

editing job to result in a belabored, stilted and artificial style, the opposite is the case. In *The Seder Night*, the running commentary is integrated and unified; it is easy to understand and a delight to read.

Many of the motifs of the Rav, the themes that he kept reminding his students of, as well as his analytic method, come through in this Haggadah accurately and consistently. For example, his great openness and his *"ani ma'amin"* in the ultimate victory of the truth of the Torah are captured in the following paragraph, as he explains the Haggadah's attitude towards the *rasha*:

*The rasha, the evil child, challenges us, saying that Yezi'at Mizrayim no longer has any significance. However, this is not so, as the great story of our tradition can encounter any opposition or challenge. One may emerge victorious even with the radical atheist if one uses the proper terms and the proper categories. The Torah that God gave us is all-inclusive, all-embracing, all-pervading. It has the answers to all problems, even though we cannot always decode its language. The Torah is not afraid. We do not have to retreat into isolation or solitude because the street is "contaminated." To retreat means to lose.*

*"Tehillat nefilah nisah, the beginning of defeat is flight," the Talmud says (Sotah 44b). The enemy will conquer when the army begins to withdraw, to retreat, to flee. On the contrary, we face the rasha. The Torah did not say to throw the rasha out of the house. Rather, engage him in debate and show him that he is wrong: "blunt his teeth." Talmud Torah requires bringing the one who got lost, the child who was alienated, back into the fold. He or she is a rasha now, but there is potential in the rasha.*

One of the well-known dichotomies in the Rav's halachic analysis is that of *"ma'aseh hamitzvah"* versus *"kiyum hamitzvah."* The former is the "dry" act that the Jew is commanded to do, while the latter implies not the simple act of the mitzvah but rather the feeling and experience of it.

The Rav, looking at the mitzvah of *"sippur Yetziat Mizrayim"* with his keen eyes, shows how Rambam created a new halachah by adding one letter to a traditional text:

*Rambam says that on Passover*

*night, we should each act like a free person and demonstrate our freedom. "In every generation one should show himself—le-har'ot et azmo—as if he had been liberated from Egypt" (Hilkhot Hamez u-Mazzah 7:6). Rambam added the letter "he" to the usual formulation: not "li-re'ot et azmo" ("one should see himself"), but rather "le-har'ot et azmo" ("one should show himself"). Li-re'ot means to experience, to feel, to re-experience the slavery and the Exodus. It should not be an ancient event, lying at the dawn of our history and having no relevance for us. I am to re-experience it. Memory, in Judaism, means not just to remember technically, but also to relive the event. Le-har'ot adds another dimension: the re-experiencing should be so dynamic and so intense that it breaks through and somehow expresses itself in action. If we are overpowered by an emotion, we cannot suppress it; we cannot control ourselves. We will sing and dance; we will cry and shout; we will shed tears and embrace people. The experience of Yezi'at Mizrayim on the night of Pesach should be so overpowering, so overwhelming, that we should act it out.*

The late Rabbi Walter Wurzburger had occasion to participate in the Rav's Pesach Seder. This is how he described it:

*Witnessing how the Rav ZTL recited Hallel and Nishmat Kol Chai during the Seder left an indelible impression upon me. No one who has observed him on such an occasion could think of the Rav ZTL as a cold, detailed, purely intellectual talmid chakham. Having been exposed to the intensity of his religious passion, I can appreciate why he always spoke in such glowing terms of the joy Yom Kippur brought to him, and why he saw in the Rambam's last chapter of Hilkhot Teshuvah, with its reference to the passionate love of G-d as well as the two concluding chapters of the Guide, the very essence of Rambam's religious interest.<sup>2</sup>*

Alas, we cannot participate in the Rav's Seder. But we can still learn from his Torah, albeit indirectly. We can study this gem of a Haggadah, internalize its lessons and plumb its depths. If we do so, I am certain that this coming Pesach, *haba aleinu letovah*, will be uplifting and exalted.

## Notes

1. Nat Hentoff, *Boston Boy: Growing Up with Jazz and Other Rebellious Passions* (Philadelphia, 2001), 26-31. David Landes, a friend from Teaneck, New Jersey, provided me with this reference.

2. Michael J. Bierman, ed., *Memories of a Giant: Eulogies in Memory of Rabbi Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, zt"l* (Jerusalem, 2001), 346

## Everyone's Got a Story

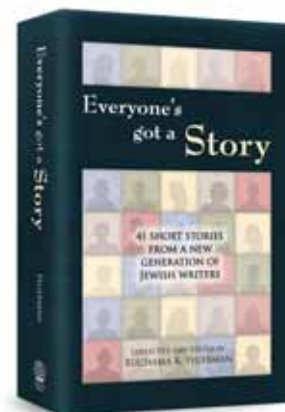
*Edited by Ruchama K. Feuerman*

Judaica Press

Brooklyn, 2008

412 pages

**Reviewed by Varda Branfman**



**E**veryone's Got a Story, an anthology of creative non-fiction and short stories, has more than the customary stamp of its editor, Ruchama K. Feuerman, who culled these forty-one pieces from writing workshops she has led over the years. Many of them were midwived by Ruchama, and unlike the usual background presence of the editor, Ruchama, author of the novel *Seven Blessings*, has a highly visible role in the book as she introduces each section with writing directives and mentoring wisdom.

Full disclosure: Ruchama and I were members of a writing workshop that was active about twenty-five

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years ago in Jerusalem. (A get-together of creative writers in the English language in the middle of Geulah was quite an anomaly, and I wouldn't be surprised if it was the first of its kind there.)

*Everyone's Got a Story* is Ruchama's second book, and it reflects her immersion in teaching creative writing during the last fifteen years. Some of her students who contributed to the book have advanced degrees, while others never finished high school. Contributors include computer programmers, psychotherapists, lawyers, social workers, teachers and stay-at-home moms. A few of the authors have many publishing credits.

Ruchama introduces each section of the book with writing tips and advice about how to get over the humps

*with its own set of problems. A story set in the principal's office will naturally differ from a story placed in the Himalayas. Look at your list of settings and choose the one that says: Write about me. I need you to tell my story. Please.*

Ruchama's anthology has a sprinkling of gems that are well crafted and focused. Marina Gelfand's "A Family Portrait" tells her story of being newly observant and yearning for her brother, with his three earrings, to "see the light." Dvora Zuckerberg, a retired computer programmer, is masterful with her spare prose when she writes about her memories of the war years in Siberia.

Every reader will find his or her own favorites. I especially like the story of the Santa Cruz vintner who lives alone in a clearing surrounded by red-

mediocre to the sublime, and this collection is no exception. It's unfair to expect uncompromising literary excellence from an anthology of this kind, where so many of the authors are not "seasoned writers." A number of the stories trail off at the end instead of being fully developed; they might have achieved a greater depth given the time to mature and ripen. With a push, these pieces could have gone further to more interesting places, but instead they pull up short as if the writers ran out of time and energy. But while we can't expect the anthology to reflect the literary mastery of a collection by Dovid Zaritsky or Isaac Bashevis Singer, the book succeeds in proving what it set out to prove: that every person can write his own story, and he can write it well.

## In all of these stories, the subtext, what is being said underneath the words and inside of them, is the subject of God consciousness.

encountered in the writing process. She explains that sometimes you have to trick yourself into creating:

*Write in haste, revise at leisure. Give yourself a topic and write about it for ten minutes straight, without pausing to evaluate or make a single correction....If what I'm writing is composed in haste, no one expects it to be perfect or amazing. Therefore, I'm free to write sloppily, foolishly, sentimentally. Ironically, in such a state, we produce our most exciting—albeit raw—material.*

When a writer feels hard-pressed to come up with something interesting, with grist for the mill, there are always writing catalysts to jumpstart the process. This anthology-plus-writing guide is peppered with "exercises" to inspire a piece of writing. For example, here's one exercise that tickled my fancy and made me want to sit down and write:

*Make a list of places you've been. Dentist's office, New Hampshire motel, labor room with Jacuzzi, chicken coop in Chofetz Chaim Kibbutz, facing thirty fifth-grade boys as a substitute teacher in a classroom, Kotel on a winter midnight. Notice how "setting" and "situation" sound so similar, because a setting so easily shifts into a situation, bringing*

woods. Told in his own words as a running monologue, the story appeals to me; it describes his pleasure and pride in his wines and the homespun beauty of his home in what I might have chosen as one of my alternative lives.

Then there is the compelling tale about a beloved grandmother who survived the Holocaust and now endures the ravages of illness in a hospital room as her oldest granddaughter tends to her needs and tries desperately to keep her alive.

"Sometimes she spoke about the camps, about the hunger and the friendships," the author, Yael Zoldan, writes. "She was fifteen when they got on the trains. Just fifteen, my age! How did she live? 'We did what must be done to survive.' Wordlessly, I willed her—*Do it again. Whatever you did, do it again.*" Zoldan narrates her story with a lyrical force that turns her prose into poetry. "I sat beside her, guarding, afraid that some dark thing would steal her away. She slept fitfully, moaning in her dreams, and I crooned, 'Stay with me. Stay with me.'"

By its nature, an anthology can be uneven in terms of the quality of the work gathered. The individual pieces might run the gamut from the

What is it that characterizes the distinctly Jewish voice running like a thread through this book? In all of these stories, the subtext, what is being said underneath the words and inside of them, is the subject of God consciousness. A Jewish writer who is Torah observant is always searching to reveal God in the events of her life or to share the experience of His hiddenness.

Each story in this anthology contributes to this process of trying to understand how God works in our individual lives and in the world at large. The stories accomplish this with varying degrees of success, depending on how far the particular author is committed to getting to the heart of the matter, how precise she is in her craft and how well she sustains her focus through to the end.

Besides the uniquely Jewish subtext of God consciousness, the Jewish writer also has a certain responsibility to consider the ramifications of what she is launching into the public domain. Words are powerful; they can be uplifting and even life giving, but they can also be potentially harmful, with subtle boundaries that a Jewish writer should not overstep. There is such a thing as commitment to one's artistic

vision, but the Jewish writer is also guided by a higher vision of God's central role in the process of all creative endeavors.

In discussing the difficulty inherent in writing about holiness without being vague or resorting to clichés, Ruchama points out the necessity for requesting God's partnership in the writing process:

"If I were to devise a prayer before writing, it would be for some divine assistance to capture the *tzaddik* and *tzaddeikes*, to capture the holy moment," she says. "I see these people and these moments in captivity. We must find the words to release them."

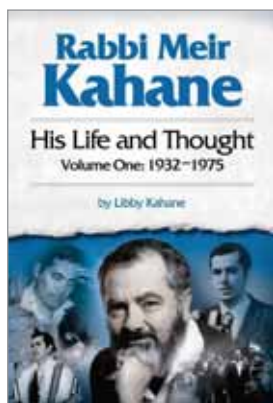
*Everyone's Got a Story* is more than a showcase for developing Jewish writers. It affirms the importance of creative writing to the Jewish world.

## **Rabbi Meir Kahane: His Life and Thought (Volume One: 1932-1975)**

By Libby Kahane

The Institute for the Publication  
of the Writings of Meir Kahane  
Jerusalem, 2008  
746 pages

Reviewed by Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff



Our generation that grew up in the shadow of the crematoria and the glow of the Israeli flag. While I was American born, there were numerous survivors among my

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fellow students. This was true of both my elementary school, Yeshiva Rabbi Israel Salanter of the Bronx, and my high school, Marsha Stern Talmudical Academy in Manhattan. Yet we did not dwell on the past, as we were engaged by the saga of the emerging State of Israel. We sought guidance and direction as we matured: How do we balance out the pain and tears of yesterday with the joy and pride of today?

Many of us were attracted to Bnei Akiva, the major Religious Zionist organization on the North American scene. There, I met and adored one of the most charismatic individuals I would ever encounter. His name was Meir Kahane.

Libby Kahane, the "wife of his youth," has published a meticulously researched biography entitled *Rabbi Meir Kahane: His Life and Thought*. The book is envisioned as volume one and covers the years 1932 through 1975. Libby, possessing a master's degree in library science, penned more than 180 pages of footnotes in addition to 566 pages of text. It is not a critical biography and there is no attempt to analyze the more controversial aspects of Meir's teachings and actions in broader context. I would describe the volume as a scholarly memoir written by a devoted spouse. Reading the volume is to relive the period in which Meir was active.

The young Meir was strongly influenced by the tragic murder of a few of his relatives on the road to Tzfat in 1938, when they were returning from a family wedding in Tel Aviv and were ambushed at close range by Arabs. Another influence on Meir was his father, Rabbi Charles Kahane, who supported the Zionist Revisionist movement. Both Zev Jabotinsky and Peter Bergson were visitors at the Kahane Flatbush residence. Meir's formal education included elementary school at the Yeshivah of Flatbush in Brooklyn, and high school at the Brooklyn Talmudical Academy. He continued his studies at the Mirrer Yeshiva by day and at Brooklyn College by night, earning his rabbinical ordination and his bachelor's degree. He later attained both a law degree from New York Law School and a master's degree in political science from New York University.

During this period Meir was active in Betar and afterwards in Bnei Akiva. In 1954, he became the *mazkin* (director) of Greater New York's sixteen Bnei Akiva chapters. I was active in a chapter in the East Bronx, New York, and Meir was a frequent guest at our activities. In a letter to Libby, Naomi Klass Mauer, an editor at the *Jewish Press*, wrote that Meir had made a deep impression on her in Bnei Akiva:

*There was a fire in his eyes, and there was a magnetism about him. He had a beautiful voice....Many of the songs he taught us...were about Israel, and I still sing some of them today. When he spoke...about Israel, there was magic. He was captivating. You could hear a pin drop during his stories. And I always felt that if it wasn't Shabbat, and he told us to follow him to Israel at the conclusion of a story, we'd get up and go (p. 28).*

We were excited when Meir became the rabbi of the Howard Beach Jewish Center in 1958. Located in Queens, New York, the synagogue was traditional rather than strictly Orthodox. I followed his new responsibilities with great interest as I too prepared for the active rabbinate. At the Jewish Center, Meir influenced many of the synagogue's youngsters to adopt a more observant lifestyle. But when he attempted to install a *mechitzah*, many of the key synagogue members turned against him. His contract was not renewed and he soon published an article entitled "End of the Miracle of Howard Beach." This was Meir's first article in the *Jewish Press*, where he continued to write until his murder in 1990.

To supplement his modest income from the *Jewish Press*, Meir purchased a newspaper delivery franchise. Libby described his route in detail and was quite positive about such employment for him. "Finished by 7 AM, he was free to go to the [Mirrer] yeshiva," she writes. But many of those who knew Meir were distressed by this turn in his life. The spiritual leader of a congregation was now a newspaper delivery boy; he had to wake up at 4 AM to distribute the dailies on time. In retrospect, I came to feel that his rejection at Howard Beach influenced the subsequent quests in Meir's life. He