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Reviewed by Elaine Margolin, Hewlett, NY

I sometimes fall in love with authors and the intimate secrets they share with me. I felt drawn to Liel Leibovitz while reading his engrossing new work, “How the Talmud Can Change Your Life: Surprisingly Modern Advice from a Very Old Book.” Leibowitz’s book introduces the lay reader to the majesty and complexity of the Talmud’s wisdom which had intrigued me since watching Barbra Streisand go to such great lengths to study its secrets in the movie “Yentl.” I grew up in a secular Zionist home and never received any traditional religious training. My parents seemed to look down upon such teachings, as if they were nothing more than a bunch of *mishigas*. I wasn’t so sure. There was something about the intensity of watching young boys and grown men immersed in Talmudic study in many of the little shuls that dotted the Long Island landscape where I grew up. Their immersion spoke to something miraculous I wanted in on.

Leibovitz believes all Jews should read the Talmud which he describes as “the central text of Jewish theology, ethic, and laws.” He explains how the Talmud has been compiled over centuries and studied closely until this very day. Leibovitz describes the Talmud as a “thicket of interlaced conversations” that asks us to grapple with our traditions, ourselves, and God. It is a book with endless questions and commentary where answers are in short supply. The Talmud captures 700 years of arguments from 180 BCE to 50 CE when Jews were under siege. The Greeks had already attacked them, and the Temple had been destroyed. The sacking of Jerusalem left almost half a million dead. There was persecution from the Persians, and the rise of Christianity. The Talmud doesn’t dwell on how Jews managed to survive all of this, but rather why they did. Leibovitz explains how the book itself became a shelter under which Jews could find nourishment and strength and the will to persevere.

Leibovitz describes for us the Talmud’s reach into the non-Jewish world. He speaks about a young secular woman’s reaction to its teachings which she posts daily on TikTok often with a humorous and sometimes profane slant that often goes viral. He tells us about how the Talmud’s translation into Italian sold out immediately requiring the publisher to print more editions. He claims South Koreans are addicted to the Talmud’s teachings believing it will contribute to their

children's growth and prosperity. Leibovitz says almost flippantly the reason the Talmud is so popular is because it is so good for you. But he warns that it can only be of service if one is willing to grow and change. It makes us realize, he states, that we are all in this life together.

Leibovitz loves the folk legends, bawdy tales, and rabbinical back-and-forth the rabbis engage in. He believes the Talmud touches on everything important: how to grieve, how to love, how to choose our friends, how to fight, how to fix our government, how to prepare for death, and how to successfully communicate with our partners. He makes his explanations more meaningful by tying the Talmud's lessons into various contemporary lives. For example, he speaks at length about a Jewish woman named Jean Nidetch who created Weight Watchers, which in Leibovitz's analysis was really about her being able to do the soul-searching required to bring her body and self into alignment. She finally figured out a way to stop herself from engaging in self-destructive eating habits. He discusses how Erich Auerbach refused to believe as a proud German Jew he could be targeted for destruction as Hitler rose to power. Auerbach was a lover of books and believed literature could "arrange the seemingly jumbled and broken mess we call reality into discernible and inspiring patterns." When he finally knew he must flee, he left for Istanbul with his son Clemens whom he had circumcised upon arrival at fourteen. Auerbach began to take his first steps into exploring the Jewish faith he was born into. Leibovitz uses these lives not as examples of people who became enmeshed in studying the Talmud but rather as examples of Jews who began to do the soul searching necessary to bring their lives into a more harmonious balance. In a sense, the rabbis debating one another in the Talmud are performing similar acts of self-exploration and moral searching.

Leibovitz describes for us how the goal of the rabbis who go back-and-forth trying to decide whether one should recite a blessing over fruit, or how someone can balance the mandates of work with religious study, brought about the concept of *sugiya*, which is a series of responsive hypotheses and questions recorded on almost every page of the Talmud. These notations are records of the rabbis thinking as they struggled to come to terms with making decisions about how to proceed. We get to bear witness to a myriad of voices engaging with one another and trying to find consensus that is reflective of deep study and interrogation. Sometimes a *sugiya* is a simple question with one rabbi asking for clarification, and another providing a satisfactory response so the conversation can move on. Other times things grow more complicated and various teachers

seem to be contradicting one another. When that happens, the influential scholars use the teachings of the Mishnah and the Torah and their own logic to argue one way or the other until they are satisfied with what the Jewish law, known as the *halacha*, should be. Sometimes a *sugiya* is left at a place called Teiku [tie, draw] which means that for the time being all agree they will allow the dispute to stand, with the understanding no finality can emerge at this time despite their best efforts.

Leibovitz seems drawn to those in the Talmud who attempted to shake things up a bit. He cites rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai for recasting Judaism as an ethical quest for justice and one that abhors absolutes. This represented an enormous shift in thinking as even the humblest practitioners were encouraged to participate. Rabbis no longer had the exclusive power to challenge the status quo and resist.

Leibovitz speaks about Rabbi Akiva, mentioned more in the Talmud than any other rabbi. He organized revolts against the Romans in 132 CE and influenced the Talmudic style of reasoning and thinking. He seems to have come out of nowhere and won the heart of the wealthiest man in Jerusalem's daughter who pleaded with him to study Torah. Rabbi Akiva was able to blend different strands of Jewish thinking and observance and create something new with it that gave more meaning to the Jews who had begun to lose faith in a world that kept trampling upon them. Rabbi Akiva knew that wisdom alone was insufficient. Each man needed to have a sense of himself and become critical thinker. Talmud study began to evolve into the pairing off into teams, and the most successful study partners were always men who were nothing like one another, yet able to bring their partners to the highest of heights. Rabbi Akiva understood that Jews could not be expected to blindly follow a rigid legal framework and saw the need for the power of stories to make God's voice more visceral for them. These stories needed to possess within them an "inquisitive flexible spirit, the feeling of movement itself," that encouraged questioning instead of stifling it. Leibovitz says this prompted the creation of the *stam* which is the nearly invisible narration that ties the Talmud's parts together into something resembling a "postmodern stream of consciousness." The *stam* is a reader, who interprets the early materials by introducing them, interpreting them, and offering commentary as well. The *stam* is the literary equivalent of a "deliberately featureless place," like an airport or a doctor's waiting room. It is where one feels they are neither home nor have they arrived at their intended destination.

If I would have stopped when I completed reading Leibovitz's beautifully written book, I would have nothing more to say other than Leibovitz is a charismatic storyteller who understands much about the human condition and is welcoming in his attempt to reach people of all stripes. I was delighted by his openness. But I decided to research him on the Internet hoping to round out my review by learning more about him. At first, all looked as I thought it would. I learned he came to study the Talmud seriously after experiencing some life crises' he hadn't anticipated that knocked the wind out of him. But much of what followed distressed me greatly and I felt betrayed. Our love affair was over.

One of the first pieces I read involved his decision to turn kosher which he thrusts upon his wife without preparation in an Italian restaurant where they were planning to order shrimp. They had been living for years as left-wing middle of the road Jews in Manhattan, and while his decision to become kosher didn't bother me in the least, something about his tone did. It carried within it an entitlement masquerading as tolerance that I sensed his wife picked up on though she said nothing of the sort. It seemed he had already taken the reins in their future negotiations regarding how they would live as Jews, as well as how their children would be raised.

There was a piece in Tablet magazine he wrote on his admiration for Ted Cruz whom he saw as a 'covenantal' kind of candidate reminiscent of an Old Testament figure whose time had not come yet, but surely would. He flies to Texas to visit Cruz and they go to a shooting gallery to practice. Both are proficient with guns. I learn that Leibovitz learned to shoot in Israel, where he was born, from his father who was a bank robber who spent years of Leibovitz's growing up time in prison.

He attacked in multiple articles the 'wokeness' of the left wing, and trampled transgender people, while ignoring feminism, abortion rights, and gay rights too.

His attacks seemed to grow more intolerant; almost hostile and condescending and seemed to contradict the 'we are all in this together' vibe he created for us so beautifully in his book about the Talmud. His definition of together seemed to be growing smaller by the minute. As was my patience for him. He speaks about having trouble finding a shul in Manhattan that isn't more concerned about the Democratic Party than God. He writes "I feel lost—homeless—in the landscape of American Jewish institutional life." He goes on tirades about how the lack of respect for 'traditional' values has created problems for our children and continues to degrade their

academic proficiency. He attacks Dr. Anthony Fauci for defending his proud lifelong representation of science. I was lost wondering where the other Liel Leibovitz went; the one whose book I had just read.

It's hard to know what makes people change into unrecognizable versions of their earlier selves. This year, Naomi Klein has written a book about someone with her name whom she is often mistaken for, who has crossed over to the dark side and now aligns herself with all sorts of conspiracy theories that challenge reasonable discourse. She has embraced fictions over facts and is certain of her righteousness and its exclusivity. I feel Leibovitz is now operating on a similar and dangerous track. I wished I understood why he has chosen to do so. He seems to have forgotten important concepts like accepting whether people choose to believe in God or not. Like acknowledging the world is unfair and we must help those at the bottom. Like conceding that we all have inherent biases. His trash talk seems to be making a mockery of the Talmudic masters he claims to revere.