Twice Told Tales

Ginzberg's 'Legends of the Jews' Returns

By ALLAN NADLER

Hassaynim Nahman Bialik, the great bard of the Jewish national revival, said of his friend Rabbi Louis Ginzberg, "Miyom she-hikarti, aha-vati" — "From the day I met him, I loved him." At first blush, the Hebrew poet's love for the prosaic, exacting scholar is startling. Both in temperament and by vocation, these men could hardly have differed more. What explains the affection of the creator of stirring nationalist hymns and love poetry for the author of dry scholarly works with forbidding titles such as "Yerushalmi Fragments From the Geniza" and "Geonica"?

The key to Bialik and Ginzberg's friendship is the shetel of Volozhin. Both men received their higher Jewish education at the famed Yeshiva of Volozhin, the mother institution of the great network of Lithuanian yeshivas, and both deserted the Orthodox world for careers that helped shape modern Jewish culture and learning. At the same time, neither man was ever fully disengaged from the enchantment and influence of Volozhin. Quite the contrary, both Bialik and Ginzberg ultimately engaged in efforts to reconstruct and popularize the vast treasury of rabbinic literature for modern Jewish audiences in Israel and America. Bialik collaborated on the "Sefer Ha-Agada," a thematic multivolume compendium of rabbinic tales, while Ginzberg produced history's most comprehensive scholarly anthology of rabbinic midrash and classical Jewish tales, "The Legends of the Jews."

Mr. Nadler is the Wallerstein associate professor of Jewish studies at Drew University.

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originally published in six volumes plus an additional index volume between 1909 and 1928. Now, happily, they have been reissued in paperback by The Johns Hopkins University Press.

The attempt by Judaica-scholar emigres from Europe to gather the pearls of Jewish wisdom from the sea of rabbinic literature was a major enterprise in the early decades of this century. In Palestine, the project of sifting through the largely inaccessible literature of the Diaspora and rendering it usable for the contemporary reader was viewed as the cultural counterpart to the return of the scattered Jewish exiles. This ambitious literary initiative was known as kinnus, the “ingathering” of the lost fragments of exilic Jewish literature. These fragments served to justify, on the authority of the traditional Jewish canon, the Zionist understanding of the Jews’ destiny and national mission.

In America, too, many scholars were involved in translating, abridging and anthologizing rabbinic sources that would otherwise have remained mysterious to the large majority of American Jews, who were already almost completely untutored in Judaism by Volozhin standards.

While Ginzberg shared the goal of making the ancient Jewish texts available to modern readers, “The Legends of the Jews” was and still is unique in scope, ambition and scholarly depth. Ginzberg culled stories from thousands of works, arranged them in the order of the biblical narrative and translated them into his felicitous German, which was translated into English by a few of his close friends.

The first four volumes of “Legends” are a compendium of classical Jewish wisdom from the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud, dozens of midrashim, medieval kabbalistic and ethical writings and hundreds of other Jewish commentaries. When there were multiple versions of legends, Ginzberg produced a superb synthesis of the rabbis’ tales that captured their common essence.

Ginzberg’s treatment of the life of Abraham will give a sense of his approach. The Bible jumps from Abraham’s birth to his covenant with God, when, at age 75, he is established as the father of God’s chosen people. Nothing is said in the Torah about his childhood, youth or spiritual development, and this scriptural lacuna is an incentive for highly imaginative rabbinic legends. Ginzberg provides 32 pages of fantastic legends that inform us that Abraham’s birth was foretold by a rising star in the East (sound familiar?), that he was deserted at birth by his mother and was sustained by the angel Gabriel (who caused milk to flow from the little finger of Abraham’s right hand), that he began philosophizing as an infant and that by the time he was 20 days old he had already begun to preach his monotheistic convictions to the pagans.

The first four narrative volumes, intended for a general audience, are followed by two volumes — almost 1,000 pages — of astonishingly erudite, discursive notes that cite, compare and analyze the thousands of sources the author used. These include hundreds of Christian sources, since Ginzberg was intent on demonstrating the profound Jewish influence on Christianity. The two volumes of notes help establish “Legends” as arguably the most learned and impressive work by a single author in the history of modern Jewish scholarship.

Ginzberg, who began “Legends” in 1901, just two years after emigrating from his native Lithuania, was largely motivated by the state of Jewish knowledge that he found upon his arrival. To the end of his life, he remained pessimistic about the future of Jewish learning in America and Israel. “I doubt whether we can expect a revival of Jewish learning in the near future,” he wrote in a letter to a young colleague.

Fortunately, Ginzberg’s despair has not been entirely substantiated. While most American Jews lack a sophisticated Jewish education, recent decades have witnessed a surprising rejuvenation of Jewish studies at all levels. This renaissance has created an expanding market in Judaica publishing, a fortunate result of which is the reissue of Ginzberg’s magnum opus. But while the return of “The Legends of the Jews” at the end of the century in which Ginzberg began his work is a happy event, it is unfortunate that — aside from the brief, disappointing preface by Harvard professor James Kugel —
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— the new edition of “Legends” is nothing more than a facsimile of the original. After all these decades, one might have hoped for some evaluation of Ginzberg’s remark-

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able life, his extensive rabbinical training in Eastern Europe, and his long and distinguished career as a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he had an impact on an entire generation of Conservative rabbis.

There is also no attempt at evaluating Ginzberg’s contributions to Jewish learning and his lasting impact on modern scholarship, nor is there a proper analysis of Ginzberg’s scholarly methodology. To the contrary, Mr. Kugel’s foreword presents a misleading characterization of Ginzberg’s work. Though he praises Ginzberg for his unmatched erudition, Mr. Kugel finds fault in Ginzberg’s alleged neglect of the exegetical context of his source material. He complains that “a body of writing that was, at least formally, biblical exegesis, a way of interpreting the Bible, came to be transformed by Ginzberg into works of the imagination, basically oblivious to the scriptural verses that were their original focus and raison d’etre.” How James Kugel, one of today’s most brilliant Judaica scholars, could say this of a work whose greatest achievement was precisely that of restoring thousands of scattered sources to the context of the biblical narrative, is difficult to fathom. Not only is Mr. Kugel’s characterization of the sources as essentially exegetical in nature incorrect — some are, but most are not — but the claim that Ginzberg “submerged the exegetical side of midrash” is belied by the hundreds of notes in which Ginzberg does the very opposite.

What is most disappointing, however, is that “The Legends of the Jews” was not typeset anew. The quality of the reproduction itself is surprisingly poor. And this shortcoming is more than a technical one, since it renders many of the thousands of numbers referring to the endnotes blurry and often indecipherable.

Still, The Johns Hopkins University Press is to be thanked for making this literary treasure available once again. Not only is “The Legends of the Jews,” as Mr. Kugel says in his foreword, “a Jewish classic, something no English-language collection of Judaica, or the ordinary Jewish home, should be without.” Ginzberg’s work also recalls a form of scholarship that has largely disappeared. The person who devoted his entire life to the attainment of such vast erudition through the assiduous mastery of his sources has, alas — in the era of quick access to a worldwide web of information — become a relic of the past.