

Book Review

Ochs, Carol *Our Lives as Torah*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Carol Ochs, author of *Behind the Sex of God: Toward a New Consciousness — Transcending Matriarchy and Patriarchy* and several other spiritual handbooks, has written a heartfelt and touching guide for those wishing to find more spiritual meaning in their lives. She describes our life experiences as part of God's story, our relationships as covenants, and suggests that we are all participants in the ongoing conversation at Sinai, in an "unending search for meaning, design and purpose in life" (p. 2).

Ochs explains that "The task of this book is to help us as we flounder while the old paradigms break apart; it is to help us find our own ark, floating above the chaos; (to) help us make our quest for meaning explicit..." (p. 21). She accomplishes this task primarily through storytelling; bringing to light the epiphanies and turning points of others' lives and illustrating the hidden and revealed theologies beneath. Ochs encourages us, her readers, to do the same — to set up the place and cast of the stories of our lives as if on a stage, and to begin to search for God within the lines. We can also, like therapists, reframe our stories by seeing the larger context. Citing the biblical example of Joseph, Ochs reminds us that Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, for their own selfish, personal reasons. But once having risen to power in Egypt, and in a position to help his brothers and father during time of famine, Joseph was able to say, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." He has reframed his own story and achieved a universal perspective (p. 41). Ochs acknowledges that this is difficult for us to do while still in our own stories, but offers us tools as we try.

By utilizing Jewish and biblical metaphors we can often better grasp our own story. At women's seders the participants are frequently encouraged to envision the Passover images of enslavement, liberation, wandering and freedom and apply them to discussions of their own lives as Jewish women, focusing on the challenges and oppressions overcome on the journey to self liberation. Ochs suggests that we can draw upon biblical stories and Jewish historical example to use the themes of creation, covenant and revelation in order to center our own stories and find ourselves.

Ochs devotes chapters to various major themes of most people's lives: love, suffering, work, our bodies, prayer, community, death and God. In her chapter on love, Ochs uses the stories of family interaction in Genesis to illustrate loving, and often conflicted, relationships between parent and child, siblings, and intimate partners. All the love we experience with others leads to the love of God, Ochs maintains, and in reverse, loving God leads us to love those whom God loves — others around us. Ochs makes the argument that all the variety of relationships and emotions we experience are already in the Torah. She notes that following Creation, the first thing declared "not good" is loneliness: "'It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a fitting helper for him'(Gen. 2:18). We spend most of our lives trying to overcome our separateness" (p. 76).

Suffering can be seen as punishment for sin, or a test of faith, or as a means to a greater good or later reward. Ochs draws throughout not only upon biblical lessons, but examples from the Holocaust and the lives of individual men and women of today. We interpret suffering based on our expectations of what is natural and what is anomalous, says Ochs, offering the example of “Bob” who cannot walk or feed himself, appearing as a tragic figure. Once we learn, however, that “Bob” is three months old, his condition is now expected and obvious (p. 84). Religion helps us search for meaning in our lives and our suffering, that we may learn to bear it. Judaism demands that we build and love and live, despite inevitable pain and loss.

Chapters on work and the physical body bring Ochs’ themes to a daily awareness: finding God in everyday living. The book at times reads almost like a primer on Jewish thought and doctrine, such as the chapter on prayer as a way to incorporate Jewish ritual and observance into all aspects of our lives. Her originality is stretched in places as she tries to ‘cover all the bases,’ in order to universalize her message, which is ultimately that “We are part of God’s story”(p. 193). Ochs includes many stories, erring sometimes on the side of repetition, as she drives her points home.

In closing, Ochs reminds us that we need not sift through “the predigested views of others” to create a theology for ourselves, but only to thoughtfully examine our own lives from an individual perspective (p. 205). Our personal theology must be based on our own experience of life and God, to “help us make sense of our basic beliefs and hopes about the real world” (p 208). With the High Holydays upon us, now is as good a time as any.

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