Vagabond

By Larry Leflkowitz

As I sat down in my favorite Jerusalem restaurant just off Jaffa Road – favored because it served good food at moderate prices – my eye was caught by the sight of two men sitting at an adjoining table. One was wearing a suit. The second man, to my surprise, was wearing an old shirt and pants that looked like they had never been washed or pressed. Their owner's hair was unkempt and his face made one want to turn away from it. The man looked like a beggar or homeless person. I wondered what the two men, so seemingly opposite in appearance, had in common. The well-dressed man seemed to be listening to the other man, who monopolized the conversation, the former nodding now and then with apparent appreciation and respect.

A waiter arrived and asked if they wanted to order something else. The well-dressed man said no. The shabbily dressed man, caught up in what he was saying, ignored the waiter. The waiter took their plates. I wasn't close enough to follow the conversation in detail, but I heard snatches of what he said, "the insufficiency of the human situation;" "pleasure is nothing less than the concentration of the instant." Not what I expected to hear from one who looked like a vagabond. And then he said something that impressed me, "Judaism is not a religion; it is much more than that, it is an *understanding of being.* The Jews introduced into history the idea of hope and that of a future." I strained to hear if he elaborated on this theme, but he lowered his voice or else the clatter of dishes being removed from a nearby table prevented my hearing more on the subject. I raised my fork to eat a piece of liver wrapped in onion strip, but stopped, holding the fork in mid-air because I heard the word "postmodern." Had I heard right? If so, this subject was of special interest to me because I taught a course in the university's literature department, "Postmodernism in Literature."

I was deprived of the utterer's thoughts on the subject when his conversant or, more correctly, his listener, stood up and said to him, "It's taken care of, Monsieur Chouchani." He meant the check, apparently. After he left the restaurant, I asked the

man who remained if I could sit down at his table. “It is in the realm of possibilities,” he said.

I took this as assent on his part and sat down. He didn’t seem surprised at all – which surprised me. “I heard you, ah, say something about postmodernism,” I said.

“Not a crime,” he replied.

“To be sure,” I said.

I told him that I taught a course in postmodernism at the university.

He acknowledged this with a half-nod.

“I would be most interested to hear the context of your use of the word ‘postmodernism,’” I persisted. The moment I said this, I felt it sounded presumptuous or condescending. I quickly added,” You have an interest in postmodernism?”

He nodded.

“In what connection?”

“In connection to the Talmud.”

I laughed. The Talmud had always seemed to me an ancient document and the antithesis to postmodernism

He fixed me a riveting glance. “If you think it droll, you can leave.”

I reddened and apologized. To try to save the situation I asked, respectfully, “Are you a rabbi?” I couldn’t help thinking of a Jewish legend I heard once about the prophet Elijah being dressed as a beggar.

“Every Jew is a rabbi.” Here he looked at me closely and added, “More or less.”

“I would indeed be pleased to her your thoughts about the connection of the Talmud to postmodernism.”

“You have to know Talmud before you can understand its connection to postmodernism.”

"Oh," I said, disappointed.

He reached an extremely hirsute hand in my direction. It reminded me of a tarantula. I feared he would touch my hand with it, but he drew it back. Maybe my face showed my revulsion. "I can teach you Talmud."

I was silent. Still, this man, erudite despite his looks, might be an interesting diversion from my routine and maybe he could elucidate a connection between the Talmud and postmodernism. Maybe it would add a new wrinkle to my course and increase its popularity among religious students.

"Ok," I said.

"Once a week, here."

I nodded.

"Same time. What time is it?" I perceived that he did not wear a watch.

I informed him. I wondered how he would know how to be on time for our meeting. Maybe according to the position of the sun. He seemed to know a lot.

"Be on time," he added. He didn't look like a person to whom preciseness was important. On the other hand, what he had said to his listener possessed just that quality.

"Er, how much?" I asked. I meant for the lessons.

"Just a meal," he said. I was relieved, I had expected the need for monetary compensation. Israeli universities were not in a position to pay employees, even professors, high salaries.

He stood up and left the restaurant.

Out of curiosity, I thought about following him, but I was hardly Hercule Poirot. And if he discovered me, it could put an end to my learning with him. He seemed a sensitive type jealous of his privacy.

When I arrived the next week at the appointed time, he was already seated at the same table. Same clothes, same disheveled hair He nodded. I nodded.

"What would you like to order?" I said raising a hand to summon the waiter.

I thought he would jump on the opportunity to order a big meal, but no. "Strudel and black coffee," he told the waiter. "And put a vanilla ice-cream on it. "

I had planned to order a meal to match his, Now I ordered cheese cake and a cup of tea.

My Talmud lessons began. During the entire time of the many weeks that we met he never gave me his name. Although his conversant had called him 'Monsieur Chouchani", I didn't dare to use it lest it cause him to be suspicious of me.

That first lesson he gave me preliminary general information about the Talmud. He spoke without reference books or notes. Fluently and with erudition. He said that the Talmud was a place where "all that can ever be thought has been thought of." That impressed me.

I started to look forward to our weekly sessions. The man was a marvel. He would have made a superb university lecturer, I thought. He would have had to change his wardrobe, of course. The Hebrew University wasn't Berkeley.

I had never realized that the Talmud was so interesting and so wise. And the images it employed impressed me.

After a year, he said to me, "I think you are ready for the Talmud's connection to postmodernism. The Talmud is also the framework for the resolution of ethics and phenomenology, but I assume you want to concentrate on postmodernity since it is your field."

I confirmed his assumption.

Invariably he left the restaurant before I did. Maybe he didn't want me to see where his way lay.

Our lessons continued another six months. Exactly six months. Later I was to wonder if it was a coincidence, or more. In any event, the next week, and the one after that, he did not show up for our lesson. Without any word to me, he disappeared.

Perhaps he had concluded his lessons; perhaps he had other reasons. I would have liked to thank him, even profusely, however much emotional demonstrations were not favored by me – one thing that he and I had in common. Which also ruled out a farewell embrace. Even to shake his hand. And to give him a little gift -- I had mulled over what an appropriate gift would be for him. Later I heard that he had left Israel. And I thought of something he once said: “The Jewish people craved their own land and their own State not because of the abstract independence which they desired, but because they could then finally begin the work of their lives.”

Although I was a professor with many years’ experience, I felt that, thanks to Monsieur Chouchani, I, too, could finally begin the work of my life.