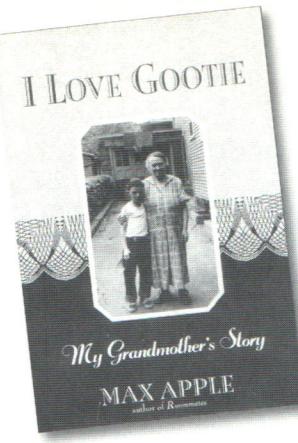


## BOOK REVIEWS



to depict his grandmother as a full-blooded individual. The wife of Rocky, the outrageous grandfather Apple portrayed in *Roommates*, Gootie's strength derived from

her powers of observation and her ability to play the muse to her literary grandson.

An immigrant from Serei, Lithuania, Gootie remains true to her upbringing even in the likes of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Serei remains vibrantly alive in Gootie's memory; she lovingly imparts to her grandson all of her memories of the town, and Serei takes on a life of its own in their shared imagination. As depicted by Apple, Serei is a near-mythic place, where his grandfather arrives on the first bicycle ever seen in the town to claim his bride. A baker by trade, Rocky nearly ruins the *shiddukh* when he presents a prenuptial challah which chokes the rabbi; nevertheless, Gootie and Rocky's marriage survives both their displacement to Grand Rapids and the tragic death of their son, Max. Eventually they come to live in the home of their daughter Bashy and son-in-law Sam Apple, who have named their youngest child Max after his deceased uncle.

Many of the most vivid moments of *I Love Gootie* depict Gootie encountering America, often in the company of her grandson Max. She brings to these encounters all of what she knows from Serei, including a dread of newfangled inventions and ideas. When she sees an escalator for the first time, she reasons, "This kind of thing is not for Jews." Based on her experience living through the Russian Revolution, she assumes that Grand Rapids teenage parties have a secret Marxist agenda: "They'll tell you it's a party. Then all of a sudden they bring out a picture of Lenin and you'll be marching down the street in a parade until the police run after you." She dreams with the young Max about his wedding, plucking goose

down with him so that he will be equipped with fine pillows for his wedding night, and as he learns to drive, she "cruises" with him one night to try to understand his teenage need for space and privacy.

The most poignant of these moments occurs when Gootie tries to protect the teenaged Max from his first infatuation. Attracted to a non-Jewish girl named Kathy, Max becomes her chemistry tutor while the ubiquitous Gootie hovers nearby. Convinced that Max will be trapped by the girl, whom she is certain is pregnant, Gootie shows genuine fear and dismay as Max rebels against her invasiveness. In a brilliantly written, cinematic scene, Apple simultaneously portrays Kathy, speaking teenager slang, and Gootie, speaking old country Yiddish, as they both manipulate his sense of guilt. Need I say who wins? Gootie, of course.

It would be hard for Apple to depict Gootie without portraying her irrepressible, curmudgeonly husband Rocky. Towards the middle of the book, Rocky steals the scene from Gootie, as Apple depicts Rocky's efforts at starting his own synagogue in Grand Rapids and fighting the bakery union's rules about mandatory retirement age. While this shift in focus is a bit frustrating for the reader, it ultimately serves two purposes. By gliding into his grandfather's life, Apple is able to depict how isolated and complicated it was to be an Orthodox Jew in a small Midwestern city, as well as to illustrate what Gootie had to put up with in her marriage, arranged at a time "before love existed."

The true love story in this book, in fact, is the unconditional trust and affection which develops between grandmother and grandson, even as he tries to break away. The intimacy they shared is remarkable, as personal as Max arranging to get Gootie's "truss" fixed. So close were grandmother and grandson that Max's own parents virtually disappear in the novel, overshadowed by the quietly formidable Gootie.

Apple's writing is superb; he effortlessly draws vivid pictures without ever resorting to worn clichés. Though she was a person whom "you would never notice," Max makes Gootie a compelling figure, the survivor not only of a broken leg sustained when she jumped off a refugee train to find

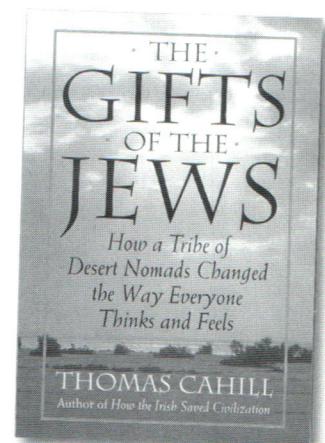
her child, but of the culture clash of post-war America. His writing is honest and direct, never sentimentalizing his grandparents' experience or his own rebellion as a teenager. Whether you are a grandchild or a grandmother, *I Love Gootie* will make you see new possibilities in the ineffable bond between the generations.

— Lois Reffkin

### THE GIFTS OF THE JEWS: HOW A TRIBE OF DESERT NOMADS CHANGED THE WAY EVERYONE THINKS AND FEELS.

BY THOMAS CAHILL.

New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday,  
291 pages, \$23.50.



world as the story of great gift-givers." In this captivating sequel to *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, the gift-givers are the Jews.

The subtitle of the book explains the author's contention: *How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels*. Western civilization and culture, Cahill maintains, is what the Jews gave us, largely through the Bible. "The role of the Jews, the inventors of Western culture, is singular. There is simply no one else remotely like them."

Using the Bible as a compass, Cahill shows how the Jews gradually led the world "into believing that the future could be better than the past — that something wonderful and unexpected could and would take place." Up to that point,

## BOOK REVIEWS

Cahill says, the world appeared to its residents as a never-ending, continuous circle, with the future predestined and absolutely unchangeable.

Cahill writes in this thought-provoking book: "The Jews were the first people to break out of this circle, to find a new way of thinking and experiencing, a new way of understanding and feeling, so that it may be said with some justice that theirs is the only new idea that human beings have ever had."

A good example of the author's analytic approach is his handling of the story of Abraham, who is often referred to as the first Jew. Prior to Abraham, people had no concept of time or history, but after Abraham, people begin to believe in a real, hopeful future. Thanks to Abraham, Cahill writes, in his straightforward manner, we now have fully-rounded human personalities, who have a vocation and a destiny. Thus, he says, "the very idea of destiny and of individual vocation is a Jewish idea." Cahill postulates that Abraham's god was probably a personal household god, but in time he emerged as the God of gods, the one and only one you can count on, the only God who matters. Abraham thus bequeathed to us all a genuine belief in monotheism. The author then proceeds to analyze key passages in the Bible. The story of Moses and the exodus of the slaves to a new era of freedom is seen as the "god of the Jews growing ever larger and more insistent — and monotheism evolving into a faith of ethical monotheism."

From this point on, Jews are taught that they must lead upright lives in accordance with God's commandments. Bit by bit, Jews are instructed to develop a sense of justice, and compassion for those in need; in a text that is filled with humorous asides, the author notes that we are being slowly but surely educated in a real sense of human values.

The way Cahill puts it bears repetition: "The Jews gave us a whole new vocabulary, a whole new Temple of the Spirit, an inner landscape of ideas and feelings that had never been known before. We can hardly get up in the morning or cross the street without being Jewish. We dream Jewish dreams and hope Jewish hopes."

Cahill then proceeds to explain other key biblical sections. For example, he says, the well-known David and Goliath story taught us to root for the underdog, and not the big bully. The Sabbath, a weekly regulated day of rest, is seen as a remarkable Jewish invention — in the image of the Creator. And this in turn has led to the concept of the weekend. Western literature has inherited from the Bible the twin themes of love and death, which in turn have included the ideas of sex and violence. In short, the Jews through the Bible and their history gave humanity the wisdom of justice, compassion and mercy — and these in turn underlie our social service and legal systems, as well as such basic documents as the Declaration of Independence.

Cahill, an Irish Catholic who mastered Hebrew, says in his concluding chapter that without justice, there is no God. He urges people to consider that the "Jewish God of justice and compassion undergirds all our values and that it is just possible that human effort without this God is doomed to certain failure."

The author sums up: "The Jews were the first people to develop an integrated view of life and its obligations.... We do not live in a fragmented universe, controlled by fickle and warring gods.... Because God is One, life is a moral continuum — and reality makes sense."

To read *The Gifts of the Jews* is to have a rare intellectual experience, punctuated with flashes of insight. It is a remarkably fine, persuasive and enjoyable book!

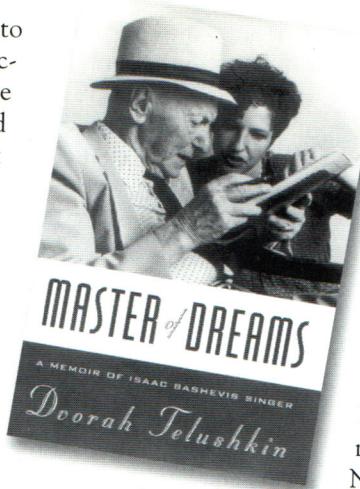
— David C. Gross

### MASTER OF DREAMS: A MEMOIR OF ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER.

BY DVORAH TELUSHKIN

New York: William Morrow & Co., 350 pages, \$25.

"**V**ell, I vill tell you," Isaac Bashevis Singer said in these very pages, "I vas never shrewd. God is my witness." Maybe not. Despite his substantial earn-



ings as a world famous writer and lecturer, he never forgot his childhood poverty and lived in terror of becoming a pauper. To avoid this dire catastrophe, Isaac (as he asked everyone to call him) put his money in the bank. Not just one bank, but many banks, all over New York City. With his faithful "Girl Friday," Dvorah, at his side, he would hop a taxi and go in search of these many banks. In her wonderful memoir about her former boss, *Master of Dreams*, Dvorah Telushkin titles this chapter, "Do You Have Here An Account For Singeh?" Which is what the great man would anxiously ask the tellers.

Alas, the banking system genuinely baffled him. As did money in general. Dvorah writes, "When a contract was sent from his agent or a document from his accountant, he would glance at the page for a second, hold his pen in the air, and ask in a distracted voice, 'Tell me, where do I sign?'"

Everyday occurrences bedeviled him. While on a trip to deliver a lecture or give a reading, he could be counted on to become hopelessly lost. Dvorah, who for 12 years was first his secretary, then translator, also became his truly indispensable guide.

In his home, inanimate objects would miraculously take flight and vanish only to turn up later when least expected. Manuscripts in progress would spitefully hide themselves. Dvorah called the room where Isaac piled 60 years' worth of manuscripts, correspondence and clothing from the 1950s, "the chaos room."

His personal life was a sort of chaos, too. After his demise, Dvorah tried to organize some of his affects; she writes about the mountain of letters she found in his "private archives": "I read a few from forsaken lovers, would-be wives, his neglected son. All the letters seem to be asking one question: Why have you left us?"

Yes, the Master had grave problems with intimacy. He had countless affairs which seem to have brought him little

happiness. He increasingly saw women as temptresses and men as their victims. He told Dvorah: "The proverbs have a saying: 'He follows her as a bird hastens to a snare and he does not know that it is at the cost of his life!'" Small wonder that he abandoned the women one after another. All his life he was suspended between the modern world and the world of his devout parents. "I am a sinner, but I am a deeply religious man," Isaac always said.

He was always a fearful man. "If an accident occurred (while he and Dvorah were out walking), if someone fell or a crowd gathered near an ambulance, he walked faster, never stopping to inquire, and too frightened to think of helping. He simply hunched up his shoulders, and ran on, burying his head in his chest."

But Isaac Bashevis Singer was in some ways a man of great courage. For more than a decade, as an unknown writer — "a nobody," as he was fond of saying — barely eking out a living at the *Forwards*, he was mocked and reviled by colleagues and editors for writing what were then unfashionable stories about ghosts, goblins and demons. His editors demanded social realism. But Isaac, who had no other source of income, simply refused to compromise (he never did about his writing, ever) and steadfastly continued to produce the stories and novels that would many years later win him world acclaim and the Nobel Prize for Literature.

For a reputed tightwad (and the accusation was not unjustified), Isaac could be extremely generous. When his editor at *The New Yorker*, Rachel Mackenzie, became seriously ill, Isaac chipped in close to \$60,000 to help cover her medical expenses. When the author Henry Miller, with whom Isaac corresponded, was ill and broke, Isaac sent him an unsolicited check for \$5,000.

The Master was a charmer, a true spellbinder whom it was a delight to be with and know. Of course, first and foremost, he was a genius, one of the greatest writers of his or any day in any language. The gift he left the world was his writing, a source of unending joy for millions of readers.

For Dvorah Telushkin, he was a one-man university. And how she blossomed under his tutelage! Working incredibly

long hours, she learned the craft of peerless writing from the Master's hand. *Master of Dreams* bares ample testimony to this. It is a remarkable book — poignant, funny, endlessly insightful, and teeming with emotion. Isaac, his many virtues and faults, and the entire Yiddish milieu in which he thrived, come strikingly alive. As does Dvorah herself, who, in these pages, grows from a 21-year-old university student into an accomplished, multi-talented woman. The intricate relationship between these two, so beneficial to both, is grippingly portrayed in this, the finest memoir about a writer that I have read.

— Isidore Haiblum

### JEWISH ROOTS IN POLAND: PAGES FROM THE PAST AND ARCHIVAL INVENTORIES.

BY MIRIAM WEINER

Routes to Roots Foundation, Inc. and YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, in cooperation with the Polish State Archives, 446 pages, \$50.

As Miriam Weiner points out in this voluminous work — both an attractive coffee-table book as well as a serious genealogy — Poland was much more than a place of death for nearly three million victims of the Holocaust. For one thousand years, it was a thriving center of Jewish life.

Accordingly, Weiner's landmark work is both a memorial album to a vanished world as well as a travel guide to Jewish Poland today. A city-by-city, town-by-town guide provides historic background and contemporary sites of Jewish interest in several places where Jews settled in the country.

*Jewish Roots in Poland* offers an inventory of archives and surviving Jewish records in Poland that are meant to assist Jews of Polish-Jewish ancestry to trace their roots several generations back. But it is a book all Jews with a sense of history should consider owning.

In his foreword, Michael Berenbaum, president and CEO of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, writes that with Weiner's help, "we return not only to the ghettos, the concentration camps and death camps, but also to the towns, vil-

lages, and hamlets where Jews dwelt for so long. Such a journey can change our sense of who we are, of where we have come from, and, above all, of what we must become."

*Jewish Roots in Poland* introduces the reader to the holdings of the Polish State Archives and to birth, death, marriage, and divorce documents in the USC — local offices in charge of such records in nearly all cities and towns in Poland. More than 200 of the book's pages are devoted to an index of archival holdings by town or by archive. "For the first time," writes Weiner, "it is now possible to determine what documents exist for a particular town among the major archival repositories in Poland."

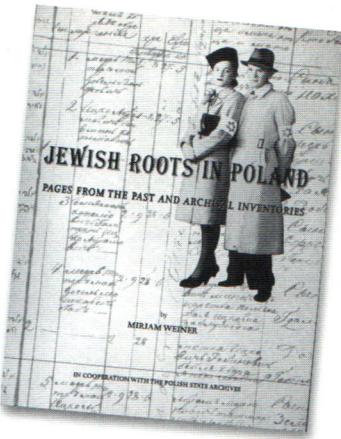
The book contains essays by experts in addition to Weiner, who has led tours to and conducted archival research in Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova. Former executive director of the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors in New York, Weiner co-edited *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Genealogy*.

The book is enhanced graphically by maps, photographs, antique postcards from the author's own collections, and examples of archival documents. There is also an extensive bibliography at the book's end, as well as selected readings after each section of the city and town guide.

This is a resource to treasure. Some day, we hope soon, our family will find the time to comb its depths in search of an answer. Is my husband in fact related to another Blank I happened to meet by chance and whose grandfather came from the same small town in Poland as his did?

For many peoples, the answers to such questions are intriguing. For Jews, especially in the post-Holocaust era, they are compelling.

— Barbara Trainin Blank





▲ At a gala luncheon celebrating the 100th birthday of Golda Meir, Baltimore Council presented its Golda Meir Centennial award to Shoshana S. Cardin, then president of the United Jewish Appeal and a life member of NA'AMAT USA, for her "lifetime of dedication and achievement in furthering the welfare and unity of world Jewry." From left: Edith Borden, Fund-raising vice president; Judi Widetzky, regional director, Israel Aliyah Center; Miriam Fromberg, co-president; Shoshana Cardin and her daughter Ilene Vogelstein; Dorothy Margolis, Publicity chairwoman, and Patricia Fisher, co-president.

Clara Kolodner, Philadelphia Council secretary and Hanita club president, was the NA'AMAT USA honoree at the Annual State of Israel Bonds Evening of Honor. Ms. Kolodner, who has a long history of volunteerism, is also vice president of the sisterhood at Temple Sinai in Dresher and a volunteer at the gift shop of the Philadelphia Geriatric Center. From left: Joy Pollock, Israel Bonds event co-chairwoman; Leah Rosenthal, Council member; Ms. Kolodner, Dina Spector, NA'AMAT USA president, and Sherrie Willner, Israel Bonds, Women's Division chairwoman.



Following the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations' Presidents Mission to Israel, NA'AMAT USA national president Dina Spector (right) and past national president Harriet Green participated in a fact-finding tour of the Negev. ▼



▲ Reena club of Tucson, Arizona holds Spiritual Adoption Luncheon featuring national Program & Education vice president Phyllis Sandground as guest speaker. From left: Miriam Specter, Fund-raising chairwoman; Ms. Sandground, Bea Spear and president Bonnie Krasner.



▲ Amit club of Akron, Ohio holds festive High Tea Donor. From left: Shelley Koch, new members Laurie Siegel and Mimi Surloff, and Faye Wish.



▲ South Shore club of Long Island/Queens Council honors life members with a delectable dinner. From left: Roz Peck, Rhoda Orenstein, Irene Alterman, Lucille Helman and Esther Feldbaum (Plainview club).