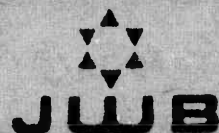


Jewish Books in Review



is a service of the JWB Jewish Book Council,
15 East 26th St., New York, N.Y. 10010

Coat of Many Colors: Pages From Jewish Life. Israel Shenker. Doubleday & Co., 245 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10167. 1985. 395 pages. \$19.95.

Reviewed by
Richard F. Shepard

When I first saw a copy of Israel Shenker's *Coat of Many Colors*, I had mixed feelings. Had I not read, as a loyal and virtually fanatic Shenker aficionado, most of these pieces in *The New York Times*, where Shenker, a colleague of mine there, has hung his hat on a hook and his head over the typewriter for ten years? Had I not read him in as motley an assortment of publications as the subjects he so adroitly dared plunge into in the way of first-class newsmen?

This book, it seemed, was a collection of Shenker virtuosity — and collections of any sort, outside of those adorning the walls of the Louvre, the Prado, or the Metropolitan Museum of Art, are things you browse through from time to time, not the stuff for a long sustained read. And so, I open to page 1, feeling that a riffle through the pages would

A Kaleidoscope of Jewish Life

refresh me for a bit before I returned to a heavier tome that I was plowing through.

Unfortunately for the other tome, I never did get back to it. I read right through it with delight that grew with every page, with the feeling that here was a compendium of Jewishness approached in a literary way for general readers that few have dared to approximate. Collection this Shenker opus may be, but it is a spellbinder for anyone with a "pintele yid" coursing through his veins, and perhaps even for those who don't know a mezzuzah from a matzoh ball.

Shenker is the best English-language stylist on Jewish matters, a graceful reporter with a sharp wit, a keen eye and an acute sensitivity. For all of these razor-edged attributes, his prose never cuts; he writes about topics he reverences and these pages are infused with the love he has for the Jewish question or, better, the Jewish questions that have not only held our people together over the millenia but have also on occasion nearly

torn them apart.

In 33 chapters, Shenker describes the Jewish concept of God, the singularity of Torah, the multiplicity of its interpretations, the institutions it has prompted, the languages and literature of the Jews, the great thinkers past and present of Jewish law and tradition, the influence on all this of the Holocaust. The key word here is "describes." Shenker is a reporter, not an officer of the law. He wants to know who, what, when and why. He has gone to the books and to the people living today who are authorities on the subject. What he offers the reader is an intellectual guidebook of Jewish faith and philosophy, garnished with vignettes and feature stories that cover such things as the making of yarmulkes and dreidls. He is respectful but not to the point of sentimental treacle. He has managed to make from these serious strands of thought a volume that is ponderable but definitely not ponderous.

In the doing, one views things from a host of perspectives, from Orthodox, Conser-

vative and Reform positions and from dissident positions within each. It is a book that abounds with examples of "response," of interviews with "cuttingly tongues" thinkers who make no concessions to popularity in the name of spreading the word.

One must remember always that this is not Shenker making the material, but it is Shenker weaving it into a varicolored fabric in which all the shades and tints are represented. Where the Shenker influence supersedes that of the rabbonim is in his worship of the word, of the sentence that sparkles like "I'hovdl," the crown of a Torah. He is respectful of his informants and his subject, but his reverence does not blunt his sense of joy in it and in writing about it.

Writing about the Glasgow Jewish Lads' Brigade, he notes, "When they play 'Hatikvah' on the bagpipes, it is perhaps time to call a plumber." At the very start of the volume, Shenker outlines what he is trying to reconcile in one volume about the Jews.

"Rent by divisions, torn asunder by controversies, affirming, dissenting, worshipful, recalcitrant, these were the people who bore living witness to the claims of ambiguity," he writes, lovingly. "Embracing and respecting tradition, bound and liberated by faith, born between obscurantism and reason, self-assured and self-critical, they were a kaleidoscope of fragments, positions held and abandoned, images formed and shattered, God-fearing Jew, God-denying Jew, passionate and indifferent, hero and villain, yeasayer and nay-sayer.

That is writing that captures all, that is hard to top, although the author continually outpaces himself with every page. It is English in its peak form and one only regrets that it could lose in the translations it surely merits.

Richard F. Shepard, who was born in the Bronx, is a cultural affairs reporter for the *New York Times*.

To three possessions thou shouldst look • Acquire a field, a friend, a book.
Hai Gaon, Musar Haskel,
11th century

Go Krogering for a wide variety of your favorite Kosher foods

Manischewitz Brand

- Matzos
- Soup Mixes
- Borscht
- Soups
- Matzo Ball Mix
- Matzo Ball Broth
- Gefilte Fish
- Whitefish & Pike
- Potato Kugel Mix
- Matzo Meal
- Matzo Ball Soup
- Bakit

Empire Frozen Kosher Foods

- Pot Pies
- Pizza
- Bagels
- English Muffin Mix
- Frozen Blintzes (large variety)
- Bagel Pizza
- Garlic Bread
- Liver Spread
- Pie Crust
- Potato Latkes
- Natural Cut Potatoes
- Challah Dough
- Chall-ettes
- Rye Bread
- Chicken
- Breaded Mushrooms

Others

- Noodles by Goodman, Greenfield and Mrs. Weiss
- Soups by Carmel, Croyden House, Goodman and Telma
- Mother's Schav
- Mother's All Whitefish
- Rokeach Old Vienna Fish
- Rokeach Tomato & Mushroom Sauce
- Wolff Groats/Kasha
- Joyva Halvah Candy
- Kedem Grape Juice
- Rokeach Pareve Coffee Creamer
- Swee-Touch-Nee Tea Bags
- Panni Shredded Potato Pancake Mix
- Panni Bavarian Potato Pancake Mix
- Pasteurized Goats Milk



Kroger Sav-on