

## AS A DRIVEN LEAF AFTER 80 YEARS<sup>1</sup>

David Golinkin

*As a Driven Leaf* by Rabbi Milton Steinberg, which recounts the tragic story of Elisha ben Abuyah, is one of the most successful Jewish historical novels of all time. Since its publication in 1939, it has been reprinted many times and has sold some 750,000 copies – and perhaps many more – with few marketing, advertising, or public relations

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on my Introduction to the new, Hebrew edition of *As a Driven Leaf – Ke'aleh Nidaf* published by Yediot Aharonot and The Schechter Institute, 2015, pp. 15–20. The initial English translation of this article was done by Ilana Kurshan. I have revised the article for *Zeramim* since this is now a stand-alone article and not an Introduction. I have also omitted the end which talks about the Hebrew translation and thanks those who worked on the book.

This article is based on the following sources: Arthur Cohen, "Introduction" to: Milton Steinberg, *Anatomy of Faith* (New York: 1960), pp. 11–60; Simon Noveck, *Milton Steinberg: Portrait of a Rabbi* (New York: 1978); Chaim Potok, "Foreword" to *As a Driven Leaf* (Springfield, New Jersey: 1996), pp. 5–10; Jonathan Steinberg, "Milton Steinberg – American Rabbi – Thoughts on His Centenary," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 95/3 (Summer 2005), pp. 579–600; Ari Goldman in Milton Steinberg, *The Prophet's Wife* (Springfield, New Jersey: 2010), pp. xi–xvii; Phil Cohen, "As a Driven Leaf" at *Jewish Ideas Daily* (March 28, 2013), accessed at [www.jewishideasdaily.com/6210/features/as-a-driven-leaf-on-february-5](http://www.jewishideasdaily.com/6210/features/as-a-driven-leaf-on-february-5), 2019; Mel Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Detroit: 1993); and *idem.*, editor, *Communings of the Spirit: The Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan*, Vol. II (Detroit: 2016). My thanks to Rabbi Jonathan Schnitzer of Rockville, Maryland, who showed me Noveck's excellent book and even lent me his personal copy until I was able to purchase my own. Brief references below refer back to this note.

campaigns.<sup>2</sup> Most of the critics were of one mind regarding the book's literary merit and its emotional force, and they showered praise upon it when it first appeared: "Imposing... remarkably effective" (*The New York Times*); "A windswept novel of a turbulent age strangely like our own" (*The Chicago Daily News*); "Perhaps so completely frustrated a life has never before been presented in fiction. Sheer beauty!" (*The Christian Herald*).<sup>3</sup> Writing in *The New York Herald-Tribune*, literary critic Alfred Kazin called it "a rare and moving book, creative in its thought, sensitive, scholarly without being a document—It has a warmth of conception and intellectual intensity that are exciting."<sup>4</sup>

Who was Milton Steinberg? Why did a successful congregational rabbi decide to write a historical novel about the most famous heretic of the Talmudic period? And why did this novel become a bestseller that has retained its relevance for eighty years?

Milton Steinberg was born in Rochester, New York in 1903. His father Samuel was born in Lithuania and even studied at the famous Volozhin Yeshiva but then became a secular intellectual and a Socialist. His mother Fannie was born in Rochester to an observant immigrant family. Steinberg absorbed a love of books from his father and a love of Judaism from his mother's parents. From an early age, Milton distinguished himself as a brilliant student who read an astonishing number of books in English and remembered much of what he read by heart. He also learned Hebrew, Bible, and Mishnah with a private tutor.<sup>5</sup>

In 1919, Steinberg's family moved to Harlem in New York City, where Milton continued his secular education at the well-known DeWitt Clinton High School. He particularly excelled in Latin, Greek, and literature and soon established himself as one of the best students in the school. For example, at the end of the third term, the English teacher, not knowing how else to express her admiration for his work, gave him the unprecedented mark of 105. The whole school buzzed

---

<sup>2</sup> According to Jonathan Steinberg, p. 580, in 2005, the book was selling at the rate of 5,000–15,000 copies per year.

<sup>3</sup> These quotations appear on the page facing the title page of *A Prophet's Wife*. For a selected list of book reviews of *As a Driven Leaf*, see Noveck, p. 336.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Noveck, p. 106.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1–7.

for days over this unusual event.<sup>6</sup> He graduated high school in January 1921 as class valedictorian and won first prize in the poetry contest.<sup>7</sup>

Steinberg also became active in the Conservative synagogue *Ansche Chesed* in New York and was strongly influenced by Rabbi Jacob Kohn, who convinced him that it was possible to bridge the gap between religion and philosophy. Kohn pointed to the indispensable role that faith must play, not only in religion, but also in science and other areas of life.<sup>8</sup>

In February 1921, Steinberg enrolled as an undergraduate at City College, where he studied Greek, Latin, English literature, public speaking, algebra, logic, and philosophy. He especially enjoyed the courses of Professor Morris Raphael Cohen, a brilliant lecturer who started out as a professor of mathematics and logic but then became a professor of philosophy. Cohen made a concerted effort to undermine the faith of his students, most of whom were Jewish. Steinberg decided to react to Cohen's relentless attacks; they had many long battles in class, with Steinberg quoting the Bible and passages from Graetz's history.<sup>9</sup> Recognizing that he needed more knowledge in the philosophy of religion, Steinberg turned to Rabbi Kohn to organize a study group in order to help him and his Jewish friends respond to Cohen's harsh criticisms. In other words, as Simon Noveck wrote in his biography of Steinberg, the matter developed into an intellectual clash between Cohen and Kohn.<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Kohn bolstered Steinberg's faith and encouraged him to study for the rabbinate.

In February 1924, Steinberg graduated from City College *summa cum laude*. He was awarded the Ketchum Medal in philosophy, and he received the highest grade point average of all 300 students in his class. Beneath his photo in the yearbook, his classmates wrote, "Prodigy of prodigies, genius of geniuses."<sup>11</sup>

In 1924–1928, Steinberg went on to study for rabbinical ordination at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTSA), where he was also awarded a long list of prizes. He especially enjoyed

---

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18–21.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21 and 23–24.

his courses with Professor Mordecai Kaplan. Steinberg had a deep appreciation for Kaplan's approach to Jewish peoplehood, but he was disappointed that Kaplan had little to say about the nature of God, the problem of evil, or of faith and its relation to reason.<sup>12</sup>

During the course of his studies, Steinberg received prizes for his papers on "Reason and Faith in Saadia [Gaon]" and "Revelation and Prophecy in Philo." He concurrently completed a Master's degree in philosophy at Columbia University, where he was heavily influenced by Prof. John Dewey.<sup>13</sup>

The first congregation where Steinberg served following his rabbinic ordination was in Indianapolis (1928–1933). In 1929, he married Edith Alpert, whom he had met earlier in New York. They spent their honeymoon in Israel and visited Jaffa, Jerusalem, Shechem (Nablus), Nazareth, and Tiberias. The descriptions of the Land of Israel in *As a Driven Leaf* were undoubtedly influenced by that visit.<sup>14</sup>

Steinberg's second and final pulpit was at Park Avenue Synagogue in New York City (1933–1950). There, he transformed a small Reform synagogue of 120 families into a flourishing Conservative synagogue of 700 families. He became particularly well-known for his sermons, which drew upon the weekly Torah portion, Jewish sources, philosophy, and secular literature. For example, in a sermon entitled "Power of Faith," he quoted Tolstoy, Pappini, Schlegel, Novalis, Goethe, Hardy, Anatole France, Bertrand Russell, Descartes, Hume, Royce, Bergson and others – all in a single sermon!<sup>15</sup> Two months before he died of heart disease in March 1950, Steinberg gave a series of four weeknight lectures on "New Currents in Religious Thought," which he envisioned as a seminar for 25–30 people. Yet 300 people came to the first lecture and 400 to the second!<sup>16</sup> In other words, in an era before television and the internet, Steinberg was one of the most brilliant and famous rabbis in the United States.

Milton Steinberg wrote eight books, some nonfiction and some fiction, some of which were published during his lifetime and some posthumously. All met with commercial success and critical acclaim,

---

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29. For Steinberg's admiration for Kaplan, see Scult, 1993, p. 274.

<sup>13</sup> See Noveck, pp. 32–34.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41–49.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291, note 13.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

and many are still in print.<sup>17</sup> But the question remains: What motivated Steinberg—a very busy pulpit rabbi who also lectured all over the country in an era before commercial air travel—to devote so much effort to writing a historical novel about Elisha ben Abuyah, who is referred to as *Aher* (The Other) in Talmudic literature?

As noted, Steinberg was an expert in Greek and Latin literature and philosophy, as well as in rabbinic literature. In 1928, he began writing his doctoral thesis on “Hellenism and Rabbinic Thought” or “Hellenistic Influences on Rabbinic Judaism” with Professor Salo Baron at Columbia University, and he worked on it intermittently for many years.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, in June 1934 he told his teacher Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan that he could not collaborate with him on the writing a series of special prayers because he needed to work on his dissertation. Kaplan complained in his diary that this was the third time Steinberg had turned him down for the same reason.<sup>19</sup>

In 1937, Steinberg published an article on the difference between “Judaism and Hellenism,” no doubt based on his doctoral research, in an anthology about the holiday of Hanukkah.<sup>20</sup> There he expressed a tremendous appreciation for Hellenistic culture—based on affluence, methods of government, architecture, sculpture, science, geometry, zoology, botany, literature, and philosophy. On the other hand, he noted its “deep and fundamental voids” that caused the Jews to reject this culture, namely the lack of: a living religion, respect for the life of every human being, chastity, charity, compassion for the underdog, and sympathy for the oppressed. “In the very moment of its flowering, Hellenism was doomed, because the intellect and the sense of the aesthetic are not sufficient for man,” wrote Steinberg.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, these motifs recur throughout *As a Driven Leaf*, which Steinberg wrote during the years 1936–1939. An unpublished article by his wife Edith entitled “Midwife to a Novel” describes his decision to harness the knowledge he had accumulated about Judaism and

---

<sup>17</sup> See Noveck, p. 330, for a list of his books until 1978 and add *The Prophet's Wife*, which was finally published in 2010.

<sup>18</sup> The two different titles are cited by Noveck, p. 55 vs. p. 97. The second title is much closer to the themes of *As a Driven Leaf*.

<sup>19</sup> See Kaplan, Vol. II, p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> Milton Steinberg, “Judaism and Hellenism,” in Emily Solis Cohen, ed., *Hanukkah: The Feast of Lights*, Philadelphia, 1937, pp. 5–16.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Hellenism for his doctorate and to use it to write a novel about Elisha ben Abuyah.<sup>22</sup>

Steinberg told one of the college students in his congregation that he put a lot of himself into Elisha.<sup>23</sup> Even so, I believe that he put in the mouths of Elisha and Rabbi Akiva some of the very arguments between Cohen and Kohn, which had shaped him as a student and as a rabbi. Elisha ben Abuyah is Professor Cohen, who dismisses any belief that cannot be proven by logical means, whereas Rabbi Akiva is Rabbi Kohn, who believes in God and in Judaism, despite all the challenges of his own era.

Steinberg worked on the novel day and night during his “free time” and he was receptive to the criticism of his wife and his editors at Bobbs-Merrill publishing house. The book was finally published in late 1939 to great critical acclaim.

What led this novel to survive the test of time and to remain relevant to readers in our own day as well? I believe there are two answers, one primary and one secondary.

The primary reason is that every modern Jew has to confront the tension between logic and philosophy on the one hand, and faith and religion on the other. Every young Jew is searching for proofs of the existence of God and the authenticity of the Torah and of the Jewish tradition. By means of the tragic biography of Elisha ben Abuyah, Rabbi Steinberg teaches us that we cannot rely on logic and intellect alone; everything in the world, even geometry, is based to a small or large degree on faith, and every Jew and every human being needs to find a way to combine faith and religion on the one hand, with logic and intellect on the other. This is a message that speaks to **every** modern Jew, but especially to young people who are searching for their path in life.

The secondary reason is that *As a Driven Leaf* managed to turn the Sages of the Mishnah—the Tannaim—such as Rabbis Gamliel, Joshua, Eliezer, Akiba, Elisha and Meir, into living, breathing people, not just literary characters. Rabbi Steinberg’s description of the debates in the Sanhedrin about the study of Greek wisdom, the descriptions of the four who entered “Pardes,” Rabbi Joshua’s speech at the valley of Beit Rimon, the arguments between Elisha ben Abuyah

---

<sup>22</sup> See Noveck, pp. 98 ff.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

and Rabbi Akiva, and the horrifying description of the Ten Martyrs<sup>24</sup>—all these bring the Mishnaic period and its heroes to life, and give readers the sense that they are there alongside them.

I hope and pray that Milton Steinberg's *As a Driven Leaf* will continue to influence generations of young Jews in the Western world. I also hope that, now that it has been published in modern Hebrew along with my endnotes by Yediot Aharonot and the Schechter Institute,<sup>25</sup> it will succeed in captivating the Israeli readership, and will serve as a beacon of light in the quest for a balance between religion and philosophy, as it has served for hundreds of thousands of English, Spanish and Russian-speaking Jews for the last three generations.<sup>26</sup>

---

*Rabbi Prof. David Golinkin is the President of The Schechter Institutes, Inc. and a Professor of Talmud and Jewish Law at the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem.*

---

<sup>24</sup> See Milton Steinberg, *As a Driven Leaf*, Prologue and Part I, Chapter 14; *ibid.*, Chapters 18, 20, 24 and more; 22; 25; and Part II, Chapter 19. (I have referred to the chapters and not the page numbers, since different editions have different paginations.)

<sup>25</sup> See my endnotes in the back of the Hebrew edition (above, note 1), pp. 455–493. (For an English version of my Notes and Sources, see “Respona in a Moment,” Volume 9, Number 7, July 2015, at <http://www.schechter.edu/as-a-driven-leaf-by-rabbi-milton-steinberg-notes-and-sources/>), which was also published in my book *Respona in a Moment*, Vol. IV, Jerusalem, 2017, pp. 288–340.) For reviews of the new Hebrew edition, see the reviews of Itamar Merilos, *Shevi'i* (June 12, 2015); Gadi Eidelheit (August 9, 2015), accessed at [www.shavua-hasefer.co.il](http://www.shavua-hasefer.co.il) on August 9, 2015; Admiel Kosman, *Makor Rishon*, No. 991; and in the *Shabbat* magazine (August 8, 2016), pp. 18–19.

<sup>26</sup> The Spanish edition—entitled *Como Una Hoja al Viento*—was published in 1952, 1961, and 1994 and is well-known among South American rabbis and educators. The Russian edition was published in 1982 and reprinted in 1989. I met with Olivier Bosseau of Paris in December 2018; he is now in the process of translating *As a Driven Leaf* into French.

