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A Former Catholic Dances With the Torah

For Jews, the people of the book, sacred text is more than law; it is our friend.

By Meir Soloveichik

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A Torah scroll in Berlin, Aug. 18.

PHOTO: MICHAEL SOHN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Stephen Dubner, a co-author of “Freakonomics,” is the son of Jewish parents who converted to Catholicism and raised him in their newfound faith. Mr. Dubner’s 1998 memoir, “Turbulent Souls,” recounts his later return to Judaism. His turning point came when his then-girlfriend suggested that he visit a synagogue. Mr. Dubner did so reluctantly, and on arriving instantly regretted the decision, surprised by “how little it felt like Church,” and feeling “like an intruder, perhaps an imposter.”

Then the Torah came out of the ark. Suddenly, Mr. Dubner writes, “The air itself seemed to grow lighter, easier to breathe.” As all in attendance hurried over to kiss the scroll bearing the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, he did likewise. “A resonance, a

gratefulness, a relief, blistered its way inside me: It is the *book* they are venerating here.” Mr. Dubner today has a Jewish family. His son, Solomon, is named for Mr. Dubner’s father, who went by Paul. His rediscovery of his roots began with a synagogue experience: “The way a Jew greeted the Torah, as though it contained everything he would ever need, everything that had ever been known or could ever be known.”

The Torah scroll is the most sacred object of Jewish life and the centerpiece of its Sabbath service. Every week it is escorted from the dark. A portion is read aloud in the synagogue, and the scroll is reverently returned to its place. On the next Sabbath, we pick up the text where we left off; and this weekend, on a holiday known as Simchat Torah, or “The Joy of the Torah,” we achieve the annual completion of the scroll.

What Jews celebrate on this day is not only that the Torah is completed, but that we can begin it again. While Christians often call their reading of scripture “Bible study,” Jewish parlance refers to “learning Torah.” It’s not a review, but a constant search for new insights. “One cannot compare,” the Talmudic rabbis reflected, “one who has learned one-

hundred times to one who has done so for the one-hundred and first.” The biblical books contain everything we could ever know.

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The night of Simchat Torah is usually one of the most raucous of the Jewish year. Jubilant songs are sung, and dancing suffuses the sanctuary as the Torah scroll is passed from Jew to Jew.

It can surprise outsiders that Jews would dance with their law and that a book of revelation could inspire such seemingly irreverent joy. In the 17th century, the London socialite Samuel Pepys came across a Simchat Torah celebration and wrote: “I never did see so much, or could have imagined there had been any religion in the whole world so absurdly performed as this.” Centuries later Harvard theologian Harvey Cox was more appreciative, describing it as a “gamboling with God.”

That we dance with our scrolls indicates that, for the people of the book, sacred text is more than law; it is our friend. When we finish reading the scroll, we ensconce our beloved Torah in what may seem to be a “last dance”—but then suddenly, unable to tear ourselves away, we begin reading again.

Given the social distancing mandated by the current pandemic, this will be a Simchat Torah unlike any other. In Israel, currently mired in an intense lockdown, many synagogues will be closed. Around this side of the world, whatever dancing takes place will be muted. Nevertheless, the fragility of life we’ve experienced in the past months allows us to appreciate better what the Torah means to us. The pandemic has made us understand what we often took for granted: how the ability to gather weekly in synagogue and study the Torah together is one of our greatest gifts. And we better appreciate how, in the face of life’s trials, it is the Book of Books that sustains us.

Strikingly, this point about Jewish learning was made by one of America’s most insightful Catholic thinkers, who experienced a moment that mirrors Mr. Dubner’s revelation in a synagogue. A decade ago, Charles Chaput, then archbishop of Philadelphia, visited the study hall of New York’s Yeshiva University, where hundreds of students spend much of their day learning Torah. Archbishop Chaput returned to church to deliver a homily about what he saw. He said he realized how “the Jewish people continue to exist because their covenant . . . is the foundation and glue of their relationship with one another, with their past, and with their future. And the more faithful they are to God’s Word, the more certain they can be of their survival.”

Mr. Dubner and Archbishop Chaput, former and current Catholic alike, discovered the heart of our faith. When all else fails, it is the Torah that sustains us. We know that now more than ever. This year, what is usually a jubilant song on our lips will become a clarion call in our hearts.

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