## Book Review

***Letters to a Buddhist Jew***
*Reviewed by Richard G. Marks*

Akiva Tatz and David Gottlieb, ***Letters to a Buddhist Jew*** (Southfield, MI: Targum/Feldheim, 2004), 302 pages, ISBN 1-56871-345-2, hardcover

The previous volume of this journal offered a review of ***Beside Still Waters: Jews, Christians, and the Way of the Buddha*** (Wisdom Publications, 2003). In the book's section titled "Jewish Voices," seven Jews tell personal stories of how they discovered significant and often life-changing insights in the teachings and meditative practices of Buddhism and how they imported those insights into the framework of their lives as Jews participating in Jewish communities. The editors of the book, who value such cross-religious experience, followed those stories with an essay by Rabbi Arthur Green, a distinguished academic, communal leader, and expert in Judaism's "spiritual writings." Green does not condemn these Jews for learning from another religion, but he blames himself and other teachers for not speaking "the right spiritual language" that would have drawn them to Judaism's "pathways" before they sought spirituality elsewhere. Yet, writes Green, Jewish spiritual traditions are inherently difficult to approach, since Judaism is a highly intellectualized tradition requiring knowledge of Hebrew and a lengthy education in its texts and practices (235). He therefore sympathizes with Jews who seek spiritual riches in Asian traditions but wants to "welcome these seekers home." He invites them to "join with us and enrich us," and he believes that "our shared Jewish life is richer" for the experience of Jews who have "returned to Judaism by way of the East" (235-36).

Now Feldheim Publishers has issued ***Letters to a Buddhist Jew***, a book on the same subject but devoting most of its pages to the arguments of a rabbi, Akiva Tatz, who, unlike Green, finds absolutely no value in a Jew's seeking spirituality outside of Judaism. Tatz argues that Judaism is home to all the spiritual practices found in Buddhism and that Judaism's doors open into a fuller world of reality than Buddhism knows.

Rabbi Tatz, a physician, lecturer, and author of five books, including ***Living Inspired: The Thinking Teenager's Guide to Life***, and ***Anatomy of a Search*** (all published by Feldheim and Artscroll, two publishers of "Orthodox" or "traditional" titles), speaks out of a thoroughly traditional education in the Lithuanian mold (289), particularly as interpreted by his beloved teacher, Rabbi Moshe Shapira (9). His correspondent, David Gottlieb, a poet, playwright, civic activist, and member of a Conservative synagogue, had found "a spiritual resonance and sense of purpose" in Zen (288), the first spiritual awakening of his life (11), and had taken lay ordination. He writes to Tatz with fifteen questions revealing his grave disappointments with Judaism in general and Orthodox Judaism in particular.

These questions may be grouped around three main issues. Gottlieb challenges basic Jewish theology. He thinks he gains a direct and immediate experience of ultimate reality through Zen meditation, but he has never experienced God and finds it difficult to believe in an active, concerned God who issues commandments, especially in the face of the Zen notion of the inherent emptiness of all things. Jewish theology maintains a notion of a self responsible for performing commandments and seeking future goals; whereas Buddhists maintain that no self ultimately exists and that recognition of this truth will decrease suffering; from a

Buddhist viewpoint, therefore, Jewish theology seems to increase suffering. The doctrine of Jewish chosenness separates Jews from other people, but Buddhists learn to view everyone as interconnected. The supernatural revelation at Mount Sinai is unbelievable "myth," in contrast with the life of the Buddha, a human sage, which is credible history. Gottlieb also questions the functionality of Judaism's traditions. If Judaism does contain real spirituality, it hides it beneath arcane and impenetrable laws and commentaries that numb the mind and deaden the heart. Judaism is "confoundingly inaccessible." Finally, Gottlieb challenges Jewish religious life. Orthodox Judaism seems irrelevant to the modern world and spiritually vacuous, whereas Zen exhibits lively spirituality, "openness and awareness and compassion." He fails to find either joyfulness or practices of meditation in Judaism—both of which he has discovered thankfully in Zen—and he finds many Jewish rituals "arrogant, bizarre, and war-like" (13-18).

Rabbi Tatz's long response to these questions is the most comprehensive discussion of Buddhist ideas that has come out of traditional Judaism in our time. Unlike Maimonides' quick dismissal of Hinduism and Judah HaLevi's tirade against it in the Middle Ages,[1] Tatz's approach is to reason gently and patiently with Gottlieb, using his brief sketches of Zen ideas as a backdrop for wide-ranging, if not always pertinent, presentations of Jewish concepts, practices, and leaders. (Indeed, most of the ideas in ***Letters*** can be found, phrased in similar form, in Tatz's previous books, especially ***Living Inspired***, published in 1993, and ***Worldmask***, 1995.) ***Letters*** starts off sounding like a dialogue, with the second and third chapters containing a series of letters in which both parties reply to each other point by point, but this is quickly replaced by twenty-five chapters consisting solely of Tatz's discourses, concluding with another brief exchange. Although Tatz's surface tone is respectful, he lets drop some disparaging comments—for example, that Jews are drawn to Buddhism mainly because it is exotic or it is popular (32, 43)—and offers a general theory that denigrates Buddhism as merely human (rather than revealed) wisdom dependent on Jewish sources. According to this idea, framed as an exegesis of Genesis 25:6, the biblical Abraham sent the gift of his human wisdom to India where it then became the foundation of both Hinduism and Buddhism (45-46).[2]

Tatz's portrayal of Judaism looks in some ways a lot like Gottlieb's picture of Zen. Abraham was a courageous iconoclast like the Buddha (46), and the young Moses left his comfortable home when he perceived undeniable suffering in the world outside (47); Moses then became a great exemplar of humility, self-negation, and silence (266). Indeed, the knowledge that comes out of silence is the most important kind of knowledge in Judaism—a transcendent and inexpressible knowledge attained by the faculty called "the inner eye" (260-63). Yes, Jews do meditate when they pray, which involves a three-stage process of self-transformation that makes one conscious of one's desires and then sublimates them within the higher Will of God (237-47). Judaism has a communal form of meditation, too, called Shabbat, through which Jews enter an eternal present beyond normal consciousness (151). Tatz speaks often of self-negation, emptiness, humility, a "consciousness void of ego"; many Jewish rituals, such as the festival of Sukkot and the act of bowing in prayer, aim at annulling the self (184, 68). Judaism has a "system" of self-discipline and morality such as Buddhism's Noble Eightfold Path; this Jewish system takes the form of commandments and training in self-discipline and morality (***Musar***), which together teach (in words taken from Gottlieb's description of the Buddhist path) "right thinking, right speech, right action, compassion, discipline of sensuality, limited use of intoxicants ... detaching, conquering delusion" (44). Like Buddhists, Jews too recognize that the world is

"empty"—in the sense that everything is an emanation of God; since "nothing exists except He," no being exists apart from God and all are part of an interconnected Oneness, separate and yet One (169-72). Also like Gottlieb's Buddhism, Judaism is countercultural, opposing the noisiness, shallow materialism, and egoism of a "neurotic" modern culture (140, 185, 265). Thus, the practices and ideas that Gottlieb values in Zen, as he has described them, are "already there in Judaism" (78, 296), "are basic in Judaism" (19). "Many Jews have gone to Buddhism," writes Tatz, "because they are unaware that Judaism contains the elements that they have found so appealing in Buddhism" (19).

But Judaism goes beyond this common foundation of similarities to offer a higher path to human fulfillment, joy, and truth. Thinking that Buddhism seeks to eradicate emotions and personality, Tatz uses the metaphor of "elevation" to describe the main difference in Judaism's approach. Self-negation in Judaism does not mean living without feelings, motivations, and one's own identity, but redirecting all of these into the service of God, subsuming one's own will under that of God's (102-3, 117-18). One "burns with motivation"[3] to serve. The Jewish concept of joy also differs from the joy that Gottlieb experiences in meditation. Tatz hints that Gottlieb's joy must be escapist or unrealistic in a world in which nearly everyone continues to suffer. Jews do not try to end their own suffering, and they even engage in actions (apparently the commandments) that increase their suffering. But they are "building the world," and their pain and selfless sacrifice here will blossom into an indescribable joy in the eternal world coming after resurrection. The joy-with-suffering which Jews experience in this world derives from their anticipation of the reward for their hard work and faith in the goal to be achieved.[4] Conversely, the main cause of pain and suffering is despair at being separated from God and the future world (224-35). Judaism also avoids the error found in Buddhism of seeking a spirituality based on physical asceticism. Tatz asserts that Judaism differs from all other religions not in its wisdom or morality but in its central concept of sanctifying the physical (210). Rather than rejecting and ignoring the body, Judaism tries to elevate it, to connect the spiritual and the material, which is accomplished mainly through the commandments of the Torah (207-14).

This Torah is "cosmic in its depth and scope." Buddhism carries its disciples to "the outer limits of the Universe," but "for all its acute insights into the nature of reality," it is confined to "the realm of human awareness" and cannot carry them "beyond the Universe to its Source," as can the Torah (46-48). The Jewish relationship with God and the Torah constitutes the most decisive difference between Buddhism and Judaism. Buddhism offers human wisdom about the physical universe; Judaism offers revealed knowledge, joy now and eternally after death, and transcendent reality. Only Torah can lead human beings beyond this world of confusion and doubt, called *alma' disfeiqa'* in Kabbalah (132).

The heroes of Tatz's letters are nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ashkenazi sages such as the Hafetz Hayyim, the Mir Yeshivah, and Rabbi Simha Wasserman. Absorbed in the world of Torah (164-65), they exhibit utmost humility, live content with their poverty (164), experience "surpassing serenity" (64), and live their lives simultaneously on two planes, the practical world and the higher spiritual realm. Their followers, "Torah-true Jews," struggle against the world's scorn and that of other Jews, to remain faithful to the difficult obligations of the Torah. Modern American forms of Judaism, in contrast, have no real connection with Torah (251); they, not Orthodoxy, are responsible for creating Jewish Buddhists. Exalting human self-sufficiency and permissiveness, compromised by modern Western culture, they offer convenience and "popularity," allowing Jews to follow their egocentric desires.

"You will have to exert yourself," writes Tatz, "you will have to seek out that narrow niche where the real Torah is found" (163). Tragically, however, most Jews remain ignorant and "asleep" (150, 161) because they refuse to accept the high task of learning Hebrew, devoting many years to learning texts and practices, and undergoing guidance by a true sage. This is why Jews like Gottlieb have failed to find Jewish spirituality, and never having studied authentic Judaism, they then search for spirituality elsewhere.

Tatz therefore cannot agree with Arthur Green that Jewish Buddhists encounter legitimate problems in discovering spirituality in Judaism or that, if they do return to Judaism, they in any way "enrich" it. Gottlieb and the Jews of ***Beside Still Waters*** have simply strayed from the path that leads most directly and effectively to deep spirituality, self-transcendence, human fulfillment, and God's presence shining through the "emptiness" of the world.

The apparent story in ***Letters to a Buddhist Jew***, implicit in the arrangement of the letters, is the gradual success of a rabbi in overcoming the resistance of a Jewish Buddhist, until the rabbi has finally won and the Buddhist is returning to Judaism. Except that what Gottlieb really says at the end is this: "Although I do not understand or unquestioningly accept everything you say, I see the work and the wisdom in it" (298). Gottlieb is not even sure that, returning to Judaism, he will follow the form that Tatz considers authentic (287). Nor is it clear that any significant exchange of ideas has occurred between a Jew and a Buddhist in this book. For one thing, as Tatz freely acknowledges, he has learned very little about Zen from Gottlieb and the two readings that Gottlieb sent him (8, 12). After the first few chapters, Tatz mostly repeats what he had already written in previous books a decade earlier. Now it is interesting that Tatz's language in those books, coming out of Kabbalah and ***Musar***, includes terms like self, ego, emptiness, self-negation, and silence that appear to be speaking about the same reality as Gottlieb's representation of Zen Buddhism. ***Letters*** looks like a dialogue, and Tatz seems to be answering Gottlieb's questions. But I often had the sense that both men were talking past each other in foreign languages. Tatz, in particular, fails repeatedly to grasp Buddhist concepts. For example, Zen Buddhists do not aim to separate the mind from the body—terms that become a meaningless distinction as one progresses in understanding (36). Nor do Zen Buddhists seek to eliminate their own suffering by ignoring the pain of others (34); they help others and lead them to see a reality beyond self. Indeed, universal compassion is a central theme of Buddhism, especially in the Mahayana tradition. (Theravada Buddhists assert that meditation and mental training lead to the Sublime States of ***karuna*** and ***upekkha***, compassion for the suffering of others while maintaining equanimity.)[5]

"God," "revelation," "commandments," "resurrection" are all highly problematic terms and mean nothing to a Buddhist without a painstaking step-by-step construction of possibilities that may come out of her or his experience and reasoning.[6] Gottlieb begins to explain this to Tatz, but Tatz goes on speaking in the same way as before. Tatz appeals to a logic of medieval conceptualization, of Hebrew word roots and hidden numerical meanings, and of biblical archetypes and exegesis, and to supposedly common human experiences—none of which are plausible within another set of assumptions, experiences, and modes of reasoning. Tatz never even defines "God" or relates the word to Gottlieb's experiences in Zen practice. The distance between the two sides becomes starkly apparent when Gottlieb quotes his teacher. She writes, for example, "All phenomena are created in our minds by imputation or concepts, all phenomena arise co-dependently and all phenomena are just this, just perfect, just now." Or quoting the thirteenth-century

Zen teacher Dogen: "The sound that issues from the striking of emptiness is an endless and wondrous voice that resounds before and after the fall of the hammer" (284). Tatz honestly replies that such statements appear "inscrutable." The discussion between Gottlieb and Tatz can go on at such great length (nearly 300 pages) only because Gottlieb has translated Zen into a language that Tatz feels he understands. On the other hand, Gottlieb also seems unable to take up Tatz's words and logic and make them his own.

This book therefore stands, in my mind, as an example of a well-intentioned effort to communicate across religious divides that fails for lack of effort to understand the Other and to speak in ways that touch the Other. As difficult and time-consuming as it is to learn the archetypal and analogical reasoning of traditional Judaism in its own language and idiom, or to learn to pray or to read Talmud in the way that Tatz urges Jews to do—so are the worlds of language, practice, and concept in Zen (and in other varieties of Buddhism), equally daunting to enter and understand. What Gottlieb and Tatz have accomplished, however—despite their failures to hear each other or say anything really new to each other—is the initial listening, the respectful tone, the work of caring about someone you disagree with, of wrestling with *alma' disfeiqa'*, this world of confusion and doubt.

**Notes**

[1] See my chapter, "Hindus and Hinduism in Medieval Jewish Literature," in *Indo-Judaic Studies in the Twenty-first Century: A View from the Margin,* ed. Nathan Katz (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[2] For an analysis of the history of this exegesis in Jewish literature, see my article, "Abraham, the Easterners, and India: Jewish Interpretations of Genesis 25:6," *JIJS* 3 (2000).

[3] *Worldmask* (Southfield, MI: Targum/Feldheim, 1995), p. 215.

[4] In *Worldmask*, Tatz writes, "Because the effort and pain here build joy there, we can feel some of that joy, intimations of cosmic and eternal joy, in the work as it is being performed ... the only joy in this world" (p. 186).

[5] I thank my colleague, Timothy Lubin, for his advice concerning my statements about Buddhism in this paragraph and for his editorial suggestions throughout.

[6] See my essay, "Teaching Judaism in Thailand," *Approaches to Modern Judaism*, Vol. 2 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984), pp. 75-91 on the problems of using words such as "God" and "holiness" meaningfully when speaking with Thai Buddhists.