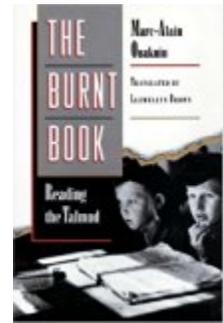


Marc-Alain Ouaknin. *The Burnt Book: Reading the Talmud* Translated by Llewellyn Brown. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995. xxii + 336pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-03729-5.

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## Burnt Books, Dead Hasidim, and Living Texts

“Dearest Max, my last request; Everything I leave behind me ... to be burned unread.” Fortunately, Franz Kafka’s instruction to his friend and literary executor, Max Brod, went unheeded.

There is something that attracts the Jewish book to the flames. For Marc-Alain Ouaknin, the burnt book recalls the immolations of Talmud at the hands of church authorities in Paris in 1242, in Rome in 1552, and burnings of Jewish books in our century; but that is not all. It also recalls the sixteenth chapter of the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Shabbat*, which asks, “Which books, when burning in a fire on the sabbath, may be rescued?” It even recalls something deeper: the burnt book is not merely a destruction of the text; but also its life: like Kafka, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (d. 1810) instructed his chief disciple to burn his writings. One of the books actually was burnt (though copies were kept), and it came to assume a special place in Hasidic literature as *Sefer ha-Nisraf*, the Burnt Book.

Ouaknin has given us a fresh insight into the process of Jewish Reading in *The Burnt Book: Reading the Talmud*, a volume which is of benefit to the novice in Jewish classical texts as well as to the seasoned scholar. Ouaknin begins with a basic outline of the text and textual principles of Judaism’s oral tradition (which is now a written one), from Mishna to Gemara to legal codifications, with explanations of the tradition’s major figures, trends, and textual styles. He then attempts to return from the themes discussed in the talmudic texts to the original problem

faced by the rabbis, namely, of a legal system in various states of exile. As he asks the question, “What is the Talmudic project?” Ouaknin maintains that this original issue has been ignored; forgotten as close textual study of Talmud cained ascendancy.

He takes as his point of departure a passage from tractate *Shabbat*, then blends an eclectic mix of explication, scholarship, mystical exegesis, and meditative reflection in a tour-de-force of contemporary French Judaic and literary studies, from Levinas and Jabes to Derrida and Blanchot. Through it all, he maintains his distinctly traditional, even orthodox Jewish consciousness as he brings the “Genius of Rogachov,” R’ Yosef Rozin, and R’ Schneur Zalman of Lyadi, the “Master of the Tanya,” into the orbit of his discussion.

Accordingly, a scholar of contemporary critical theory can feast on a banquet of talmudic *shakla ve-tarya* to rival any dialogues she has engaged up to this point; while conversely, a knowledgeable student of the Talmud (one who might pick up Ouaknin’s book) will find an explication of familiar talmudic hermeneutical and dialogic structures charted through literary theory unrivaled since Susan Handelman’s *Slayers of Moses*.

Ouaknin argues that in its effacement, of which burning is merely the coarsest example, the Talmud acquires meaning. Thus, the burnt book indicates our interpreting the text, born of reading and understanding.

Ouaknin’s postculturalist reading covers eroticism,

death, postculturalism, and messianism amid its analysis of the role played by study of text throughout exilic Jewish cultural history. For example, he remarks that Exodus 25, wherein the travels of the ark are described, teaches that the ark and the law it contains are in a state of ever-readiness for travel. The text is in perpetual movement, perpetual becoming. "Meaning," he writes, "is never there where it is given." He calls Jewish modes of reading "atopian," "nowhere," which provides an interesting if divergent explanation from George Steiner's recently published essay, "Our Homeland, the Text" (In *No Passion Spent*).

"Toyte," or "Dead" hasidim are the followers of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, who until today reread the tales authored by their master, finding in them the infinite in-

terpretive possibilities of holy writ. They rejected the notion of a successor to their beloved teacher, who before his death told them, "Don't worry, my fire will burn until the coming of the messiah!"

On the last page, Ouaknin expands on the effacement of messianism in Nachman's ambivalent redemptive thinking: "To exaggerate a little: The messiah is made for not coming ... and yet, he is awaited." Or, as Kafka put it, "The messiah will come only when he is no longer necessary. He will not come on the last day, but on the very last."

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