

6 poets look to their Jewish roots

By Leonard W. Boasberg
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"I'm not a religious person," said Stanley Kunitz. "No, that's not true. I think I am a religious person, but I have no religion. That's why I think so much about God."

The Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, two months shy of his 80th birthday, was one of six distinguished American Jewish poets — or, as perhaps most of them would define themselves, American poets who happened to have been born Jewish — who came to the Kaplan Institute of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Wyncote this week to exchange ideas about God with leading Jewish scholars.

They also came to discover — or rediscover — their roots in a tradition that all either had abandoned, at least so far as institutions and practice are concerned, or had never

even concerned themselves with.

It was a close encounter of a unique kind for Kunitz, Allen Ginsberg, Louise Gluck, Linda Pastan, Gerald Stern and C.K. Williams.

As Ginsberg, 59, put it: "I've had lots of experience with lamas and Zen masters and swamis. It's the first chance I've had to talk with a group of rabbis."

In three days of round-table discussions, seminars and one-on-one meetings, they talked about what it meant to be an American Jewish poet, raised in the secular Western tradition, in quest of the sacred, the transcendental, the word and the Word.

The poets read their own poetry in a program Sunday at the YM & Y-WHA Branch at Broad and Pine Streets. In seminars Monday and yesterday, they joined the scholars in discussing the Bible and Jewish commentaries through the centuries.

The scholars read, in English and in Hebrew, the works of such poets as the medieval Spanish Jew Yehuda Halevi and the modern Israeli Nathan Zach; they examined sacred worship, the quest for the sacred after the Holocaust, and women's perspectives on Jewish traditions.

"I love the opportunity to learn from the scholars, to talk about Hebrew poetry, to talk about the Talmud, to talk about the cabala," said Stern, referring to the medieval mystical interpretation of the Scriptures.

Yet the poets, all with their own experiences, their own visions, their own conceptions of the sacred, were not there just to sit respectfully at the feet of the scholars: This conference was meant to be a dialogue.

As Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, director of the Kaplan Institute, put it, "Our goal is for the poets to go away with a sense that their heritage could be a resource for them in their lives as artists and spiritual men and women, and for the scholars to learn how to make those texts alive."

So the poets asked questions, as Jews have done since Moses questioned God. Why does the Old Testament God seem so angry? Why is God "He"? Why was this or that story so meaningful to my great-grandfather, when it isn't doing anything for me?

And, as Jews always have been, they were sometimes dissatisfied with the answers. They disputed with the authorities; at times the tension in the air was almost palpable.

Between poets and scholars there was a "clash of agenda," in the words of one of the scholars, David Roskies, professor of Jewish literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City.

Some of the scholars, he said, seemed to be attempting not only to impart knowledge of Jewish tradition and liturgy to the poets, "but at some level trying to turn them on." And the poets, while eager to gain knowledge — no one, after all, had twisted their arms to make them attend — did not necessarily want to be turned on to organized religion.

Gluck, 42, who lives in Plainfield, Vt., and teaches creative writing at Williams College in Williamstown, Mass., said she had accepted the invitation "out of curiosity and ignorance," but not, she emphasized, as a declaration of faith.

"I've always been preoccupied with religious questions, but not exclusively Jewish. ... I'm not happy when I'm included in an anthology of women poets; I'm not happy to be considered a Jewish poet."

The poet's approach to the Divine is "a lonely encounter," observed Kunitz, who teaches writing at Columbia University. "To the poet, institutionalized religion is like all institutions — suspect. ... Essentially, the approach of the people here at the rabbinical college has been exegesis — you analyze and deconstruct the text. The approach of the poet is to confront the Holy face to face; it has nothing to do with analysis of text. It's a very private and sometimes terrifying experience."

The Pittsburgh-born-and-bred Stern, 60, said he had left Judaism at the age of 13 years and one day — the day, that is, after his bar mitzvah. "But I never really left it," he said.

He is, like his colleagues, a non-practicing Jew. He often writes on Jewish themes — the Holocaust in particular.

"But just as Whitman says, what have I to do with institutions? We poets, whether we realize it or not, are saying, 'What have I to do with Judaism?' But when the chips are down, I have everything to do with

Judaism."

That seems to come close to summing up the consensus of his fiercely independent colleagues. None seemed disposed to start writing liturgical poetry or to become practicing Jews, but, by the same token, none of them shows any disposition to any other religion — except perhaps Ginsberg, who considers himself both a Jew and a Buddhist.

And they will write on Jewish themes, as some of them already do, when they feel like it. It seems safe to anticipate, though, that the spirit may move them to do so more often, with the knowledge and understanding that they have gained of an ancient tradition, defined by Reconstructionist Jewish philosophy as an evolving religious civilization.

As Philadelphia poet Elaine Terranova put it, "There'll be a lot of good poems coming out of this."



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