**A Rabbi’s Guide to As a Driven Leaf**

How to raise deep questions

and translate Talmudic tales

to our own age and idiom

**by Rabbi David J. Wolpe**

*As a Driven Leaf* is a novel of Talmudic times written by the foremost pulpit rabbi of his day, Milton Steinberg. It tells the story of Elisha ben Abuyah, the apostate known in the Talmud as Acher—“other.” Steinberg portrays Elisha not as an evil man bent on denying his heritage, but as someone who is motivated by a search for truth and for love. In our own world we understand that doubts about Judaism often arise for those who are seeking, just as Elisha is in *As a Driven Leaf*. In addition to being a gripping story and giving us a peek into the world of the Talmudic rabbis, Steinberg’s tale proves an effective catalyst to begin discussion about the modern Jewish world and its challenges.

I have returned to *As a Driven Leaf* throughout my life, for two reasons: As a rabbi it enriches my understanding of our tradition because it brings us inside the lives of our sages. Even better than a conventional biography, I feel I “know” Akiba from the depiction in these pages, and feel similarly familiar with other characters that Steinberg develops. And as a searching person, *As a Driven Leaf* reminds me how ancient are the questions of faith, how many ways they can be legitimately approached, and how powerful for all of us are the different answers our faith provides. It is a book that, like all the best literature, grows with us, and I find myself reading a different book today than I read in my twenties.

There is also a kind of “practical rabbinics” aspect to this book. It is clear from the first sentences that we are reading a book written by a pulpit rabbi. Steinberg’s reading raises questions that are central to the everyday life of the congregation: families in crisis, good and evil, the position of men and women in society and religion, secular learning and sacred learning, and how to stay within the bounds of tradition in a modern age.

*As a Driven Leaf* also asks us the question of what we can forgive, and what God forgives. Guilt is always a struggle for sensitive souls, and the novel provides a lot of material for discussions of culpability and of fate. In the end the question of whether we can ever be too far-gone for *teshuvah* (recalling that Elisha hears a heavenly voice telling him he cannot be redeemed) could itself be a High Holiday sermon or discussion. Is there anyone you, or God, can never forgive? In the course of discussing the novel, the themes of *teshuvah* and sin can bring congregants back to the Mishnah and Maimonides, discussions of what can and cannot be forgiven. The story appears to say that Elisha cannot be forgiven—the *bat kol* says so—and yet Rabbi Meir seems to forgive him. Perhaps as long as Elisha is Acher he cannot turn back, but could he return as Elisha? There are many possible homiletic answers, but surely the question of *teshuvah* resonates throughout the novel.

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*As a Driven Leaf* helps rabbis raise the deep questions of translating Talmudic tales into our own age and idiom. Below are some suggestions, along with readings that may help.

1. **The Interplay of Secular and Religious Forces**

As rabbis we struggle with the question of how much we should preach from the Torah and how much from the Internet and the newspaper, from literature and philosophy and science, and how to intertwine these sources. We are expected to know about our own society as well as sacred texts. The same questions are manifest in the life of Elisha. Of course he, perhaps to our great discomfort, chooses to abandon the rabbinic world to become educated in secular learning.

Famed Talmudist Saul Lieberman devoted much of his life to the question of how Hellenism and Greek influences made themselves felt in Jewish Palestine, and is remembered, in part, for two books on this subject. He pointed to the similarity of Rabbi Ishmael’s *middot*, which we recite in the prayers each morning, to Greek laws for explicating texts. Similarly, as modern scholarship has strikingly shown, the Passover seder incorporates many features of the Greek symposium. From this we can see that the rabbis did share with the surrounding Greek culture certain intellectual approaches. But interestingly, with all the Hellenism surrounding the rabbis, and with so many Greek terms found in the Talmud, the eminent scholar of philosophy Harry Wolfson pointed out long ago that not a single Greek *philosophical* term endures in rabbinic literature, and the rabbis never ask the sort of abstract questions so beloved of the Greeks, such as “What is justice?” preferring instead to render the law in specific situations. The rabbis stayed far from a systematic exploration of Greek ideas. You can introduce these facts to begin a discussion: How much of modern Judaism owes its origin to non-Jewish sources? Is our Jewish life—our worship services, daily practices, our entire approach to Jewish culture in the modern world—a compromise with secularism?

Since for Elisha the question was philosophy, we can also note that philosophy for Jews was generally reactive—Philo to the Greeks, Sa’adyah to the Karaites, Maimonides to the Arabic Aristotelian tradition. Why did the rabbis not ask philosophical questions and what might that teach of Judaism today? Is it because of the Jewish emphasis on *mitzvot* and the primacy of practice over issues of discourse and debate over concepts?

1. **The Role of Women in Jewish Tradition, Life, and Law**

The contrast of the courtesan Manto with the wife Beruriah gives us the chance to discuss the position of women throughout Jewish history, and today. In the Bible strong women are prevalent, but in the Talmud they recede into the background. Many years ago Theodore Friedman wrote an article suggesting that the decline of the position of women in Judaism from the biblical to the rabbinic period was due to their low status in the Roman Empire. Who indeed has higher status, Beruriah or Manto? In our age, the expanding role of women in the society around us has been accompanied by an expanded role of women in Jewish life. We can consider, with our congregants: How has the changed position of women affected our Jewish lives? What role has it played in the revitalization of Jewish life we see around us? Is there more learning, more practice, and more Jewish awareness because now we are blessed with women rabbis and cantors, congregational presidents and movement leaders?

In the unsympathetic portrait of Elisha’s wife we can discern some of the strains that women were subject to in traditional positions. We may be more sympathetic to Deborah’s anger over her husband’s independence of mind and social nonconformity than Steinberg’s first readers fifty years ago. In what ways has our understanding of her dilemma changed?

1. **The Boundaries of Acceptable Discourse and Debate**

The story of Elisha ben Abuyah, and Steinberg’s interpretation of it, is of great interest to anyone who has studied rabbinic literature. Elisha is the “wicked son.” Some Talmudic anecdotes make him more sympathetic and some less. In our own age, people are sometimes read out of the tradition for their political views on Israel, or LGBT rights, or other subjects, as well as for their religious views. On social media, we hear that this view or that is beyond the pale of acceptability. Public shaming has become a matter of great controversy. What are the boundaries, and what should they be, of acceptable discourse?

How did the rabbis themselves interpret the story of Elisha to support their efforts to keep the community within the orbit of their influence—to discourage them from going outside the tradition? To reflect their own concerns? The way Elisha’s story was shaped to serve the rabbi’s developing concerns with authority and community can be seen in Jeffrey L. Rubenstein’s pages on Elisha in *Talmudic Stories*. There you will also get a picture of how Talmudic stories are composed and can follow how Steinberg weaves those strands to construct a narrative. For example, the way in which the Talmud (JT *Chagigah* 2:3) depicts Elisha as using his halachic erudition to ensure that the Jews break the law, or drives young people away from the study hall and religious training into a profession. Or the Talmudic claim that each time Elisha stood up “heretical books would fall out” from under his cloak (BT *Chagigah* 15 a-b). It enables us to ask anew—does sending children to university drive them away from our tradition? Many campuses are unsympathetic to Jewish causes and beliefs. Moreover, universities are secular institutions with an inbred suspicion of religious commitment. Is our concern essentially different from the rabbis’? Are we too concerned that engagement with the world inevitably leads to a certain decline of Jewish commitment and observance, as well as the ever-present prospect that our children, part of a much larger community, may not marry other Jews?

1. **Jewish Power in the Modern World**

Elisha’s age was riven by the question of accommodation with versus rebellion against Rome. Some groups preached accommodation with Rome, and others, as we see in the novel, open rebellion. It is a pivotal moment in Jewish history when the choice of rebellion proved disastrous. Steinberg’s portrayal of Jewish zealots reminds us that the revolt ended at Masada and catastrophe for the Jewish people. It opens a conversation about the strategies Jews have used to survive and even about the strategies of the modern state. Can we negotiate successfully with our enemies? Do we resort to military confrontation too quickly in the assumption that reasoned accommodation is impossible? The questions of Masada, and the Holocaust—powerful events in our history used as paradigms—are ever alive to us. Should we turn to these stories to guide us, or are they too rooted in their own time and more liable to mislead than to offer wise counsel?

Jewish power is a reality in our day far beyond what the rabbis could have anticipated. How would the characters in the novel react to a Rome (America?) sympathetic to Jewish power? How would they react to a State of Israel, one which is in fact economically and militarily powerful?

1. **Rabbinic Authority**

In a book where Elisha must choose between intellectual masters, what does the sages’ reaction to Elisha tell us about rabbinic authority? Even in the last century people’s sense of obedience to rabbis has changed. Once in America authority figures held great sway, from sports heroes to judges. Now, just as we distrust politicians and business leaders to be wise and altruistic, deference to rabbis has declined. There is less willingness to trust the word of prominent people in all areas of life—politics, religion, and “expert” commentary are all under constant question. Is that a healthier atmosphere than a time when authority had more sway? In what areas should the rabbi retain authority, and what uses of rabbinic authority are legitimate? Does the rabbi have a greater insight into the politics surrounding Israel, questions of marital and personal life, etc.?

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All of these questions and more are provoked by this story of faith and heresy, family and forgiveness. As community leaders we are asked to help people understand these questions, even if we cannot arrive at definitive answers. Part of the book’s enchantment is that we are not alone, not in our own day, and not in Jewish history. Struggle has forever been a part of our people’s journey. That is why *As A Driven Leaf* has enchanted generations of readers. By engaging in discussion we can see that its themes continue to resonate on many levels—historical and contemporary. It asks us to think about the kind of Jews we are and the kind of Jews we wish to be, and reminds us that our ancestors, in their own age and idiom, asked the same questions of themselves.

***Further readings***

Friedman, Theodore. "The Shifting Role of Women from the Bible to the Talmud," first published in Judaism, Vol. 36, No. 4 (1987).

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*Mishnah Yoma*, chapter 8.

Rubenstein, Jeffrey L. *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.

Wolfson, Harry Austryn. *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Volume I*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962.

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