

BOOKREVIEW

Springs of Western Civilization: A Comparative Study of Hebrew and Classical Cultures. By JAMES A. ARIETI. Lanham: Lexington Books (Rowman & Littlefield), 2017. Pp. xvi + 321. Hardcover, \$110.00. ISBN 978-1-4985-3479-6.

Western civilization derives its dynamic character from the combination of two very different ancient traditions, the Biblical and the Classical. But in what specific ways were these two traditions distinct, and when and in what ways did they blend together to produce a product so spiritually and intellectually unique? These are the fundamental questions James Arieti's book seeks to answer.

Structurally speaking, his book is arranged by broad topics ranging from the natural environment to the world of human beings, viewed first as individuals, then as family units, and, lastly, as societies practicing politics and religion. Arieti's prime focus is not on the specific values of each cultural tradition—a subject equally deserving of study—but rather on the peculiar outlook or turn of mind responsible for their birth. His method is a comparative one that takes a series of thematically paired passages, one from each culture, and, by holding them up side by side, discloses the specific features that distinguish one from the other, thereby revealing how the Hebraic and Classical eye each saw the world.

According to the author, these originally separate cultural perspectives stereoscopically fused during the Hellenistic Age and generated a new, more logically and rationally consistent vision of God and a new, more warmhearted image of man. It was this latter image that may have been “the most salutary effect of the Western ideal that formed from the merged outpouring of the separate springs.” (xvi). What developed, the author says using a Yiddish expression, was “the figure of the *mentsh* [in German *mensch*, a kind and morally upright person, someone not merely human but also humane], glimpses of which had appeared in biblical and classical texts [such as the tales of Joseph in *Genesis* and Patroclus in the *Iliad*] but which emerged full-scale and worthy of emulation when the philosophical model of God combined with its ethical implications to create narratives of good people engaging in good actions” (xv-xvi). Alongside the *mentsh*, there also arose a correspondingly new, matching, and rabbinically inspired sensibility, *ment-*

shlekhkeyt (in German *menschlichkeit*), a sensibility that with generosity of spirit and compassion displaced the older, more aggressive model of the hero.

Yet if cultural springs can energize and sustain a civilization with their vital force, those same springs can also dry up over the long course of history. Millennia, in fact, now separate Western civilization from the creative wellsprings that once gave it life and sketched its trajectory. Today, in my opinion, we inhabit a very different cultural landscape, an arid one in which the ethical norms of an earlier era have been blurred or erased and the traditional contours of human conduct coarsened. Significantly, it is precisely the kind of hate-saturated society where more *mentshen* and *mentshlekhkeyt*, anachronistic as they may seem, are so desperately needed if we are to find our way again.

Arieti's well-documented text is dense and challenging, suitable not for undergraduates or even most graduate students today but for the rare scholar devoted to the history of ideas. Yet by dwelling on the author's examples and passionately pondering his conclusions, those of us engaged in the pursuit and transmission of the humanities can help fulfill an ancient prophet's prayer that someday "justice will well up as waters/ And righteousness as a mighty stream" (Amos 5:24).

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