

CHRISTIANITY CANNOT OUTGROW ITS NEED OF JUDAISM

Dear Chaim,

1 I cannot thank you enough for your daily blessing on my life. Literally: My daily devotions always include a reading from the Hebrew & English of your GATES OF PRAYER (Central Conference of American Rabbis/75 ed.), which is twice quoted in HYMNS OF TRUTH AND LIGHT (5 UCC churches; pub. by First Congregational Church, Houston, TX). Also, other writings of yours....

2 Said hymnal, which is super-PC in banning the biblical pronouns for God, quotes from you [source unidentified] this prayer of profound, wide-ranging compassion:

On numerous occasion I've tried to read this prayer, including for family devotions in our home Christmas Day. I can't get through it without choking up. Faces swim before my inner eyes, a blur of thousands of faces of sufferers whom I've tried to help through this now almost 60 years of ordination. I am awed to have as a friend a man of such compassion, imagination, & poetic inspiration.

WE PRAY FOR

All those whose speech betrays them into misunderstanding
All those who have wrapped themselves in a cloak of humiliation
All those who struggle vainly for attention
All those who shrink with fear at another's touch
All those whose faces we forget from one meeting to the next
All those whose outer awkwardness blinds us to an inner grace
All those who never seem to find a resting place
All those whose ambition exceeds their skill
All those whose minds are clouded or weak
All those who stumble when others seem to fly
All those who bear the burden of broken bodies
All those who wait in pain only for death
All those who wait for news which never comes
All those who are unloved, unloving, alone
All those who having been lifted high are fallen to the dust

WE PRAY FOR THEM . . .

— Chaim Stern, adapted

3 On p402 you say "Let the heritage that has been entrusted to us be secure in our keeping." I trust your loyalty to your heritage, which by adoption is also the historical-spiritual basis of mine as you acknowledge of us Christians at numerous points in GATES OF PRAYER--eg, on 704, you say "Israel gave birth in time to other religions that have brought many to God, but our responsibility continues, for our mission remains unfulfilled. It will continue until the earth is full of the knowledge of the Lord as the sea-bed is covered by water."

4 PROBLEM: In the NEW YORK TIMES extensive report (12.20.98, "Q&A/Rabbi Chaim Stern: A Religious View of Where Cultures Meet") of an interview with you, "the Lord" (the knowledge of whom your religion is commissioned to global extension) is unmentioned. Did you mention him but the NYT dropped him, or did you decide not to mention him (because deity is such a turn-off in secular media), or was it by inadvertence (habit?) that you did not mention him? I'm puzzled. Do you perhaps think that I (in my Thinksheets & in correspondence & conversations with you) mention him too much (driven, as we Christians are by what you Jews initiated, by the "sea-bed" vision)?

5 Your Reform Judaism & my liberal (UCC) Protestantism have had an overreliance on the Enlightenment. Long ago you told me that your Orthodox mother, upon hearing you'd flipped out into Reform, said to you, "Well, I suppose it's better than nothing." (Parallel: When my religious vision began to broaden & deepen, my sponsors, who'd paid my college costs, cut me off.) On p111 of (the copy you gave me) GATES OF UNDERSTANDING (Central Conference of American Rabbis/77), this: "Reform Judaism, with its accent on prophetic ethics, and its optimistic vision of bringing the promise of the Enlightenment to its messianic fruition, was quick to include those theological and ethical readings which accorded with its conception of Judaism as a set of highly developed moral teachings....The result was" that the prayerbook "came to resemble congregational sermonics in which worshippers recited prophetic readings about justice, righteousness and so on, addressing their remarks to each other rather than to God." (Oh, so like, so much like the current UCC prayerbook & hymnal--both depressive of God's linguistic masculinity, as in a letter you told me the latest edition of GATES OF PRAYER is.) Postmodernism, as post-Enlightenment, ain't all bad.

By DONNA GREENE

RABBI Chaim Stern's earlier book was quoted by President Clinton. In his newest book, it is Rabbi Stern, of Temple Beth El in Chappaqua, who does the quoting — showing with the words of others the common themes that seem to transcend time, religion and culture.

The book is "Day by Day: Reflections on the Themes of the Torah From Literature, Philosophy and Religious Thought" (Beacon Press). It is, Rabbi Stern said, his way of bringing together the words of the Old Testament and the bibles of many religions, with poets, scholars and others, organizing the words along themes that relate to weekly Torah readings in synagogues each Sabbath. Collectively, the writers discuss creation, freedom, conflict, love and forgiveness, among other things.

It was his stated attempt to earn forgiveness that apparently drew President Clinton to Rabbi Stern's "Gates of Repentance," the High Holy Day prayer book that he had edited. President Clinton read from the book in September, when addressing a prayer group about the Monica S. Lewinsky scandal and his planned path to contrition.

Here are excerpts from a recent conversation with Rabbi Stern, who has been a rabbi for 40 years and is also the co-editor of "Gates of Prayer," another leading prayer book of Reform Judaism:

Q. Why did you write this new book?

A. I've always been fascinated by the interconnections of cultures on the same themes. And I wanted to show that. There were people who wanted me to do this book only with Jewish sources. That would have, of course, completely negated my vision of it.

Q. So we have Plato, Helen Keller, Jewish sources, quite a mixture of people.

A. Eastern and Western sources, and to me they seem to be sitting side by side quite amicably. Most of the time one reinforces the other. Occasionally, one goes in one direction, one goes in the other; but even then they don't really clash. Of course, I could have chosen passages that clash. But I didn't want to.

What I'm trying to produce are counterpoints, so they're not all alike. They're not all looking at things the same way, but they end up complementing each other. And I myself wrote 300 or so passages. I kind of joined the conversation as well as these people.

In the Talmud you have discussions: "So and so said this," "So and so said, no, you're wrong." And they go on like that for a while before reaching or failing to reach a resolution. The fact of the matter is they



Chris Maynard for The New York Times

Rabbi Chaim Stern in the sanctuary of Temple Beth El in Chappaqua.

lived at different times. We know George Eliot is not a contemporary of mine, but I feel akin to her, which is why I quote her. You have a passage, in the same way, from, let's say, an Eastern source from 700 years ago and a psalm. Yet they're standing side by side "talking" to each other: men, women, East, West, North, South, English, French, Jewish, Russian. I have not created the dialogue, but I'm kind of like the conductor of an orchestra.

Q. Here's a question that is probably difficult to answer in two paragraphs. Do you think people are basically good?

A. I think they are potentially good and potentially evil. I think we have a capacity to be one or the other or a mixture. What we do become is a combination of nature and nurture. I wouldn't presume to guess what percent of each. Obviously, some people are born evil. And some people are made that way, and some have it thrust upon them. And the same way with goodness and even beyond goodness — saintliness.

Q. When you reflect on your faith, your 40 years as a rabbi, how much of an ability do you have to influence people?

A. I think any rabbi, minister or, for that matter, psychotherapist asks that question all of the time, because, of course, we don't get anywhere near where we'd like to get. We don't accomplish what we would like to accomplish. On the other hand, it is amazing and gratifying to discover as one does if you do this long enough that you have influenced people in ways you weren't aware of.

It's an intangible. You can't quantify what you are doing. But there are times when I will find out 10 or 15 or 20 years later things that I said that influenced someone. Someone quite recently wrote me a letter telling me how much I had done for him;

it didn't occur to me. I had been just doing what I was doing. So one accomplishes more than one suspects, I think.

Sometimes you're better off not influencing somebody: you might have influenced them improperly. When you give people advice, that advice isn't always going to work out. So, I'm not so sure I want to influence people all the time just because I think a certain way is the right way to go. On the whole I prefer that people should be grown up and be able to make their own decisions. That doesn't mean they shouldn't listen to other people, including me. And that I shouldn't listen to them. But I have to believe that what really matters is the individual's ability and responsibility to make the right choices. And, of course, the other side of it is, "We don't know what is inside another person. If you think of President Clinton, how do you know for certain what he is thinking, what he is feeling?"

Q. Is he really repenting or just saying it?

A. There is absolutely no possibility that we're going to know any time soon. We may know this 5 or 10 years from now. In some other instances, we know it very clearly. For example, you have a fellow like President Carter who spends a lot of his time since his Presidency working for people's welfare, whether it's Habitat for Humanity or going around helping to mediate conflicts. I suspect we won't know about President Clinton for a very long time. And people don't, after all, go in a straight line. You know, you do better, you do worse. Everybody is like that.

Q. So years from now we may be able to see that his behavior is better but we won't know if it means he has just hidden his indiscretions better?

A. There is a statement in the Talmud: "Don't trust yourself until the

day you die." And it means obviously that we are not guaranteed that just because we're behaving well today we'll behave well tomorrow. And, on the other hand, if we fail in some way, whether it's morally or in business or whatever, today it doesn't mean we're going to fail tomorrow.

Q. Most organized religions have a lot of room for forgiveness.

A. Forgiveness is a major theme of every religion, and sometimes there's a variation on that theme — namely, that forgiveness is almost beside the point, that you've got to just carry on. Don't put people in a position where you have to forgive them. At least if you can avoid it. You can't always, of course.

Q. What would you tell President Clinton right now?

A. What I would say to him is that he has to carry through what he has said he feels. He has got to make that evident to others so they can feel better — especially his partisans. One way to do that is to just proceed in a way to finally reach the point where you're no longer mired in your past. Just do what you know is right to do. You have to put it behind you at some point. Of course, it's self-evident, these are platitudes. The moral life is filled with platitudes. There is nothing that we can say that is suddenly going to be a revelation of a new form of morality. The issue is not that we don't know what to do. The issue is that we don't do what we know we should do.

Q. Do you think a book like William Bennett's "Book of Virtues" advances discussion?

A. He is an intelligent man, and I believe that the whole struggle of humanity is to find practical ways to do what we know we ought to do. That's why America has been called a therapeutic society. We're struggling for ways to tell each other what we think is right. That in itself does not redeem us from our failings. But it's better than nothing.

And sometimes it does help us. We do not yet know — I'm speaking now of the whole human race, whether we're Buddhists, or Jews or Christians or Moslems — we don't yet know how to actually put into effect our dreams and our hopes. The 20th century is a wonderfully horrible illustration of this truth. There have been many messianic movements to redeem the world — Marxism, for example. Every such movement ends up overreaching. We don't get there. In fact, we go back.

But it does demonstrate our desperation to get to a point where we love one another and actually behave that way. After all, how is one to argue with the idea: to each according to his need, from each according to his ability? It's a noble vision.

The problem is we don't know how to do it. To impose it on others — which is, of course, what Stalinism and Leninism attempted — plainly doesn't work. It creates enormous suffering. To impose it, as in the Middle Ages the Inquisition attempted to do, also fails. So what we're left with is this need to find peaceful, loving ways not to impose it but to arrive at it together.

Q. Meaning we need to find a way to change people's hearts?

A. Yes. And I expect it's going to take awhile — at least another week.

6 Never before in a Thinksheet have I tried to set down something of possible use in anybody's memoirs, but here goes. For the record, the remembrance of you, I'm setting down a few notes complimentary to your soul-**generosity** toward & friendship with a Christian (ugh!), a Christian clergyman (ugh! ugh!). The ughs are my inelegant recognition of your achievement in even wanting a Christian friend, given all the reasons for reluctance & even (for the Orthodox child-of-the-past within you) revulsion. A high achievement: When you had Loree & me in your home as the guests for the first Seder after the publication of your beautiful GATES OF FREEDOM: A PASSOVER HAGGADAH (Bedford, NY: New Star Press, 1981), you told us that we were the only Christians you would "permit" in your home. Your humor is so dry & often smileless that we didn't know whether to take that as a fact or only as a high compliment! The copy you handed us, on that occasion, was inscribed "9 January 1982. For Loree & Willis--With love & admiration & with hope shared. Chaim." Your whole family & we were at table two hours, with a joyful mix of solemnity & silliness (the latter, eg, when the cat scratched on an outer door & you said with a loud voice "Michael, let Elijah in!").

Books. For some time now you've seen into print more than a book a year. I want to put on the record some of your earlier books copies of which you handed me....GATES OF PRAYER (mentioned in §1, above), the standard prayerbook for Reform Judaism, which you'd inscribed "To Willis--with deep affection and respect, for a friend and fellow-pilgrim on the way. Chaim." (Also, GATES OF PRAYER: Services for the High Holy Days, KTAV/70.) That's the blue book.

The green book--GATES OF THE HOUSE: The New Union Home Prayerbook (Central Conference of American Rabbis/77)--you brought to our home (in recognition of the wife-mother's liturgical functions in the home) presented to Loree. As was the case with the blue book, the green book had just reached your home. Inscription: "For Loree & Willis--in friendship. Chaim. [Oct/77]."

Which brings me to the red book--GATES OF REPENTANCE: The New Union Prayerbook for the Days of Awe (Central Conference of American Rabbis/78--which brought you (at least!) fifteen minutes of fame when President Clinton, having been given it by a Jewish friend, used it for a personal public repenting (at the White House Prayer Breakfast, "when [said the NYT] addressing a prayer group about the Monica S. Lewinsky scandal and his planned path of contrition"). Inscription (mix of Hebrew & English): "To Willis--once again, blessings in friendship and shalom. Chaim." Your intro prefers "turning" to "repentance": "To the Jew, to repent is to turn back to the Source of goodness and truth." (Personal note: The day before you gave me this book, your wife was graduated from Pace U. summa cum laude, 2 June 78.)

Other books you gave us? GATES OF FORGIVENESS: The Union Selichot Service: A Service of Preparation for the Days of Awe (Central Conference of American Rabbis/80). Inscription (in awareness that I'd just been fired): "For Loree & Willis--Gates open, close, re-open. The rhythm is toward opening, but both are needed. Love, Chaim. 24 June 1980."....GATES OF HEAVEN: Services for children and their parents on the Days of Awe (KTAV/70/79). Inscription: "To Willis & Loree--I haven't enough words.... Love, Chaim."....GATES OF JOY: Services for children and their parents for Sukkot, Simchat Torah, Shabbat Chanukah, and Purim (KTAV/79). Inscription: "To Loree and Willis, I hope this brings you some joy, as your friendship does for me. Chaim [15 Aug 79]."....DAY OF AWE: Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for the High Holy Days (KTAV/71)....SABBATH EVENING SERVICE (Chappaqua, NY: Temple Beth El of Northern Westchester, 1980).

A few Stern/Elliott events just before Loree & I moved to Cape Cod:

1 1978, you showed up for the birthday party for my 60th. In your crisp, pungent, profound style, you discoursed briefly on "The Point Is to Be Torah." As the only Jew present, you were extending covenant blessings to us Christians. You are a model of biblical man: Without betraying or watering down your own faith, you extend its blessings beyond tribal boundaries.

2 1978, I spoke in your temple on the occasion of your 20th* year of ordination. With mock seriousness, I told your folk that through the years you'd pared down your messianism to the point where "now he prays to get through the world doing as little damage as possible."

* Now you've passed your 40th, & my 60th is not far off.

3 1979, you had me give the 1st series of Neidich Lectures in your temple: "Who is Jesus for us Jews and Christians, now?" "The 'Cults'--gates of new life, or old death?" "Making sense when the world just doesn't make sense." "The sense the Bible makes." "Tomorrow from the inside out." Your folk were attending & attentive.

7 For a poetry session in our church 12.3.98, I wrote this, which via Jesus' Incarnation-Resurrection-Presence combines halakhah (responsible life as "walking") with shekhinah (Immanuel, "God with us"). Specifically Christian while illustrating the truth in this Thinksheet's title.

8 In your home 28 Sept 75, four days after you received your 1st copies of the big GATES OF PRAYER, you read to me three of your compositions in it: 174 ("You are the world's beginning....Inexhaustible God.

...Is there--surely there is?...an echo of love? We look, and listen, and struggle to gaze upon Your world in joy and awe and love and praise: holy, holy, holy: the hidden God / the One who speaks--and there is light!" I used this long ago in Thinksheet #698.); 216 ("O give thanks / that spring will always come / to make the heart leap, / that your winter ear remembers / a summer song, / and autumn colors return / to the jaded eye. // O make song / for lucid air of morning, / bright blood's beating, / life's flow deep and swift, / a kingdom of joy and awe / for us to dwell in....loving all human beings, and bringing them to the Torah" [your "light to the nation" mission in which, by extension, we Christians share with you & should be fellow-workers with you on, as you say you & I are "fellow-pilgrims."]); 232 ("Let me hear you, Lord, when I hear my spirit soaring in prayer. May I sing because I love, not afraid to waste my sweetness upon the void, but reflecting in my soul's flight the universal God who sings through me." Also in #698.)

As a man
I have walked alongside donkeys
in the narrow streets of your hometown
Nazareth, where you
as a boy
walked alongside donkeys
up and down the narrow streets.

You were to grow up to ride one of them
--a donkey--
on a wide street

through the Gate called Golden
into Jerusalem.

And you were soon to walk that street
through the Gate called Golden
out of Jerusalem
and onto the Mount of Olives.

And almost immediately
you were to walk that street
down back through the Golden Gate

into Jerusalem
to your Cross.

Golden,
because the East gate of the rising sun.
The East gate
through which the sun shone
Easter morning,
when you were done with donkeys,
but not with streets,
our streets,
my street.

9 Comment on you as **poet**: In my early teens I made an arc furnace for melting metals. Electrodes too separated, no heat; too close, burnout; just right, HOT LIGHT! It's so with your imag(in)ing: your arcs (the tenor & the vehicle) are just the right distance for the spark of warmth & illumination to leap inside your hearer/reader. It's an analogy I often think of when writing poetry, at which I'm your inferior, & thank God for your greater & my lesser gift.

10 Comment on your **wisdom** (including in the NYT interview [p2 of this Thinksheet]): It's enriched by world-awareness (other times/cultures/religions) but never loses its footing in "the Fathers" (as I rejoiced to see in that four-inch-thick typescript of your commentary on "Sayings of the Fathers," Pirke Abot; eg, your [128ff] section on "Yetzer Hara," which is faithful to the classical Jewish & Christian anthropology of good/evil tendencies in humanity, in contrast [eg] to the romantic "people are good" in TUESDAYS WITH MORRIE, on which you'll soon have a Thinksheet).

11 Christianity broke out of Jewish tribalism, but the potential for a universal religion is in what I like to call the First Gospel, viz Isaiah. You too have broken out: I've noticed dozens of times (in GATES OF PRAYER [eg 268] & elsewhere) your refusal to end a prayer as the Hebrew does, viz with "Israel": you regularly add "and all the world." You & I both are tribal-global on the same Abrahamic base, & are called to preach-&act together where we can each do so with integrity. Till God himself in his own way resolves the division, Jews & Christians will not agree on the question I asked in my first lecture in your temple: "Who is Jesus for us Jews and Christians, now?" For me, he's for what to you are two blasphemies: (1) The Messiah without potential remainder (despite the "not yet"), & (2) God come among us as a man. I regret the pain of this, but you & I have always been clear about its cause in the necessary self-definition of each of the two religions.

Grace & peace,

