

Marc B. Shapiro. 2015. *Changing the Immutable: How Judaism Rewrites its History*. Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 360 pages, ISBN: 978-1-904113-60-7. (Hardback). UK £24.95 / US \$39.95.

In my Yeshiva University days a part of me had the foresight to purchase Rabbi Marc Shapiro's *Limits of Orthodox Theology*, though at that point I feared I was not ready for the information contained within to contradict my Torah learning and development. My father has always implored me from my youth to question; Shapiro's works enable the questioner through rich and punchy pieces of "data", often included in what I label most unprofessionally as some of the "juiciest" of footnotes. I still cherish that first book and refer to it. It gave a *hechsher* to my often-unformed questions by laying before me a Jewish world that was indeed complex, variegated, and far more

Book Reviews

intriguing than what we typically are exposed to in 21st Century Torah observant communities.

His latest work, on this count, does not disappoint. What is different is the heightened sense of relevancy, of contemporariness - from the very first page in the Preface, displaying graphically, front-and-centre, how Brooklyn Yiddish newspaper *Di Tsaytung* had doctored the now famous image from 2011 of President Obama, Vice President Biden and Hillary Clinton receiving an update on the assault that resulted in the killing of Osama bin Laden. Clinton, as well as another woman, are missing in the newspaper's photoshopped version. Whereas we can only provide conjecture that the reason behind the assault on Osama was due to Obama's having grown tired of name confusions, it is readily apparent that the reason for the equally successful assault on the women within the image was due to editorial zealotry over modesty for the benefit of the newspaper's target ultra-orthodox, hassidic readership.

What makes this book fun is that in most cases, the author meticulously places back the missing pieces of the puzzle to reveal the secret to each mystery caused by censorship. The full picture is often fascinating, and the reasons for the censorship - whether through well-researched and supported conjecture or with clear supplementary evidence - are equally rewarding and enlightening for the reader.

From the footnote on the first page of the Preface, the reader may also learn of a new feature that will be carried throughout the book, namely, the prolific infusion of internet links - particularly blogs - as sources, or for further reading. I would suggest this reflects changing reading trends in general, in much the same way as social media has become the primary source of news for many. As with many blogs, stylistically the reader may feel that there is more of Shapiro's own voice in this work than anything prior.

Shapiro has been a keen observer and commentator on currents running throughout the Orthodox Jewish world for decades. He has witnessed "distortions" in representations of facts that, as a historian, tasked with researching and preserving the truth, he finds irksome - to put it mildly - distortions which demand responses.

These have often come in the form of his Seforim blog posts. For example, in January 2015, Shapiro took ArtScroll Publishing to task for their blatant censorship of part of Rashbam's commentary:

Here we have an explanation from Rashbam that has been discussed and dealt with by some of the greatest Torah scholars

Book Reviews

for well over a century, yet ArtScroll feels that it knows better than all of them and thus has the authority to simply delete passages from the commentary. If that isn't chutzpah, I don't know what is (<http://seforim.blogspot.co.il/2015/01/artscrolls-response-and-my-comments.html>)

These groups and individuals continue to muddy waters that Shapiro has dedicated his life to render clear. *Changing the Immutable* is his response. An accessible book in which the blogs and serious scholars protest. In Shapiro's words:

I was well into this book when the action of *Di Tsaytung* became public knowledge. However, its [wider than usual] discussion, which included commentary and criticism, highlighted for me the need for a detailed investigation of how some in the Jewish world have chosen to rewrite the past to serve the needs of the present (viii).

To some readers it may be possible to view the book as being a somewhat forced collation of hundreds of the combined, fascinating, often horrifyingly egregious and scandalous discoveries of various scholars and/or bloggers at such sites as Seforim and BeHadrei Haredim ("In the Rooms of the Chareidim" - a play on the phrase בחדרי חדרים "in the inner chambers" of one's house), thrown together into oddly selected chapters and tied up by a worn but ever-pertinent, earthy string. For instance, a colleague saw no conclusions drawn from this work of Shapiro's (in contrast to his earlier books) that might require one to read the entire text to absorb. Consequently, *Immutable* becomes a resource, a compendium of data rather than a proper investigation, because it lacks any outcomes. Perhaps the author wished the reader to have the opportunity to be overwhelmed by the abundance of untruth and fiction - but to what end? To encourage the reader to be at the very least uncomfortable with the prevalent practice of censorship, if they weren't already? Further to this we could ask who the audience for this book might be? Dissatisfied *Haredim*? Modern Orthodox at risk of "sliding to the right" and becoming *Haredi*?

I think that Shapiro does his best to acknowledge many valid reasons why censorship may be desirable, certainly from the point of view of Orthodoxy, and he further acknowledges just how complicated that can get. If the conclusion to be drawn is that the reader should appreciate that further study, guidance, and personal reflection is

Book Reviews

necessary on the subject of truth, then yes, the book achieves this goal.

Facts are an obsession of our age. Though many pay mere lip service to the importance of facts, few say that they wish to be lied to by politicians. There exist fact checking NGOs, and fact checking blogs (with or without partisan bias or funding), and the wrestle over the truth in the public sphere is manic - especially over Israel, and especially during periods of great political import such as the lead up to the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Objective reporting is difficult to find.

In the more liberal democracies, there is a disconnect: "The Truth" becomes a right, everyone else's obligation towards us. We do not expect or want a third party determining for us what is real, or sanitising history, and in this fashion we educate our children (see p. 23). Lack of truth is seen as an affront, a violation, yet occurrences are so commonplace that one's directed outrage at any single instance is usually short-lived.

Shapiro is quick to distinguish this view, termed "academic history," from "Orthodox history," which holds an ideological agenda, "designed to instil the proper 'outlook' in the reader. Thus, not only censorship but even outright distortion is permissible, all in the name of a higher truth (10)." Shapiro remarks that while the Western world has moved on from a view of history prevalent among Greeks and Romans as societally educative, Orthodox Jewry has not.

Today, scholars can rapidly share digitised resources such as rare manuscripts as never before. The ease with which a member of the Haredi faithful can find out just how grey the world truly is, is seen to demand a heavy-handed black-and-white response. There are questions that arise from this: who is winning the fight for ownership of truth within Orthodox Judaism - and, as Shapiro asks more deeply in the final chapter "Is the Truth Really That Important?"

In *Changing the Immutable*, Shapiro considers both the many ways of concealment available to censors over the centuries (such as simple deletion, deliberate mistranslations or non-translations, impossible interpretations - often to the opposite intent of the author, superimposition of blank white spaces over text or pictures, re-drawing images of women as men, colouring in "missing" *yarmulkes* on images of males, concealment of authorship, declaration of forgery without evidence, and interestingly, on pages 13-16, concealment through *at-bash* encoding - a simple, last-to-first substitution of Hebrew letters thaw for aleph, shin for beth, and so on), and the many different motivations for wanting to do so - among them, keeping information

Book Reviews

from the masses, modesty, preventing Jews from “sin”, protecting the memory or saintliness of various sages, encouraging certain behaviours by assigning a teaching to someone of greater stature, and most importantly today, ensuring that the historical facts available to ultra-orthodox society match their prevailing internal socio-philosophic views, so as not to lead to confusion or worse, loss of faith in and consequent abandonment of the system.

At the outset, Shapiro promises only a selection of examples of censorship for his investigation, and these are grouped into the chapters outlined below. Here, in the Introduction, the author indicates that this book will be about the truth and its malleability, recalling various examples also noted in previous works, such as Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler’s lifting a sermon directly from Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, without attribution, and Maimonides’ ‘necessary beliefs’ (pp. 24-26).

Within the chapter “Jewish Thought”, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein is recorded as having declared that a commentary on the Torah by famed pietist Rabbi Judah Hehasid “contained heresy”, such as the assertion that some verses of the Torah were post-Mosaic “and could not have been authored” by Hehasid, and that “it was therefore forbidden to publish the work” (p. 56). The prominence of Rabbi Feinstein had the desired effects in seeing the offensive sections removed before reprinting. Much more on this topic can be read in Shapiro’s book *Limits of Orthodox Theology*.

Included in the chapter on “Halakhah” the reader will find reference to the popular Baghdadi scholar Hakham Yosef Hayyim, popularly known as the “Ben Ish Hai”, and his discussion about European Jewish women on the topic of head covering. The report from these women that neither they nor the surrounding Gentile European women cover their hair only appears in the original Arabic version *Kanun al-nisa [sic]*. In the Hebrew *Hukei hanashim* this line is missing, and in the English translation, *Laws for Women* (Salem Books, p. 96), there are ideologically based additions (*Immutable*, p. 109 & 112).

The chapter also deals with the known forgery *Besamim Rosh*, attributed to Rabbi Asher ben Yehiel, among others. Though the work’s intent was the “undermining of traditional Judaism... this was not apparent to all, which explains how the book became accepted by much of the rabbinic world.” The chapter includes examples of cover-ups of subsequent commentary and responsa in which the authors are seen to take *Besamim Rosh* seriously (p. 114). Not wanting their “*gadolators*” to believe that their rabbinic icons were anything less

Book Reviews

than infallible, the historical record is altered by editors to ensure that these *gadols* do not appear to have been “taken in.”

Consider this sample from the chapter on Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch:

When Netzah reprinted the Nineteen Letters in the late 1960s, it was felt that even more text had to be censored. Thus, all criticism of Maimonides, including three whole paragraphs devoted to this theme, were cut out. Here is an example of what was regarded as “acceptable” just twenty years earlier, but had now come to be deemed unsuitable in a book written by a *gadol* such as Hirsch...
...What this deletion means is that the reader of Letter Eighteen in Netzah’s updated translation of the Nineteen Letters will be completely unaware of Hirsch’s strong criticism of Maimonides. This, of course, is the point (pp. 123-124).

In another passage, Netzah deleted Hirsch’s mention of *torah im derekh erez*. “Let us not forget,” writes Shapiro, “that torah im derekh erez was the central value of Hirsch’s life. One can only wonder at the absurdity of trying to keep Hirsch ‘kosher’ by nullifying his entire educational philosophy” (p. 125).

It is in this chapter that the reader will find images and instances of men without head coverings, including the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Isaac Breuer, and Rabbi Leon de Modena. A similar bleaching of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook occurs in the next chapter, where a great number of his *haskamot* were excised from editions of books published after his passing. Associations with this radical thinker needed to be forgotten, for the purity of the flock. What is interesting in this chapter is the number of instances of self-censorship (the reader will find one such remarkable case involving Elie Wiesel early in the book), usually at the hands of son Rabbi Tsevi Yehudah Kook, for fear that readers wouldn’t understand, wouldn’t be ready for, or would attack the teachings and besmirch the teacher. To this day, many of Rabbi Abraham Kook’s manuscripts remain unpublished.

If any chapter should come with an R18+ rating, it is “Sexual Matters and More”. Indeed, one could ask why books (unlike films and video games) are exempt from age categories? Clearly titling a bookstore section “Young Adult” is insufficient if, at age 15, I was required to read a book for school that featured two scenes - one particularly salacious - that I remember being angry about to this day.

The chapter ends with what might be startling to some, especially

Book Reviews

adherents to a brand of Lurianic Kabbalah, penned by Rabbi Hayim Vital. In his personal diary, *Sefer HaHezyonot*, Vital records that the author of popular Shabbat hymn *Ya-h Ribon*, Israel Najara, always used foul language and was a drunkard his whole life, and, while drunk, engaged in relations with other men and a gentile woman. Only with the 1954 publication of *Sefer HaHezyonot* (from Vital's own autograph manuscript) did the name Najara become associated with the story, however (p. 211).

Notable is this inclusion in the chapter "Other Censored Matters" (p. 217):

Unlike other examples of censorship, when it comes to alterations in translation there is an inner crowd and the outsiders. Those who can read the original are allowed full entry to the author's intention. Those who do not know Hebrew, who have not earned their admission, as it were, are regarded by the translator as not worthy of receiving all that the author has to say.

Beyond *Changing the Immutable*, a similar point, in a very different context, is made by Hakham José Faur in his work *The Naked Crowd*, in a right-of-reply to Robert Alter, who dismissively reviewed Faur's work *Golden Doves* that contained what Alter felt was "nothing less than a subversion of Western metaphysics." Faur responds:

The [pejorative] mention of "rabbinic intellectual styles," by someone who can hardly read a page of the Talmud in the original, feels like a bad, ironic joke. It is also indicative of the intellectual integrity of those engaged in the disarticulation of Jewish texts... (*The Naked Crowd*, pp. 51-52)

To Faur, "illiterates" place *themselves* on the outer, as censorship-by-translation seeks to achieve. Faur compares "sloppy and myopic" dissertations about "Torah" by such "conceited scholars" ("the greatest danger to Judaism") to "dissertations about trout-angling by somebody who never set foot outside his native Sahara Desert" (*The Naked Crowd*, p. 53). To Professor Faur, the right to an opinion comes at a high cost of entry – meticulous familiarity with Jewish texts (not ceasing at those written in Hebrew and Aramaic, but including Arabic at the very least, as well) and the generations of culture carried within.

Censorship-by-translation, discussed by Shapiro, manufactures an exclusive club for modern material of far lower import than the Talmud.

Book Reviews

Finally, returning to the matter of the truth, Shapiro records for the reader a breadth of scenarios in which a Jew – according to the rabbis cited – may be sly with one’s words or lie outright. One opinion allows one to say that one is collecting charity for a poor bride-to-be, even if the intention is to assign that money to Torah learning institutions (p. 273). As Shapiro writes:

Fortunately, the opinions noted in the last paragraph are not widely held (at least as far as I know), and they are great examples of how far the slippery slope can carry you once untruths are permitted for a “good cause”. To pick the last example mentioned... [if rabbis permit themselves to abuse the story of the poor bride] then their word will lose all credibility in the eyes of the people. As it is, based on what we have seen... laypeople would appear to have plenty of justification for doubting the veracity of at least some of what their rabbis tell them (p. 274).

Reading this and reflecting upon other factors detracting from the value of the title in our times - such as the churning out of very young communal rabbis armed with both a speedily-gained *semikhah* certificate and a cavernous deficit of life experience to advise congregants on their marriages of 25 years - one may be permitted to feel at least mildly disillusioned.

Shapiro later turns to stories about great rabbis used for educational purposes and inspiring the masses. According to authors cited by him, as long as the teacher’s purpose is for the sake of heaven, one may make up these stories:

...[o]ne can assume that a significant number of the false “*gedolim* stories” that are bandied about are not run-of-the-mill rumours, but were intentionally created in order to inspire people. R. Elyakim Schlesinger reports that a group of Torah scholars actually admitted to him that they invented stories about the Hazon Ish, since they thought the stories would be inspiring (pp. 282-283).

Interestingly, Shapiro records Rabbi Ya’akov Ades’ take (n. 212 on p. 283) that it is permissible to add to stories of rabbis in children’s books, but that it would be theft to do so in books for adults, since adults would not have purchased the book had they known that the stories within were embellished.

Book Reviews

On the reverse side to additions and embellishments, doesn't every father commit a "sin" of omission, after all, when explaining something serious to his five year old daughter? September 11, 2001, the Holocaust, Baruch Goldstein, or even (!) human reproduction - is there any adult who would not leave a great many details out?

I suggest something further than the author: there is a clear difference between adults and children - the former are not immature and undeveloped, requiring the same protection. There comes a point (indeed many, successive points) when adults must be allowed to grow up. What good is the Torah as the blueprint to the universe if we are denied access to true representations of that universe? This leads to the danger of Judaism sliding into obscurity and irrelevance.

Will our children prefer *The Crucible's* flawed, yet honest John Proctor, or will they, as Thomas Putnam, dedicate their adult lives to insist on a very different account of history, happily sacrificing the reputations of society's Rabbi Natan Slifkins and Rabbi Saul Liebermans for what they are convinced is a "greater cause"? Would they rather continue their casual consumption of *Soylent Green*? Gladly work their way up the ranks of the Party in Orwell's *1984* to control the future by controlling the past?

Or would they refuse to be lied to, and instead join *The Truman Show's* determined protagonist on a journey to once and for all exit, however cautiously, a false utopia come-what-may, with the aim of building towards the real messianic era?

Rabbi Shapiro's latest work is a necessary one, remarkable in style and content for its suitability to our age. Where censors disable and disenfranchise, Shapiro equips the reader with data with which to make sense of things. It is unsurprising that, as my father encouraged me to question, so this book is dedicated to the author's children. Like all of his work, it deserves to be shared and talked about far and wide.

Endnote

1. "A portmanteau of "gadol" and "idolatry," the word "gadolatry" refers to a perceived phenomenon in Orthodox Judaism where select rabbinic leaders are treated with a degree of deference or reverence, bordering on worshipping the person of the rabbi himself." (Rabbi Josh Yuter, Yutopia: <http://joshiyuter.com/2011/08/17/random-acts-of-scholarship/gadolatry-in-orthodox-jewish-discourse/>)

Michael Sassoon