EDITORIAL

Libraries reflect the spirit of their times and places. On the intellectual map of modern Europe many Judaica Libraries are to be found, far too many to take into account in this brief presentation. This issue will focus on ten libraries, sorted in alphabetical order according to their authors. We tried to get a representative picture of different kinds of libraries to be found in Europe, from large State collections and University libraries via rabbinical seminaries, congregational libraries, bigger and smaller institutional libraries and private collections. A. Boeckler, H. Hyams and D. Hulbert will shed light on the history and special collections of Leo Baeck College Library in London and its recently acquired private collection of historic Jewish children's books. M. Boockmann depicts a very special book in the library of the Hochschule für Jüdische Studien Heidelberg, Germany. Y. Domhardt describes the library of a Jewish congregation in Zurich, Switzerland, which became one of the important Judaica libraries in Europe. P. Figeac will describe the fascinating history of the internationally important Berlin State Library. E. Kalousová gives us insight into the development in the new Eastern Europe by describing the Kabinet Judaistiky of Palacký University in Olomouc, Czech Republic. B. Outhwaite reveals which texts he would save in case of a fire in the Taylor-Schechter Genizah Research Unit at Cambridge University Library. P. Salinger describes the Hebrew Collection at the School of Oriental and African Studies Library in London. The British Library of course must not be left out, so Ilana Tahan tells its history. There are also famous manuscripts and important prints in Oxford and Piet van Boxel introduces the Bodleian Library and the library of the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies. These are only ten out of so many interesting Judaica Libraries in Europe and it is a pity that we could not include more, for example the Rachel Network in France, the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana in Amsterdam, the library of the Jewish Studies Institute in Vienna, and many others. However, we hope to raise a greater interest in the stories and different characters of Judaica libraries in today's Europe.

Annette Boeckler

The second part of this edition addresses a number of issues to do with interfaith dialogue and in particular the interface between religion and society. This year saw the celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the annual Jewish-Christian Bible Week. Founded at the Hedwig-Dransfeld-Haus in Bendorf, Germany, under the guidance of the Haus’s director Anneliese Debray, the Week came into existence because of the fortuitous arrival of some young rabbinic students from Leo Baeck College. The impact of their presence led to the transformation of what was a Catholic Bible study week into a new
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experiment in dialogue, through the shared study of Biblical texts, which gradually defined itself over the following decades. When the Hedwig-Dransfeld-Haus closed, the conference moved to Haus Ohrbeck in Osnabrück where the fortieth anniversary was celebrated this summer. The theme of the Week was the Book of Leviticus and we publish in this edition a short introduction to the topic, given by the Editor, and three of this year’s lectures. Christiane Thiel looks at the political implications of the Book from the perspective of a Protestant theologian raised in communist East Germany. Professor Erich Zenger is the most celebrated German Catholic Bible Scholar who has done pioneer work in the relationship between Jewish and Christian Bible exegesis, in particular as the coiner of the term ‘First Testament’ as a better designation than ‘Old Testament’ for the Hebrew Bible. Professor Marc Saperstein, Principal of Leo Baeck College, examines the way the text of Leviticus has been used in sermons from mediaeval to modern times. Though not lecturing at this year’s conference, Rabbi Howard Cooper is a regular participant and we are pleased to include his study on the Scapegoat phenomenon based on his reading of Leviticus 16. To mark the anniversary we invited Professor Hans Hermann Henrix, recently retired Director of the Episcopal Academy of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Aachen, to reflect on the current state of Catholic–Jewish relations in terms of approaches to the Bible.

The other programme that developed at the Hedwig-Dransfeld-Haus over thirty years ago is the annual Jewish-Christian-Muslim (JCM) Student conference. The lectures delivered there are marked by a personal approach to the given topic, reflecting the deeper level of engagement and experience of the participants. (As a rule, no one is asked to lecture who has not attended at least one conference in the past.) Precisely the richness and unexpected dimensions of these encounters are reflected in a paper from this year by Rabbi Gloria Rubin.

Much media interest has followed the writings of Richard Dawkins in his polemic against organised religion and belief in the existence of God. Rabbi Jonathan Romain collected sermons by rabbinic colleagues from the progressive movements in the UK in a booklet entitled God, Doubt and Dawkins. In his paper he explores the arguments in defence of a religious perspective. From a very different sociological perspective Konrad Pedziawiatr argues for the significance of religious communities in developing civil society. If the articles in this section of the journal operate within the familiar terms of religious discourse, the John Rayner Prize essay by Judith Rosen-Berry opens up radical and challenging questions with her exploration of the possibilities of a Jewish ‘Queer’ Liberation Theology.

A number of book reviews and poems round off this edition.

Jonathan Magonet
LETTER TO THE EDITOR

18th October 2008

Dear Jonathan Magonet,

I wonder if I may be allowed to add a small note to the article by Lord Peter Millett on 'Isaac and Iphigeneia' in your 07/2 edition. In that article he comments on the Akeda [Gen XXII] yet misses, perhaps, the most intriguing element of the story; indeed the element that more than anything else differentiates the Biblical and Hellenic texts and this in a way that not even Erich Auerbach in his seminal essay brings out. For this we are indebted to Maurice Blanchot.

There are four elements in the famous sentence 'Take now thy son, thine only son, namely Isaac, whom thou lovest' and each is critical to making sense of the whole. The first element which Kierkegaard emphasised is the question of infanticide. What can we think of a patriarch who commits the worst of all possible ethical sins, the murder of his son? (the murder of a father or even of a daughter, horrible as they are, being less startling in the ancient world than that of a son). This is the ethical dimension which the reader has to deal with.

But Maurice Blanchot brought out another more fundamental facet; which we might call the metaphysical. In saying 'thine only son' the text gets involved in a paradox (and not the first or last in this story). Abraham had earlier been told that the birth of Isaac to Sarah when she was beyond the age of bearing children was miraculous. Abraham had been told by God and thus believed that Isaac would be the father of the Jewish race; that his seed would be as the sand on the seashore and the stars of the heavens thus the very justification of Isaac's existence would be his survival at least long enough to have offspring. Of course it was not impossible for God to repeat the miracle but Abraham was not to know this and had been given no hint of it. More to the point we are given no hint of it in the text. If Isaac had died on the altar on Mount Moriah there would be no Jewish race. Thus, in sacrificing Isaac, Abraham was putting into question the very faith that he was heeding in obeying God's command. God was risking that Abraham would doubt his faith (in respect of believing God's promise regarding Isaac's offspring), the very faith that was pushing him to sacrifice Isaac.

Thus what is demanded of Abraham is not only the sacrifice of his son but the sacrifice of his trust in God itself; that the son is the future of God on earth; [L'Espace Littéraire p.65 trans p.61]. This is emphasised by the additional 'even Isaac' as the name itself means 'he will laugh' emphasising the
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miraculous nature of his birth. 'And Sarah said, God hath made me laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me'.

And then, finally, the tear-jerker that makes it all come alive: 'that thou lovest'. This puts all the rest in the shade; the first time the word love is used in the text. It is the textual density of the Elohist that still challenges the reader today and it is this challenge that is at the core of Jewish thinking.

Yours Truly

Dr David Pollard