turns to ashes before him. In the final chapter, the desolate and ruined old man returns to Galilee and encounters his beloved disciple, Rabbi Meir, once again. He confesses that reason and faith have both failed him. He delivers a brief lecture arguing that faith and reason are not antagonists, and declares, "That is the fantastic intolerable paradox of my life, that I have gone questing for what I possessed initially—a belief to invest my days with dignity and meaning, a pattern of behavior through which man might most articulately express his devotion to his fellows" (p. 474).

There is more than a whiff of John Dewey, William James, and Mor-

decai Kaplan in the idea that faith is merely “a pattern of behavior” designed to “express devotion to his fellows.” This is not the way believers have conceived the truths of their faith. The Orthodox make it clear that, since God revealed the law entire and perfect on Mount Sinai, Torah is absolute truth and every deviation from strict observance of the 613 *mitzvot* is heresy, blasphemy, or backsliding. In a vivid scene, Steinberg describes the martyrdom of the Jewish sages. The rabbis who were burned at the stake had not died for “patterns of behavior” but for the word of God. Here Louis Silberman is clearly right when he argues that Steinberg substitutes a logical theism for Jewish faith.

On the other hand, Milton/Elisha cannot accept the alternative. He cannot enter Tiberias either. As he explains,

For those who live there insist, at least in our generation, on the total acceptance without reservation of their revealed religion. And I cannot surrender the liberty of my mind to any authority. Free reason, my son, is a heady wine. It has failed to sustain my heart, but, having drunk of it, I can never be content with a less fiery draught. (p. 474)

Nothing remains but for the desolate old man to ride off into the distance like a theological John Wayne, destroyed by his inability to reconcile faith and reason, tradition and freedom of thought, orthodoxy and reform. The pain of this dilemma remains unresolved. Steinberg must have known that his version of philosophical theology was unlikely to withstand today’s equivalents of Roman torture—nobody would go to the stake for Reconstructionism—but he could not accept the authority of Orthodox fundamentalism either. *As a Driven Leaf* remains alive today because it embodies a real, insoluble religious dilemma in the language and techniques of the historical novel.

Basic Judaism is lighter and, in a way, easier on the reader.¹⁸ It is a supple and sinuous work of interpretation, dealing with the basic fact that Jews never bother to explain what they do or why. Two thousand years of Diaspora have created an inner world, which outsiders find hard to penetrate and insiders rarely reveal. The stance of *Basic Judaism*, published in 1947, is, however, exactly the same as that bequeathed to readers by *As a Driven Leaf* of 1939. The intervening years—the war and the extermination of European Jewry—have not (or not yet) altered the terms. Jews fall into two clear categories: traditionalist and modernist. The rabbi-guide has no need to choose between the camps. He can simply

18. Milton Steinberg, *Basic Judaism* (San Diego, 1975).

explain, and this he does with a rich collection of quotes from traditional spokesmen. On the other hand, he makes sure that the elementary questions are not ignored. Chapter 3 on Torah pauses to explain, especially to the non-Jews, that

as a physical object, the Torah is a parchment sheet, or rather a succession of parchment sheets sewn together breadthwise and rolled about two wooden poles so as to make twin cylinders. These sheets contain the Hebrew original, hand-inscribed and painstakingly edited for absolute accuracy, of the first five books of Scripture, the Mosaic books, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. (p. 19)

This is why *Basic Judaism* goes on selling and selling. It answers the questions that strangers or “un-churched Jews,” as Steinberg used to call them, have about Jewish traditions. It is short, easy to read, and deals with the Jewish religion, what Jews believe and do with that belief in their religious capacity. I suspect that the “basic” in *Basic Judaism* was inspired by the war-time discussion of C. K. Ogden’s and I. A. Richards’s books on *Basic English*, which appeared in 1938 and 1943 respectively and stimulated much discussion during and shortly after the war. The idea was that the essence of Anglo-American English could be represented by, in Ogden’s words, “a careful and systematic selection of 850 English words which will cover those needs of everyday life for which a vocabulary of 20,000 words is frequently employed.”¹⁹ Milton Steinberg represented basic Judaism in much the same way.

The terms of the conflict, then, are the same—orthodoxy versus modernity—in both books, but between 1939 and 1947 six million Jews had died. That terrible fact leaves no obvious trace in *Basic Judaism*. This silence on the greatest of all Jewish tragedies and its implications for a God-centered faith is very odd. In his private life and preaching Steinberg had been involved in the tragedy of German Jewry since 1933 and, as the war unfolded, of European Jewry as a whole. What he had not yet found, I think, was an adequate theological response. On the second night of Rosh Hashanah in 1944 he preached one of his greatest sermons on the extermination of the Jews of Seraye, his father’s native shtetl in Lithuania. Later he rewrote it under the title “When I Think of Seraye,”

19. Charles Kay Ogden, *Basic English: A General Introduction with Rules and Grammar* (London, 1938); I. A. Richards, *Basic English and its Uses* (New York, 1943).

which was delivered to the UJA in 1945 and published in *The Reconstructionist* in 1946.

Sometimes when I think about Seraye, I am ashamed to be a human being, ashamed to be a member of a species which could perpetrate the evil done to Seraye and almost as much ashamed of the supposedly good people of the world who stood by when the evil was being perpetrated and who stand idle now.²⁰

The horror of the Holocaust may have prompted Milton Steinberg to create a quick attractive guide to the world of the religious Jew, as a kind of short-term prop for the traumatized community, but that fails to explain his continuing optimism in his theology. As late as February 1947, he could write in an article, "The Common Sense of Religious Faith," "Jewish history demonstrates that the God-faith is life-giving, humanizing. But is it likely that a belief will evoke such echoes from reality unless it is in tune with it?" No common sense explains the gas chambers, the piles of corpses in the muddy pits outside Ukrainian villages, the humiliations, exiles, the desecrations, the sheer bestiality and evil of the Shoah. It is staggering that the finest theologian of his generation could still recite such platitudes when the corpses had not yet been buried.²¹

The Holocaust does not appear in *Basic Judaism*, because, I think, Steinberg realized that he had to face, as he had not done before, the problem of evil in the world and the difficulty of belief in the shadow of the chimneys of Auschwitz. He had not as yet found the language, the structures of thought and possibly, though this cannot be illustrated, a faith strong enough to face the world in its true, unredeemed misery.

The Holocaust was not the only existential change that pushed Steinberg toward much deeper theological insights. He had now to confront his own mortality. Always a workaholic, overworked and under constant stress, he described his life as a treadmill, in a letter of March 1940 in reply to an invitation to speak:

On Sunday, March 31st, I speak in Camden, New Jersey, and in Philadelphia. On Monday, April 1st, I teach one class at the Jewish Theological Seminary and three classes in the evening at my own Synagogue. On Wednesday, April 3rd, I am speaking in Richmond, Virginia, and on Tuesday, April 2nd, which is the day in question, I open a book

20. Noveck, *Milton Steinberg*, 158.

21. Arthur A. Cohen in Steinberg, *Anatomy of Faith*, 100.

review series in my own Synagogue at 11 o'clock, I speak at 3 o'clock at the East End group of Hadassah and I conduct a class in the evening at the Young Men's Hebrew Association. Technically, I am free at the hour at which luncheon begins, but after all there is a limit to what one person can undertake.²²

A heavy smoker, he had already developed alarming heart symptoms by 1941. When, after Pearl Harbor, he went to enlist in the U.S. Army as a chaplain, he was turned down, although he was only thirty-eight, on health grounds. He took a commission as chief chaplain in the New York National Guard and embarked on UJA and other tours to help the war effort. In the fall of 1943 he visited Jewish troops about to go overseas, and in Brownwood, Texas, in November he collapsed with a massive heart attack from which he never entirely recovered. In those days heart patients became instant invalids, and there was, of course, neither bypass surgery nor angioplasty treatment. For the remaining six years of his life, Steinberg fought a constant battle with his overdeveloped sense of pastoral responsibility and the increasingly shrill warnings of his wife to get to a deeper and more satisfactory theology. In April 1945, the Reform rabbi Bernard Bamberger wrote to Steinberg after reading *A Partisan Guide to the Jewish Question*:

In your book you lament that so little has been produced by American Jews in the field of Jewish theology. May I express the hope that your next book will grapple with some of the deeper religious problems. Other men, after all, can write about anti-Semitism and Zionism and anything written on these subjects is quickly dated by changing events. You are one of the few men we have equipped to say anything about the profound and enduring problems of Jewish belief.²³

Steinberg knew that Bamberger was right. As his disciple Arthur Cohen observed, "Characteristic of American Jewish life during the past hundred years has been the consistent, stubborn, and—given the intellectual revolutions of the twentieth century—almost miraculous avoidance of theology."²⁴ While writing *Basic Judaism*, Steinberg began an intensive course of serious reading. He set out on a journey not unlike that of Elisha ben Abuyah, but the destination this time was not Antioch but the

22. Noveck, *Milton Steinberg*, 145.

23. Noveck, *Milton Steinberg*, 216.

24. Noveck, *Milton Steinberg*, 155.

Protestant seminaries in Europe and the United States. The teachers he sought—Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Paul Tillich, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Reinhold Niebuhr—were theologians and philosophers of existence, of the absurd, of nonreason, of neo-orthodoxy, but, above all, thinkers who had confronted in various ways sin, guilt, and evil. This traveler, unlike Elisha, had no intention of sacrificing his Jewish faith; on the contrary, at the same time that he read the existentialist and neo-orthodox Protestants, he rejoiced in the Hasidic tales of Martin Buber and the neo-Kantians, philosophers like Herman Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig. This confrontation between the great Protestant tradition and what Steinberg referred to as “normative Judaism” utterly transformed his theological position. He knew both Tillich and Niebuhr personally. In 1940 he had invited Tillich to lecture at the Park Avenue Synagogue and Niebuhr had in turn invited him to the Union Theological Seminary.

Steinberg’s critique of neo-orthodox Protestant theology reversed, in a striking way, the plot of *As a Driven Leaf*. Milton Steinberg, the Jewish spiritual pilgrim, learned what the Christians could teach him not as an either/or, as in Elisha ben Abuya, but as a both/and. He absorbed the alien wisdom and used it to redefine and strengthen his Jewishness. In an address to the Rabbinical Assembly in 1949 titled “The Theological Issues of the Hour,” he openly confessed the inadequacy of his previous position:

Having long shared in the exaggerated optimism of our age concerning man’s goodness, I for one owe a considerable debt of gratitude to the neo-Reformationists, Reinhard Niebuhr in particular. They have caused me to see a truth which I had somehow missed in the world about me, though its evidences are everywhere, a truth which I encountered time and again in the rabbinic tradition but which, being a creature of modernity, I had denatured. They have reminded me of the depth and tenacity of evil in human nature. In this they have supplied me with a frame of reference which hitherto I lacked for the comprehension of the social horrors of the last decade, and also with a more realistic estimate of the size, strength, and toughness of the Adversary who is not only before and behind, but in us also.²⁵

His debt to Reinhold Niebuhr consisted in the following insight:

What, then, according to Niebuhr, is the human dilemma? Not that man possesses no freedom whatsoever, as Luther and Calvin taught.

25. Noveck, *Milton Steinberg*, 191–92.

Not that the will is by itself totally incapable of the good, as is the contention of neo-Orthodoxy. Man is free and can will the good; being, however, a creature of self-love he is more inclined toward evil, and even when he wills the good, it will tend, owing to his self-love, to come out less good than he purposed, most often indeed not good at all.²⁶

He could now dispense with his previous “denatured” theological position. God was no longer a “God-idea,” a metaphysical assumption, but the personal God who answers prayers. As he put it to the rabbis,

God-in-Himself is needed, too, as a principle of explanation in the first instance, but also because otherwise the God-idea itself is emptied of content and potency. This is not to say that all religious people must be metaphysicians; it is to say that, be it by intuition or systematic elaboration, there must be at the core of their belief something ontological, some affirmation, whether naive or sophisticated, whether guesses or reasoned, concerning the ultimate nature of things.²⁷

Steinberg also read widely in the Jewish mystical tradition. I recall walking into his room one morning in 1948 or 1949 and finding him with his tefillin on. I asked him what he did when he prayed in the mornings. He thought for a moment and said that it varied. Some mornings when he felt uninspired, he simply studied. Most mornings he put on his tefillin and said the morning service. And some mornings—he looked at me with a sheepish, embarrassed, half-smile—he just communed. The “God-idea” had vanished and been replaced by a much more complex, personal faith. This mystical Milton Steinberg did not come through to Louis Silberman when reviewing *Anatomy of Faith* nor to Steinberg’s oldest rabbinical friend, Ira Eisenstein of the Society for the Advancement of Judaism on West 86th Street. Eisenstein remained a true disciple of Kaplan. In his attack on Arthur Cohen’s introduction to *Anatomy of Faith* from October 1960, Eisenstein wrote:

I still find I cannot agree with my good friend Milton. He seems to think that by adopting the hypothesis that God is being he explains the word better than by assuming that God is a process. To my mind both

26. Noveck, *Milton Steinberg*, 190.

27. Noveck, *Milton Steinberg*, 182.

explain reality equally well, while the idea of God as being strains my credulity.²⁸

Eisenstein, in effect, never understood that Steinberg no longer wanted “to explain reality” but to draw near in faith to the living God. There is among the Steinberg papers a prayer, not dated but in his handwriting, titled “A Mystical Note.” Its content and tone would have strained Eisenstein’s credulity even further had he heard it:

It is the practice of those who love God that they shall know him, recognize His will for them and perceive that all their circumstances and movements are but in conformity with the Creator. Then do they cease to choose aught except him. They desist from desiring the world and its tumult. They abandon material affairs and concern over their bodies. Their bodies remain on earth, their hearts in heaven. They serve him with the Holy Angels in the high heavens. Desire melts from their hearts. They approach the level of the Prophets, those pure and radiant saints, who know Him.²⁹

These are the aspirations of the mystics and believers down the ages. Ira Eisenstein supposed that Milton Steinberg wrote theology to explain God. By this stage in his life, he wrote it to worship and to love God, a God no longer a premise but a being.

The new Milton Steinberg returned to rabbinic teaching to rethink and restate his fundamental theological position in the light of what he usually called normative Judaism. In another of these last essays from 1949–1950—and to my taste his most brilliant—he confronted the radical Protestant theology of Søren Kierkegaard. In this sympathetic account of the great Danish thinker, titled “Kierkegaard and Judaism,” which appeared in the spring 1949 issue of *Menorah Journal*, Steinberg shows his mastery of the entire corpus of Western religious thought, and the effortless ease and self-confidence of a thinker now at the height of his powers. In this passage he contrasts the two doctrines of free will in Christian theology:

Within Christianity, within all theisms, there have always been two states of mind as to the nature of the divine essence. One holds it to consist in reason and the rational. To this school the Christian Plato-

28. Ira Eisenstein, “Milton Steinberg’s Mind and Heart,” *The Reconstructionist* (October 21, 1960): 26–7, AJHS, SP, P-369, box 14, folder 11.

29. “A Mystical Note,” AJHS, SP P-369, box 13, folder 1.

nists and Thomists belong and, in a drastic metamorphosis, the Hegelian idealists also. In the alternative view, God is Will before He is Reason. What He determines, by the very fact that He determines it, becomes the reasonable and the good. In this line stands Duns Scotus, Calvin, and Luther. This is the foundation stone of all those theologies which teach that salvation is of God's election only.⁵⁰

The object of the analysis remains always the light the Christian position throws on the very different Jewish one. Take this passage on grace:

Then is man not in need of God's grace? Of course; all the time and in everything. But that grace is not to be supposed as only exceptional and crucial, as it were, a lightning flash of redemptive mercy breaking unpredictably into and through normality. There is that grace described in the *Siddur* as the "miracles which are daily with us, the wonders and goodness which are at all times, evening, morn, and noon." This is the grace manifest in the Torah's guidance and in "the merits of the fathers," the examples and admonitions of the righteous, in the *yezer tov* (good instinct), conscience, and aspiration toward the good, and above all, in the uninterrupted magnetic pull of God. It is a grace always at work, ever available, never failing. All a man need do to have it is to call it in truth. Even as it is said: "he who setteth out to be purified, from heaven do they help him." This is the supreme and ultimate reason why Judaism, conscious with Kierkegaard of the human ordeal and peril, does not yield to his despair. It knows that man is stronger, and God is greater in justice and mercy, than he allowed.⁵¹

In all these comparisons the Jewish position appears more balanced, more humane, more reasonable, more in touch with the great realities of human existence than the Christian theology he examines. Here is Steinberg's analysis of the Pauline influence on Christian thought and the way Judaism happily avoided it. The passage is taken from the Rabbinical Assembly lecture.

All Christian religious thought is shot through with the feverish spirituality of Paul. It was he who imposed on it such vagaries as the corruption of the flesh, Original Sin, justification by faith alone, the incarnation, vicarious atonement and a salvation that is of individuals

30. *Ibid.*, 140.

31. *Ibid.*, 150–51.

only and almost totally “vertical.” Because of him these must constitute a large part of the program and raw materials of any Christian theology. From concern with such idiosyncratic and artificial notions Judaism has been spared by Paul’s departure from it. It is free then to address itself to the real themes of religion, unadorned and undistorted: God, revelation, and redemption.³²

Ultimately, Steinberg rejects all versions of the Pauline and Protestant doctrine of salvation by grace alone:

As for the neo-Reformationist doctrine of *sola gratia*, there is a sense in which every religious person accepts it. To believe in God is to believe that it is He who, out of love, makes available whatever good we find about us and in ourselves, including our final salvation. But *sola gratia*, in the special sense in which it has been employed from Augustine to Barth, is unfair to man and to God alike. It is unjust to man because it assumes a total absence of merit on his part. Why, one wonders, is it assumed by neo-Reformationist theologians that to be under God’s judgment is the same thing as being totally condemned by it? Unless, as seems to be the case in Kierkegaard, the very fact of finitude is itself a sin.

Sola gratia is even more unfair to God in that it ascribes to him the injustice of exacting perfection from men when it was He, their Maker, who made them imperfect; further it represents Him as morally arbitrary, saving one man but not another, though both are equally without justification; finally, though it prates much of God’s mercy, it conceives it as being too little and too late. Divine mercy always, in this scheme, comes onto the scene after judgment.³³

The prose has the strength and clarity of the preacher but also the confidence of a great religious thinker who now can see the task ahead of him, nothing less than the construction of a new Jewish theology, one which might be able to do what his beloved John Milton attempted in *Paradise Lost*, “to justify God’s ways to man.”

The time left him was now very short and the task still scarcely begun. The letters from this period describe his intensive reading and his meetings with the German refugee sociologist Albert Salomon to read Continental thinkers. In November 1948, he invited Arthur Cohen to join a

32. *Ibid.*, 211–12

33. *Ibid.*, 194.

theological discussion group with Salomon and the ex-Marxist Will Herberg, which met for the first time in February 1949.⁵⁴ In early November 1949, Steinberg wrote to Arthur Cohen to tell him that the Jewish Theological Seminary had offered to create a Professorship of Systematic Theology for him:

The Seminary, feeling that it is giving its student body no instruction in Contemporary Theology and recognizing the void which this represents, has turned to me. . . . I know that this offer has come to me *faute de mieux*, just because there is no one else anywhere on the American Jewish scene who has some philosophical knowledge and some theological interest.⁵⁵

It was, alas, all too late. Steinberg would live for only four more months. His excitement and commitment to the theological project never slackened. In spite of ill health and difficult pastoral problems (such as the funeral for a wealthy congregant who had been in life a Jewish version of Ebenezer Scrooge), he decided to deliver four lectures to the congregation of the Park Avenue Synagogue in January 1950, called "New Currents in Religious Thought." As in the past, a typical mixed Manhattan congregation of clothing manufacturers from the garment district and their families, a smattering of refugees from Europe, and a personal following from all over the city would show up as the audience for theological reflection. By now they must have been used to it, for the lectures attracted more than a thousand people to each.

The four last lectures, republished by Arthur Cohen in *Anatomy of Faith*, have the nobility and serenity of a thinker who has found at last a task worth the ultimate sacrifice. Steinberg knew that the strain of their composition risked his life but he approached the task with a wonderful composure. He had always believed that Jewish religious observance must rest on thought about the nature and purposes of God, and it was to that final mystery that he addressed his last energy. I end where he did with what he called "Summation and Reprise," the conclusion of the last of the four lectures and, in effect, the last words he ever wrote: "The new currents in religious thought which we have examined are neither necessarily new nor necessarily confluent. They just happen to be the

34. MS to Arthur A. Cohen, November 29, 1948, February 7, 1949. AJHS, SP P-369, box 17, folder 13.

35. MS to Arthur A. Cohen, November 7, 1949, AJHS, SP P-369, box 17, folder 13.

currents which are flowing at present." He then outlines the four main currents: the revolt against reason, religious pragmatism, revisions in the conception of God, and the reevaluation of man, and then concludes:

Religion is more than theology. Although religion is theology, to be sure, it also comprehends the entire array of culture. The enterprise of faith is, however, not an enterprise of reason alone or of faith alone. True to the heart of Jewish religious belief, above both faith and reason, hope remains supreme. The spirit which must invest the religious enterprise is the spirit of hope. The prophet Zechariah, in an exquisite phrase, said of those believing in the world that they are "prisoners of hope" (Zech 9.12). We are indeed all of us imprisoned by hope. But, and we should not forget this, hope may be delusive, narrowing, unrealistic; and hope may also release and redeem us.³⁶

These beautiful words, his last public utterance, would be the right place to end if this paper were a memorial, but it is not. It is an attempt to answer a question—what makes Milton Steinberg live today? We have our answer now: his unique combination of deep God-centered piety, his philosophical brilliance and lucidity, his warmth and compassion, and his commitment to the pulpit and the pastoral activities of a rabbi. It was his desire to infuse, enliven, and clarify the lives of ordinary congregants with the double power of faith and reason, the task he never finished. He leaves us the legacy of an incomplete structure, one that has at its heart unresolved contradictions. It would not be a true tribute to his life and ministry if I were to fail to discuss them here. I believe that the late theology of Steinberg slid imperceptibly into a Protestant theological frame without his knowing it. The logic of his position made every observant Jew his own rabbi, as Martin Luther had declared in his *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520): "We are all priests, as I have said, and have all one faith, one Gospel, one Sacrament; how then should we not have the power of discerning and judging what is right or wrong in matters of faith?"³⁷ Steinberg had come to the same position, as I will illustrate by a set of propositions:

1. Steinberg rejected Torah as the complete revelation. It is only part of divine revelation, not the whole.

36. "New Currents in Religious Thought," in *Anatomy of Faith*, p. 300.

37. Martin Luther, "Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation" (1520), *Readings in European History*, ed. J. H. Robinson (Boston, 1906), 2. Hanover Historical Texts Project; scanned and proofread by Monica Banas, 1996. <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/luthad.html>.

2. Revelation is continuous: hence Judaism changes all the time.
3. If Sinai is not the complete revelation, the Covenant, the election of the Jews as God's chosen people, become nonbinding pieces of history. The Reconstructionist prayer book eliminated all traditional assertions of God's choice of the Jews from daily worship. I have found no evidence that Steinberg had reservations about that. He used the prayer book in the Park Avenue Synagogue.
4. If the Jews have not been chosen, what binds them to their tradition and history? Who decides what Jews should believe or practice and on what grounds?
5. Since Judaism has no specific creed, the rejection of the Covenant as revelation makes Judaism, especially in its Conservative and Reconstructionist variants, indeterminate and almost arbitrary.

Steinberg evaded this implication by referring to rabbinic tradition, which he called "normative" Judaism, but he offers no formula to define what is normative and what is not. Kaplan can rely on community norms because religion emerges from group-consciousness. Steinberg relies on God and prayer, and neither can offer clear guidelines by itself. In Steinberg's late theology, tradition falls into a kind of limbo where every Jew must select his or her bits without guide, consistency, or theological foundations. A glance at much Jewish observance in the United States today suggests that that is precisely what has happened. Milton Steinberg might have found a way to link tradition, choice, and faith; we do not know. We do know that he—almost unique in the American rabbinate—had the intellectual power to undertake the task.

Milton Steinberg died serenely and fully conscious on March 20, 1950, at 145 East 92nd Street, where he had lived since returning to New York in 1933. He died as a "prisoner of hope," that hope which has sustained the millennial faith of the Jewish people. He became, as the tradition puts it, a "light in Israel" and that is, as he used to say, "in the last analysis" why he still lives both in his writing and in his example. The question which haunts me as I close this sketch is, what might have been? What would American Judaism be like today had Milton Steinberg lived to complete a modern systematic Jewish theology?