

Spiritual life on all three sides of the tracks

READING MORMONISM THROUGH JEWISH EYES

By Jeffrey Needle

I EMERGED FROM MY MOTHER'S WOMB ON 14 May 1950 screaming and complaining. Rumor has it that I haven't stopped since. Which is possibly the reason I chose to take up book reviewing as a hobby. Where else could I vent with impunity and be congratulated for it?

I grew up a Jewish boy in a Jewish family where ritual was observed only when necessary but where identity was everything. I have fond memories of Passover seders. To this day, I recite the beginning of the "fier kashas"—the questions that Jewish lads ask their elders, beginning with, "Why is this night different from all other nights?" For some reason, I especially remember my choice, one year, to wear bright red socks with a dark suit. An older cousin decided I looked "stately," and this became my nickname for the next few years.

Growing up in a culturally isolated religion, I attended Hebrew school, became quite a little scholar in the Hebrew language, and went on to study more Hebrew in high school (it was New York, after all), winning citywide Hebrew language competitions. Now that I'm hurtling toward my 60th year of life, I find that I no longer remember about 99 percent of my Hebrew learning. Yeah, I can still read and translate a bit, but likely no better than a complete newbie.

At age 16, I was trolling downtown Manhattan in search of a summer job. Standing in front of the New York Public Library, I glanced diagonally across the street and saw a man holding a large sign reading, "Free book to any Jew who will agree to read it." Intrigued, I crossed the street. The man was a Baptist missionary, giving out versions of the New Testament meant to evangelize Jews. I accepted the book.



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And, at the same time, I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.

Now, if you had asked me what had just happened, I couldn't have told you even if you'd been holding a gun to my head. The whole thing was so foreign, so unfamiliar, but I agreed to begin Bible studies with a nice old couple in Brooklyn. Two years later, I was finally baptized, but not as a Baptist, to the great disappointment of my Baptist teachers. I just couldn't swallow the whole hellfire idea. It was so contrary to everything that seemed rational and reasonable. Instead, I became a Seventh-day Adventist. At least they didn't have a hot place to put their enemies.

When I converted, my family was furious. It took a while to restore good relations with my parents and other relatives. In some Orthodox families, if a child converts, the family actually holds a full funeral for the child. In their eyes, the son or daughter is dead. No further communication is allowed. Severe? You bet. No "court of love" for us Jews. If you think the circumciser's blade is sharp, you haven't been at the wrong end of a Jewish mother's tongue!

Transitioning from Judaism to any form of Christianity is traumatic and upsetting to the family structure. It matters not one whit whether your relatives are practicing Jews or veritable agnostics. Judaism is more than a religion; it's a culture, an identity, a tribal affiliation. Step outside the tribe, and you've committed a form of treason not to be tolerated.

Now, so many years down the pike, I recognize that summer day in 1966 as the day my life changed completely. I was now a Christian, or, as my Baptist friends would insist, a "completed Jew." I believed in the Jewish messiah, Yeshua ha-Mashiach, and trusted Him for my salvation. This was not just a new path for my life; it was a complete revamping of everything I had ever thought I believed.

After that, I went to church on Saturday, abstained from unclean meats, and honored the Ten Commandments. We rejected the burning hell of our Baptist brothers, and (at

least early on) the trinitarian formulas of Catholicism and Protestantism. But as I became more integrated into Adventist culture, I learned, to my dismay, that distrust and outright dislike of Jews was as prevalent in that church as it was in the larger society.

Imagine my culture shock when I enrolled in an Adventist secondary school in the tiny town of Wildwood, Georgia. This was in 1969, the year after my baptism. I

When I first considered writing the article you're reading, I decided that it would be an impossibility because I wasn't consciously reading any books through any eyes. I was simply reading. I believed a bit of it. I rejected the rest of it. And when I read it all again, I rejected things I had initially accepted and adopted ideas that I had at first tossed into the waste bin.

But, in that way, I don't think I'm much different from



JEANNETTE ATWOOD

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lasted a year. When I came home, I was much relieved to be gone from the oppressive atmosphere of the South. I returned to New York City ready to pick up my life where I had left off. It wasn't long before wanderlust hit again, and off I went to San Diego, where I've lived for nearly 35 years. I'm ready to relocate again. Anyone know of a good low-rent district in Salt Lake City?

Since my conversion, I've developed an interest in all things Christian. And when I say all things, I really do mean all things, but with the uncoordinated passion of an amateur. The mess that constitutes my pursuit is nicely reflected in the chaos of my home. My Christian cortex is populated by the miscellaneous thoughts and aspirations of every moment of my life all getting processed through my Jewish hippocampus. No wonder I'm so adaptable. When you have your feet firmly planted in mid-air, you can do just about anything.

anyone else. Each of us reads through the prism of our own experiences and biases. Whether these biases are a matter of nature or of nurture matters not one bit because the experience of reading is real. Can a purely objective reading of anything be attained, then? I'm going to suggest that it can't be. In other words, I read in exactly the same way you do. I just have a Jewish background. And that's probably what you're here for, so let's get started.

WHEN A JEW reads Mormon literature, certain aspects border, not just on the strange, but on the offensive. It's hard for many Jews to understand the Mormon fondness for certain doctrines. And some practices are just plain misunderstood.

Let me start with a simple one—the plurality of gods. To a Jew, the idea of other gods, no matter how you frame it, is

a complete denial of the cry of every Orthodox Jew: “Shema, Yisrael, Adonai Elohenu Adonai Echad”—“Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is One Lord.” Central to the “heatheness” of the communities that surrounded national Israel was their acceptance of many gods. It’s probably true that early Hebrews were not so much monotheistic as henotheistic—in other words, they acknowledged other gods but dismissed them because Yahweh was the biggest, baddest god in the ‘hood who could beat the snot out of anybody.

But modern Judaism, much like Islam, is strictly monotheistic. It admits to no other divine power, no so-called “Son of God,” and certainly no eternal progression to godhood. Add into the mix the idea that God has a body of flesh and bones and that God, at one time, was human, and you rocket into an orbit beyond even Kolob. Yes, there have been Jewish converts to Mormonism, but they’ve had to abandon this central belief of their Judaism, which can be quite challenging.

Another part of Mormonism that is very hard for Judaism to swallow is the idea that the ancient prophets of Israel understood the idea of a messiah coming to die on a cross, and that his followers would be called “Christians,” and that he would be born of a woman named Mary, and so on. Frankly, all of this is hard for Catholics and Protestants to swallow, too. Outside of Mormon literature, there is no real evidence that these ideas are true. Of course, it doesn’t mean that they *aren’t* true, but rather that Mormons seem to have a corner on this knowledge. Like the Mormons, Jews believe they are the chosen people, but they’ve never thought that they had a corner on religious knowledge.

A Mormon practice widely misunderstood by Jews, and sometimes causing some friction between the two religions, is proxy baptism.



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Those unfamiliar with the practice think that being baptized for a relative is intended to make that person a Mormon at a stroke. But those who understand the idea behind the practice know that this rite simply opens the door for the deceased to accept the gospel if they so choose and continue their progression. Until then, they’re kept in something of a prison, one they wish to be free of. When the recent kaffuffle over the proxy baptism of Holocaust victims hit the headlines, I initially wondered what all the fuss was about. But after thinking about it for about forty-five seconds, I realized what bothered the Jewish authorities so much.

It wasn’t that they believed that such baptisms turned the victims into Mormons; rather they worried that the baptisms reflected an attitude that has plagued Judaism for years—the idea that somehow their religion is defective. Yes, Christians argue, the Jews may have been God’s chosen people at one time, but now, their religion isn’t good enough. They need something else, whatever it might be—a baptism or an oven. Believe me, your average Jew—even your unaverage Jew—will reject the idea that anything needs to be added to the sacrifice made in the camps of Nazi Germany. Being Jewish is sufficient in itself.

Mormonism has more to say about Israel and the Jewish people than do most other Christian denominations. Having rooted the Book of Mormon in

Jerusalem and anchored its story in the Law of Moses and the identification of Jesus Christ as the Jewish messiah, Mormonism could in theory go a long way in bridging the distance between Jews and Mormons. But at the same time, it makes Jews a bit suspicious about the whole enterprise. If there really was a prophet Lehi, why is this the first we’ve heard about him?

So often when I read Mormon literature as a Jew, I

feel as if I'm watching a monumental clash of cultures—one chosen people trying to unseat another. Yes, Mormons honor Israel and understand their scripture to be “one in thine hand” with that of the Jews. But, if you ask a Mormon, Jews are not the apple of God's eye right now. Don't think you're going to make any Jewish friends by preaching that.

I'm not really certain why a group would fight to be God's chosen people in the first place. God never chose anybody except for service and sacrifice. Chosen doesn't mean pampered. To ascend to heaven, you have to take the stairs, possibly even the fire escape. No one is going to install an escalator for you. Your journey to exaltation will be entirely self-propelled. But God certainly has focused His eye on particular sets of people from time to time. And those people, whether Jews or Mormons, better understand that God means business!

Like Mormonism, Judaism is a funny mix of belief, practice, and just plain repetition. As a Jew, you go through cycles of celebration and mourning, you have a checklist of dos and don'ts; but you also have a rather wide spectrum of orthodoxy from which to choose. Here, Mormonism and Judaism part ways. From the Hasidic and Orthodox brands of Judaism, with their stern, sometimes unforgiving, rigidity, to the very liberal Reform Jews, any son or daughter of Abraham can find a place to immerse him or herself in the traditions. For example, I attended a liberal Reform congregation, arriving just after the sermon, and heard a young lady expressing to the rabbi her gratitude for the sermon and her relief to learn, at last, that pre-marital sex was okay.

I'll give you a thousand dollars if you can find a Mormon bishop who would preach the same thing.

I HAVE A friend who is a professor of philosophy at the University of San Diego. Some years ago, she asked me, “Do you know what philosophy is?” Of course I know what philosophy is—what a question! But I was wrong. Her definition is, “Philosophy is everything that isn't something else.” It took me a minute to wrap my brain around this idea (and sometimes I wonder if it did irreparable damage).

It does make some sense, though. What is now mathematics or science has its roots in the philosopher's mind. Maybe religion, too, is everything that isn't already something else. We bayed at the moon and called it religion. Now we call it superstition. We burned witches in the name of re-

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ligion, and now we admit it was mob violence. We worshiped the sun, moon, and stars, until we understood that they were merely natural phenomena. We now call our heaven-gazing “astronomy.”

As we enter into a new age of humanistic brilliance and ethnocentric hubris, science is trying to move even more of religion into the category we call superstition. We want things explained; we want them proven. Mormonism is certainly facing such a challenge. DNA evidence, archaeology, historical and linguistic studies have all been mounted to challenge belief in the Book of Mormon, for example. Yes, you have FARMS and FAIR to supply the last word on Book of Mormon evidences. But you also have Signature Books to remind you that the last word has not yet been uttered. What you end up with are true believers who cannot substantiate their beliefs with scientific fact but don't seem to mind.

To this group, I say, Hooray! Jews find the whole idea of scientifically proving religious belief to be a strange and woefully misguided enterprise anyway. We believe there was a Moses although we don't have any science to back it up.

I have no hope, and indeed no aspiration, of ever having my own planet. I'm far too lazy for that. But I do want to ascend a little higher than I am right now.



And we believe that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob existed, not because we've found their green cards but because our Holy Book tells us so.

Isn't it great? Jews and Mormons have something in common. We choose to believe, even when we lack empirical, objective evidence. But there is one important difference: Jews don't make empirical claims about the historicity of the Bible. They simply accept it. Many Jews, of course, have dismissed biblical history as just so much nonsense; but they continue to teach, live, and pray as if the biblical heroes really existed.

In all my years of attending synagogue, I can't recall a single person getting up and saying, "I know that Moses was a true prophet of God. I know that the Bible is true. I know that Judaism is true." We Jews just don't talk like that. Instead, we go about our lives as if we believed these things. A life lived is considered more compelling than a slogan recited. For this reason, a Jew would probably leave a Mormon testimony meeting scratching his or her head. Why all the protestation that one is a Christian? Why all the insistence that Nephi was a real guy? Just live it! But we understand and honor the belief statements of other faiths. We get it—different strokes for different folks.

But let's not get too chummy here. Because I really have to tell you that, when compared to Judaism, Mormonism is just too darned coherent. You guys have a systematic theology (a phrase that rings oddly in the Jewish ear), you have a creed, you have a body of men who decide what beliefs constitute orthodoxy and when to discipline dissenters. Judaism thrives on conflict; Mormonism avoids it at every turn. Judaism celebrates a variety of belief; Mormonism shies away from it. Jewish mothers love to exclaim, "My son the doctor!" Mormon mothers—oh wait, they kind of like that, too.

I will confess that I abhor any attempt to correlate belief—it seems so counterintuitive to the entire religious en-

terprise. But I understand the need of any school of religion to present a unified face to the world. The chaos that is early Mormonism—the rough landscape of ideas, sane and otherwise, that can be found in the earliest writings—needed to be paved and striped so that seekers would know exactly where to park. But I prefer driving recklessly as I tour the religious landscape of America. I don't like speed limits, and I categorically reject toll roads or other constraints on my free-wheeling imagination. Consequently, while I find much in contemporary Mormon literature to be spiritless and void of any energy, I can always hop on the *Journal of Discourses* express and, without fail, find something to carry me through.

It really hasn't ever occurred to me that I should become a Mormon. I don't have a testimony of the Church, or the Book of Mormon, or the Tabernacle Choir. I hardly ever attend ward meetings. I do, however, read the Book of Mormon and other Restoration scriptures. And my home looks like a giant LDS library hit by one of California's famous earthquakes.

But there are ways in which my own near-Mormonism has affected the way I think and act. I really believe that my exposure to Mormonism and my admittedly puzzling affection for even the schlockiest manifestations of Mormon culture have helped shape my worldview. My friends are completely perplexed to find that I love to spend time at Temple Square. I can sit and watch the movies at the Legacy Theater and the North Visitors Center, recognizing that they are revisionist to the max, and still enjoy them. I even purchase DVD's of the films so I can watch them again!

Perhaps even this is part of my Jewish upbringing. We never seem to do things halfway. When we develop a passion, we go all the way with it. Jews, I believe, are so successful in business, in entertainment, and in other fields precisely because we're raised with a passion to excel. There's

nothing quite like having a Jewish mother pushing you along to be your best.

I don't suppose I'll ever be able to liberate myself from the strictures of my Jewish upbringing. I don't think I even want to. I am content to see just about everything—from the Book of Mormon to the daily newspaper—through the eyes of a Jew who has emerged from his tribal constraints into the larger diaspora of Christendom.

I remain focused on what the Apostle Paul called “the prize of the high calling in Christ Jesus.” I remain confident that, however things work out in the end, God is in charge of the operation. And I always remember what my friend Father George Keith said one day: “A table not set for all of God's children is not a table set by God.”

SOMEWHERE IN EASTERN Europe, many years ago, it was the practice of Orthodox Jews to meet during the Days of Awe, the ten days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Each morning the people would gather at the synagogue, but the rabbi would never be there. A visitor asked the townspeople about this and was told that the rabbi was so holy that during the Days of Awe, he personally ascended to heaven to present his petitions to God.

The stranger didn't believe it and was determined to find out what actually happened to the rabbi. One night, he stole into the rabbi's home and hid under his bed. The next morning, the rabbi awoke, performed his ablutions, and then, curiously, put on his coat and grabbed an axe and a length of rope, all the while reciting the first of the three prayers for the Days of Awe.

Tailed by the skeptic, the rabbi left through the back door of his home and went into the woods. He chopped some firewood and bound it with the rope he'd brought. As he chopped, he recited the second of the prayers for the Days of Awe.

He walked to an adjoining town, mostly gentile and very poor. He walked through the streets, shouting, “I have firewood for sale! It's very cold! Anyone want to buy some firewood?” An older lady stuck her head outside her window and shouted, “Mister, I need the wood, but I have no money.” “Ach,” the rabbi answered, “money, schmuney. I'll be right there.” The rabbi entered her home, dropped the wood into the fireplace, lit the fire, and recited the third of the prayers. The old woman was sick and very poor. The rabbi knew of her need. He left her home with her blessing and her thanks.

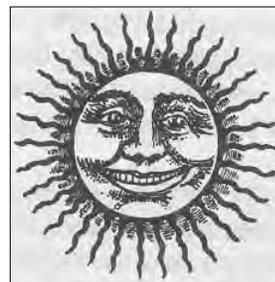
Now, when the stranger comes to this town during the Days of Awe, he hears about the rabbi who is so holy that he ascends to heaven and presents his prayers to God. And when he's asked if he believes that the rabbi ascends to heaven, he responds, “Maybe higher.”

I suppose, at heart, this is what I want. I want to ascend to God, not physically, but ethically and spiritually. And I suppose Mormonism has something to say to this old reprobate Jew. It tells me that maybe God is busier than I had ever thought. Maybe he has arranged things so that a young boy

named Joseph Smith would stand at the head of this dispensation and bring about a new set of realities, grounded in Americanism and a radical liberalism. Maybe this fellow taught us all how to be better people, how to be more like God, and maybe, just maybe, how we may become gods ourselves.

I have no hope, and indeed no aspiration, of ever having my own planet. I'm far too lazy for that. But I do want to ascend a little higher than I am right now. Like the rabbi, I want to learn to put my religious notions into action, to be a light to other people, and to live a useful life. Can Mormonism bring me face to face with God? Maybe it can bring me even higher. Maybe it can teach me what it means to be a godly person in an ungodly world.

Alas, the progress is slow, but I trust the direction is right. Enfeebled and defective as they may be, these old Jewish eyes continue to search for truth wherever it may be found. And that, my friends, is what being a Mormon is supposed to be about and is, indeed, what being Jewish is all about. The nexus of my Jewishness and my quasi-Mormonism has yet to be discovered. But when enlightenment does come, you'll be the first to know.



EGRETS

The egrets dance
but what connects their flight,
undulates them down at river ice?

What draws one flash after another
to race to meet the blur
of its own reflection?

What urged prayer beyond its knuckles,
festooned a collar bone with sparkles,
What part rosary, what part necklace

follow it back up
to taste perspective,
dip wings in well of sun

to write hover and droop
then swoop again
to part the cold with bristled wind?

— THOMAS ROBERT BARNES