

An Experience of *Teshuva*: a personal reading of *Jewish Dharma* by Brenda Shoshanna and *Merton and Judaism* edited by Beatrice Bruteau

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Ideas don't change people, it's people that change people.' I heard these words from Fr Richard Rohr OFM several years ago. They struck me at the time as having a great deal of truth in them. But over the years their truth has become more significant for me. This has been particularly true in the past two or three years as I have begun to discover the beauty to be found in Judaism.

Let me say now that this essay is very autobiographical and somewhat confessional. Let me begin then with the confessional bit. Until quite recently I must admit that my view of Judaism and the Hebrew scriptures was very dismissive. Although I studied the Hebrew scriptures as part of my seminary training for the priesthood I very much saw it in terms of 'Old Testament'. It was a fascinating account of the historical development of the Israelite people, their understanding of God and their relationship with him. But, I believed that all that was totally superseded by the coming of Jesus. Looking back on it now I am ashamed to admit that even after forty years as a priest my view of Judaism was little different from the Christian attitude down through the ages which created an atmosphere which allowed for the persecution of the Jews

and eventually for the horror of the Holocaust. Although I avidly read the Conciliar Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*) from the Second Vatican Council I was more interested in what it said about Buddhism than in its statements on the relationship between the Roman Catholic church and Judaism.

So, you may ask, what changed me? I think over the years I had met a few Jewish people who impressed me personally; it never went further than that. Through her published diaries and letters I was impressed with Etty Hillesum who was a victim of the Holocaust in the Second World War. I can also recall how a Jewish person very much befriended and encouraged me during my early days of Zen training. There was a further significant moment when attending a consultative weekend on the Contemplative Mind in Society. The opening session on the Friday evening was begun with a short liturgy led by a Jewish Rabbi. It included a breaking of bread and sharing wine over which words of blessing had been said. On the Sunday afternoon I concluded our meeting with a Catholic Eucharist, and the prayer of blessing I said in taking the bread and wine was almost word for word

the same as the rabbi had used. Although I never really followed it up I was struck by this evidence of our common heritage.

Singularly, the most significant encounter though was my meeting with Brenda Shoshanna. It occurred in the context of my Zen practice and I was immediately struck by her whole approach to life. I discovered that her warmth and friendliness emerged from her experience of growing up in an Hasidic Jewish family. She had developed a most profound love of the Torah from sitting at the feet of her grandfather. Her stories about growing up in this environment had a deep effect on me. This was reinforced when she kindly gave me a copy of her book *Jewish Dharma*. The book came alive for me and informed me not so much about Zen practice but about Judaism. Interestingly she dedicates the book, amongst others, to her grandfather with these words:

And a special dedication to my grandfather, Moshe Snitofsky, whose love of God, Torah, life, and all people was neverending. I always see him singing in his *sukkah* under the grape vines, shining with joy.

The whole book clearly draws deeply on her experience of growing up in an orthodox Jewish family which is also for her reinforced by her practice of Zen, as she says in words that resonate well with my own experience:

The practice of zazen creates an atmosphere of love, acceptance, respect, clarity, and kindness—and not only illuminates one's

original teachings, but provides a deeper experience of them. And conversely, one's religion of origin brings a dimension to zazen practice that is beneficial, grounding it in the reality of who you are and where you've come from. (p.3)

I am especially impressed by Brenda's love of the Torah which is so clearly revealed in chapter two. Here she addresses the seeking of understanding through study of the Torah and Zen Koan practice. From her Jewish teaching she learns:

Sometimes the stories you encounter in Torah seem obvious, but you must look deeper. You then turn to allegorical interpretations and secrets embedded within words and images. You visualize different letters and use them as doors to contemplate deeper meanings. Torah study shows how to break limited, restricted thinking. Torah study becomes a means of altering your consciousness, a form of meditation. For Torah students, the entire world exists in layers, hidden by veils. As they study, the veils part and true understanding arises. (p.44)

The end of each chapter adds an important dimension to the book. It provides practical guidelines and steps on how to relate her ideas to one's own life. Chapter three therefore, on self-discipline, suggests using a *mitzvah* each day, (a *mitzvah* is usually translated as a good deed).

Take note of the areas in your life where you feel enslaved, areas where you find it difficult to move forward freely.

See what actions you normally take. Choose new actions in those areas, based on a *mitzvah* and see what takes place.

A very important and simple *mitzvah* is to say the *Shema* twice each day, in the morning and evening: 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.' This prayer takes only a moment, but it is the basic prayer of all the Jewish people, one that is said from childhood on. During all religious services, the moment it is said, it reverberates deeply within and brings you into a different state of mind. It is said that when people were dying in the Nazi camps, this prayer was often on their lips. (p.75)

Following this she goes on to suggest ways of incorporating other 'transforming' *mitzvah* into one's daily life. The important factor that emerges is that all of these are orientated towards one's relationships and encounters with others. She deals with these by using both her grounding in the Jewish faith and also her Zen practice.

Quite a number of years ago I came across a circle of Christian families who had had such overly busy lives that it undermined their ability to create close family relationships. To deal with this they decided that their family at home would implement the Jewish Sabbath. In my conversation with them they gave glowing accounts of the effect that this had on both their individual lives and their relationships in the family. I have yet to try it myself but Brenda makes a similar point in chapter four:

No matter which denomination you belong to, Sabbath is a day of holiness (*kedushah*) for all. It creates a space and time that tran-

scend the material world and its usual concerns. The Sabbath is a time of homecoming. As Sabbath takes place on a weekly basis, it becomes impossible to stray too far, either from your external or internal home. Everyone comes home for Sabbath and stays together for twenty-four hours. This can be both comforting and unsettling. We all wish to leave home and find our own way. For six days in the week you can do this, but then on the seventh day you are called home. Without the constant returning, you could easily forget who you are, what you here for, who it is you need, and who it is who needs you. It becomes easy to drift unanchored in an unruly world. (pp.91-2)

The rest of the book deals with aspects of our whole orientation towards life. It draws not only from the richness of the

'...Sabbath is a day of holiness for all... a time of homecoming...'

Jewish faith but also the Zen tradition, both of which emerge from the author's own personal experience of each tradition. It speaks eloquently of the need for and the power of silence, the dangers of attachments and the need to let go. She outlines ways of discovering one's own true self and inner truth. As we all live in relationship to others she suggests ways of making peace in the family and the world as well. This is further developed for

building relationships, whether in marriage, or in the single life. Her own description of how this has occurred in her own family are perhaps what makes her suggestions so convincing. All she says is always done with such enthusiasm, humour, gentleness and encouragement. This was a person whose words and actions make one want to know more about her Jewish faith that is the very foundation of her life. Perhaps the Jewish dimension is best summarized in these words by her:

Torah provides an ideal image, a prototype of the perfect person to aspire to be. Interestingly enough, however, there are no saints described in Torah. The gap between the ideal and the reality of human nature is always recognized. The greatest leaders in Torah are filled with human failings. Even the greatest prophets are shown grappling with conflict, anger, and sorrow. It is the struggle between the ideal and our human responses, emotions, and tendencies which strengthens and purifies us. (p.274)

We can turn now to the second book to be considered. It also makes a significant contribution to the expansion of my own appreciation of the Torah and the whole Jewish faith and scriptures. Here one notable fact that emerges from this exploration of Merton's encounter with Judaism is his personal relationships with Abraham Heschel and Schachter-Shalom. It is interesting to note also the influence of Martin Buber who with Abraham Heschel were important influences on

Brenda Shoshanna.

Merton and Judaism is a collection of papers delivered at a conference by seventeen scholars. Their examination of Merton's encounter with Judaism is examined in some detail. Interestingly the scholars don't always see things in quite the same way though. Two central papers for me were James Carroll's on *Teshuva* and William Shannon's overview of 'Merton and Judaism'. *Teshuva* in Hebrew is a call to openness and change. It is a dynamic word, not just calling for a 'one off' change but a willingness to be constantly open to change. This seems in accord with that famous saying of Cardinal Newman 'to live is to change and to change often is to grow'.

Carroll begins by describing Merton's friendship with Rabbi Heschel:

Merton's friendship with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was so pivotal. This is a story well known to all of you, and made powerfully clear by the work of Professor Edward K Kaplan of Brandeis. Rabbi Heschel was the first great figure in my own awakening to the reality of Jewish religion as a living religion beyond the dominant Christian caricature of an Old Testament religion. The Old Testament religion, we were effectively taught, was properly left behind, except as a mere foreshadowing of Christian truth. (p.48)

Carroll then goes on to describe how Heschel had influenced himself:

Heschel was a living contradiction

of the dominant Christian assumption about Jewish obsolescence. And for that matter, about Jewish victimhood. Heschel was the opposite of what we Christians had been taught about Jews...

... Moreover, and even more surprising, Rabbi Heschel then began to teach me about my own faith, my own belief in a God whose search for me, in his phrase, outweighs my search for God. It seemed outrageous of me to have to admit it, but with Heschel I discovered that the God of my Christian faith is nothing but the God of Israel. It shames me to admit it. So Heschel was pivotal to my growth in Christian faith and he became an object, still with Merton, of my morning meditation. I was far from alone in this. And I would say that knowing of Merton's regard for Heschel was a key part of what enabled me to open my parochial, supersessionist mind to such a magnificent witness. (p. 49)

Reading this has drawn me to read two of Heschel's books for myself, namely *Man's Quest for God* and *God in Search of Man*, and I can attest to the fact that Heschel is having the same effect on me as he did on Carroll.

This article also encouraged me to revisit *Nostra Aetate* once again. (Interestingly the successive versions of the Declaration are printed as an appendix of *Merton & Judaism*). Carroll points out Heschel's concern as an observer at the Second Vatican Council to see the

gradual weakening of the new relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jews called for by Pope John XXIII. Carroll notes that with Pope John now gone, there was a marked change in the tenor of the debate by the Church Fathers on the proposed document. The old 'contempt, ambivalence and resistance' had returned and each successive draft was more watered down than the previous one.

Heschel approached Merton and asked him to help, whereupon Merton wrote an urgent letter to Cardinal Bea asking him to ensure that the Council does not miss 'this opportunity for repentance and for truth'. Interestingly we are told that when *Nostra Aetate* was finally debated by the Council Fathers it was Bishop Karol Wojtyla from Poland (later to be Pope John Paul II) who spoke most strongly in favour. (It is interesting to be aware of the present concern among many about the present Pope Benedict XVI's advancement of the cause for canonisation of Pope Pius XII whose support for the Jews in the light of Nazi victimization is questioned). Incidentally many of the papers at the conference point out the significant impact of the Holocaust and the influence it had on Merton's response to his Jewish correspondents. In fact in his final summary of these points Shannon writes:

Merton's involvement in the issue of Jewish-Christian relationships went far beyond the personal concern he had for his friends or even the affection he had for the Hebrew Scriptures and religious perspective those Scriptures embodied. More than these, it was generated by the deep appreciation he

had of the religious significance—for Jews and Christians—of the horrible and terrifying eschatological event of the Holocaust. Nowhere does he express this more poignantly than in a brief line, written during Easter week of 1964, in his journal, *A View of Conversion*: 'Can one look attentively at Christ and not also see Auschwitz?' (p.65)

Shannon's final reflection also points out that it was not unusual in Merton's life for him to be influenced very much by the personal affection and personal concern for his friends and this was particularly shown in the incident above.

On a much broader note Shannon suggests that these events and contacts brought Merton to a greater maturity where he could no longer accept church pronouncements uncritically. Further, when such pronouncements seemed to conflict with what he experienced and felt others were experiencing, he was not hesitant in stating his views. Indeed, it seems to me that it is not stretching the truth to see in Merton's willingness to state divergent views the beginning of what has become an important reality in the life of the Roman Catholic Church (though it was scarcely even named in Merton's day); namely, the right to dissent from certain 'official' teachings of the church authority without forfeiting one's claim to be a true and authentic Catholic. (p. 65)

Again these words from such a renowned Merton scholar and theologian have given me much pause for thought, to the extent that it has challenged and formed my own position in the postmod-

ern climate of today.

I found that the whole collection of papers included in this book drew my attention to a number of quotations from Merton which are still both challenging and encouraging. I am particularly struck by Merton's letter to Heschel in September 1964 where he writes, 'My latest ambition is to be a true Jew under my Catholic Skin' (p.110). The reference to 'Catholic Skin' provides the theme for Paul Quenon's final poem in the book.

Under My Skin

I've got to get to
The good Jew
Beneath my Catholic skin.
I've got to get to
The sincere humanist
Beneath my
Jewish skin.

I've got to get
Beneath my
Humanist skin
To my original face.

The good Jew
Finds my Catholic skin
Unbelievable.

The sincere humanist
Finds my Jewish skin
Superfluous.

My original face
Finds all skins

Magnificent. (p.339)

It was interesting to be reminded of the account of Merton's dream as recounted

in his journal as early on as February 28 1958. This, and some successive quotations, included here from the journals written in the 1950s also clearly show the interest and openness that Merton had towards Judaism, which was more than a little unusual for a 'good Catholic Trappist monk'.

On the porch at Douglaston I am embraced with determined and virginal passion by a young Jewish girl. She clings to me and will not let go, and I get to like the idea. I see that she is a nice kid in a plain, sincere sort of way. I reflect, 'she belongs to the same race as St. Anne.' I ask her her name and she says her name is Proverb. I tell her that is a beautiful and significant name, but she does not appear to like it—perhaps the others have mocked her for it.

When I am awake, I rationalize it complacently. 'sapientiam amaviet quesivi eam mihi sponsam assumere' (I loved wisdom and sought to make her my wife)—Sophia (it is the sofa on the back porch ... etc, etc.) no need to explain. It was a charming dream.' (p.113)

Merton's subsequent reflection on this somewhat erotic dream sequence takes a more theological line that is indicated by his journal entry for March 4, 1958:

Dear Proverb,
For several days I have intended to write you this letter, to tell you that I have not forgotten you. Perhaps now too much time has

gone by and I no longer exactly know what I wanted to tell you—except that though there is a great difference in our ages and many other differences between us, you know even better than I that these differences do not matter at all. Indeed it is from you that I have learned, to my surprise, that it is as if they never even existed. (p.115)

We are again reminded that even earlier in his journal, October 24, 1957 Merton startlingly writes:

One has either got to be a Jew or stop reading the Bible. For the Bible really cannot make sense to anyone who is not spiritually a 'Semite.' The spiritual sense of the Old Testament is not and cannot be first an emptying out of its Israelite content. The New Testament is the fulfilment of the Old, not its destruction. (p.115)

I must say that these words have caused me to stop dead in my tracks and look at my own way of reading Scripture with guilt and a resolution to change my whole attitude. Because we share much of our Bible with the Jewish faith community I find myself particularly drawn to revisit the sacred scriptures, especially in the light of the paper by Karl Plank on Merton and Buber's reading of the Bible. Plank opens his paper by quoting first from Thomas Merton and then from Martin Buber:

...(these passages) are somehow claiming that there has been a

breakthrough of the ultimate word into the sphere of the human, and that what the Bible is about is this breakthrough, recorded in events, happenings, which are decisive not only for the Jewish people or for the disciples of Christ but for (human) kind as a whole. (p.127)

This follows with a quote from Martin Buber:

All (the Bible's) stories and songs, all its sayings and prophecies are united by one fundamental theme; the encounter of a group of people with the Nameless Being whom they, hearing his speech and speaking to him in turn, ventured to name. (p.157)

In conclusion I hope that I have indicated clearly that there is more than enough meat in the papers presented here for all to read and to reflect upon in a way that brings about a transformation or, to use the Hebrew word, Teshuva, for an ongoing desire for change. All in all it calls for a realisation of one of Merton's oft quoted statements:

If I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., in the end I will find that there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic: and certainly no breath of the Spirit with which to affirm it.
(Quoted on p. 95 of *Merton & Judaism*)

For me this is not really a question of more academic study of the question, but for those who need more academic research on the topic then there are twelve pages of books listed as 'Resources for Further Study'. For me the book drives me to deepen my own experience that I may become more of a living witness to the power of love so ably discerned in the lives of Merton and his Jewish friends and by the Jewish friends I have made and those I hope yet to meet!

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