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Sh'ma

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

In this issue

Aging.

In an era of youth, how can we learn the art of age?

As we focus on continuity, how are our elderly faring?

Sh'ma thanks guest co-editor Susan Berrin for her conception of and invaluable contributions to this issue.

When we are blessed with time Susan Berrin

As we approach old age, we face the tasks of learning and doing within a world of negotiated choices. We learn about increased limits, about diminishment, about loss, about the richness of each day. And while we are sharpening the skills of adaptation, in an effort to continue to grow through the experiences of aging, we are also facing the questions and tasks of death ahead of us.

Creating And Sustaining Meaning

Providing for a full, meaningful life throughout the span of a person's years is a task of monumental proportion. And it is to the interweaving of the individual, the family and the society, that we look for fulfillment of that task: the weaving of personal and collective responsibilities.

Focusing on our elderly raises several significant questions: Is old age seen as a reward for living a virtuous life? How do we honor the lives of our elders while acknowledging our own departure from that, often patriarchal, societal construct? Perhaps it is in connecting the identity issues of youth with the issues of the elderly, that we can create an answer to the ever-present question of continuity in Jewish life. For it is in our youth, hopefully, that we begin to invest, both materially and spiritually, for our old age.

In soliciting material for this issue of *Sh'ma*, I asked several women to write about their roles as care-givers. None were willing. They feared betraying their

mothers, betraying unspoken family bonds, and betraying the secret of emotional pain inflicted by their mothers.

When The Older Tend The Elderly

I heard stories about the coldness, harassment and verbal assault of daughters, who as women in their 60s and 70s, were trying to provide a mooring and a life-line for their elderly mothers. What are the life-experiences of these daughters, and why do they persevere in serving their mothers? How do we name the inner fulfillment of serving a life-long bond? Although each case of care-giving is predicated on the specific, we need to question and address the issue: Why is it that women are still serving as our primary care-givers and why is this role of care-giver treated with disdain rather than admiration?

A Personal Dedication

I would like to dedicate this issue of *Sh'ma* to my mother-in-law, Sireen Reinstein, Sarah Chava bat Rivka v'Yosef z"l, who

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did not reach old age. She died this spring at 72 years old, still contemplating the writing of an article for *Sh'ma* on the daily care she gave to her 95 year old mother. May her memory be for a blessing. □

Early spring

Kerry M. Oltzky

Spring. Finally, the sun began to rise as early as I do. With unusual intensity, the early morning sun seemed to flood the entire bathroom with light as I stood there shaving. Nothing particularly unusual about it. Then suddenly it hit me. For a split second, I saw my father's face staring back at me in the mirror, peering intently: scrutinizing, evaluating, then fading away. Since that transformative moment, I look at who I am and what I have become rather differently. Maybe it is because, as I struggle with the aging of my parents, I am forced to confront my own aging process: Their finitude is directly related to my own. Never before had my father's near reincarnation been felt so strongly as it was during that solitary early morning encounter.

Learning To Grow Older

Intellectually, I understand that growing older is a process that begins at birth. It is not something that just happens. But trying to learn the torah of my own parents' aging and relate it to my own aging has not been an easy process. As they become impatient with their failing bodies, fighting to maintain their dignity and independence, I find myself becoming impatient with them. As a result, there are many things that get in the way of our relationship--trying hard to nurture that upside-down bond that develops between adult children and aging parents over the telephone between New Jersey and Florida. Yet, I have come to understand, among other things, that to actually *grow* older, one has to keep growing, regardless of what God throws our way. Otherwise, you just simply get old.

My mother's battle with life threatening cancer showed me that. She refused to submit to the angel of death even though the angel fought to win. Instead she turned that struggle into an advocacy role for others fighting the same disease. She cherishes every extra moment she is alive,

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SUSAN BERRIN's book, *Celebrating the New Moon: A Rosh Chodesh Anthology*, will be published this winter by Jason Aronson Press. She is currently collecting material for an anthology about Judaism and aging.

running to do all the things that employment and raising children seemed to prevent her from doing much of her adult life. My father, on the other hand, gave in to the aging process, permitting his aging body to make demands on the way he views the world.

Before I became aware of my own aging process, like most of us, I used to think that one day people wake up suddenly old. Now, as my parents get ready to move from the house in which I matured into an age-segregated condominium complex, I see rather vividly that rather than being the end of life, old age is what we work toward our whole life. Somehow we all got where we are today, having followed life's circuitous route with its unplanned twists and unexpected turns, sometimes driving, at other times being driven. Life is also filled with blunders, regrets, stuff that we wish we had the chance to do over. Looking back over life from the perspective of old age is a daunting experience. As a

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result, we are often afraid to confront our past, believing that we are no longer the person we used to be. But we are indeed the sum total of our past.

Old age provides us with a unique prism through which to view our lives, as well as an unparalleled opportunity to rise to the challenge of confronting it. While young we erroneously think that only the (endless) future is open to us to shape; the past is something that we can no longer control. In old age we learn that the opposite is true. The past is fluid and changing; it is the future alone which is static. Through the process of growing older, we can enter the past, recover our essential selves, and attempt to repair the damage done. In this process, we actually try to replay previous encounters in order to gain a better understanding of who we were during those particular events. Once we understand our role in such encounters, we can better see the perceptions of others, as well, especially those whom we may have wronged. Good or bad, we can't erase what we did, but we can transform it in order to heal ourselves and those around us.

Viewing Our Deeds Through The Lens Of Time

The significance of everything we do is relative to the time in which it is done. As our personal history moves forward, past actions take on different meanings. We are only able to gain a full perspective on the meaning of things through the perspective of time. For our focus changes through time. The variety of life's experiences changes us and offers us a different spin on what took place only moments before.

We call this process *cheshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of the soul. Unlike the process of repairing relationships, *cheshbon hanefesh* is an entirely personal accounting, one which reaches the inner recesses of one's soul.

Social gerontologists speak about a similar notion. They call it life review, an opportunity to look back on our lives, to access and assess its essential meaning. They speak about that ability to go outside of ourselves in order to penetrate more deeply inside our inner selves. Through the process, we gain focus and direction, flashes of insight, often when we least expect it.

While life review is commonplace among the elderly, it is something that need not wait until we grow older. As a matter of fact, such a process will help us to *grow* as we grow older. One chassidic rebbe used to teach that there are some moments in our lives when the total purpose of our existence is revealed to us. Those mo-

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ments of profound insight are fleeting; we have to be ready to grasp what is being shown to us whenever we are given the opportunity.

Through life review, we come to understand the very purpose why God placed us on this earth in the first place. Then we face the challenge of taking that knowledge and doing something about it. If actual repair can't be made, then we are advised to direct the positive energy someplace else where it can do some good. Otherwise, the negative energy created will simply consume us and thereby make us old. As the Yiddish proverb has it, old age to the unlearned is winter; to the learned it is harvest time. □

Family responsibilities to the aged

Michael Chernick

The Jewish tradition's concern for the aged is well known. The Torah teaches, "You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old...." (Leviticus 19:32). But rabbinic Judaism was never content with aphorisms and generalities. It sought to specify how one honored those who had grown old. Therefore, Rashi, the great commentator on the Bible and Talmud, immediately cites Sifra, a major midrash to Leviticus, to help us understand how one shows deference to the old: one does not contradict an aged persons' words nor sit in places specially reserved for them or chosen by them. While these signs of concern may be dated in our world, the interest in tangible acts done on behalf of the elderly should not be. This sort of consideration can enhance the elderly's sense of worth, and help them to live longer and in a more contributory way.

In symbolic ways, we often undermine the aged person's words and usurp their positions. The Jewish tradition seeks to give the elderly the greatest opportunities for continued contribution and autonomy. Let us take as an example the Talmud's point of departure in its discussion of what is owed to one's aged parents:

"Our Rabbis taught: ...What constitutes honoring parents?

Honoring one's parents is observed by helping them to eat and drink, clothing and covering them, and helping them to enter and leave (their domicile)."

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In this passage, the Rabbis sought to define the ultimate situation of honoring a parent. Honor, they taught, expresses itself in caretaking. If we look at the forms of caretaking they suggested, it becomes obvious that the parent involved must be disabled, possibly—even probably—by age. Why else the need to help feed, clothe, and perambulate? The “child” expected to fulfill this command is, as usual in Jewish law, not a minor, but a legal adult.

Preserving Autonomy

At this point in the text, the Talmud asks an extremely practical question, “Who pays?” That is, whose estate bears the financial responsibility for the materials and services the Rabbis equate with parental honor? The tradition provides two answers: R. Judah says the child pays. R. Nathan b. Oshaiah says the parent pays. Usually such debates are simply analyzed without necessarily reaching any conclusion. Here, however, the Talmud is quite clear about the law. If the parent has the wherewithal, he or she pays.

Our sensibilities tend to be shaken by this response. Yet here rabbinic Judaism indicates what true honor is. It is to allow a person who has been stripped by age of certain abilities to maintain control over what he or she still can control. In short, if elderly parents are capably independent, children should never believe they are doing parents a favor by infantilizing them. Is there respect or honor in “taking care” of someone who can take care of himself? Further, even in the sad scenario of limited ability, if the parent can still exercise some autonomy, that autonomy, no matter how limited, must be granted. That is what constitutes honor and respect. That is how the aged, and most people, feel useful and human. That is what we are forbidden to trample over.

When We Can't Be There

Once the text has granted our parents the highest degree of control over their lives, what is required of us, their adult children? The Talmud's answer is, essentially, personal attention and service to our parents. In former generations this may have been considerably easier than it is today. Family members usually lived in closer proximity to one another than is frequently the case today. This also meant that the actual help described in the Talmud was something an adult child could provide. Often that is not the case today.

We need to recognize that lack of proximity has major implications for all the parties involved. Often, when parents have moved to retirement communities, children,

who sincerely wish to fulfill their filial responsibilities, are left wondering what it is they are supposed to do. Similarly, work and career situations in our mobile society draw children away from their family's place of origin, distancing them from parents who may continue to reside there.

What does it mean for us today to say that children must sacrifice some of their work time in order to give physical and emotional support to their elderly parents? I would suggest that it means maintaining ongoing and regular supportive contact with our aging parents. To the extent that one can spend time with one's elderly parents, one ought to. In our world, family visits that are multi-generational, that provide opportunities for younger children to know their aged, are extremely important. Often this takes creativity, not only in scheduling, but in planning the event so that there is positive interaction between the parties. Certainly, there is considerable giving of one's time, thought and energy to organize these important, mutually sustaining and nurturing events in our complex society. In this way, in our time, we may continue to provide the emotional support that contributes to our aged parents' well-being and sense of connection to us and our families.

When Obligation Ceases

Another contemporary issue related to filial responsibility to aged parents is the issue of parental abuse of the child. In cases where a child has experienced real physical or sexual abuse at the hands of the parent, the abusing parent is regarded by the tradition as a *rasha*, a wicked individual who has violated the Torah's commandments (*Tosafot, BT Kiddushin*, 32a, s.v. R. Judah). In such cases, the parent cannot legitimately claim his or her Torah-given rights to honor from the abused child. Technically, then, the child is free from all responsibility to the parent. This does not mean, however, that abused children cannot provide attention to their parents if they so choose. Yet, the tradition would support abused children who, due to their abuse, no longer wish to maintain a relationship with their abusers. Obviously, if all the parties have reconciled, all their obligations and rights are re-established since the offending parent has repented and been forgiven by the child.

There is also the sad situation in which parents have become so senile that it is impossible for the children personally to handle the situation. Here, too, the tradition recognizes adult children's option to place their parent in the direct care of those who can provide effective help (*Shulkhan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah* 240:10). This view is much debated and ought to be considered a “last resort”

position. Nevertheless, it recognizes that there are situations so devastating to the parent-adult child relationship that in the interest of protecting all parties' "image of God" and emotional health, some distance between parent and child may be necessary.

A few general principles emerge from our texts. Elderly parents need as much autonomy and personal control over their affairs as they can manage. They need encouragement and appropriate frameworks in which to exercise this control. It is not the appropriate role of children to become "parents" to their parents, unless no choice remains. The adult child's role is one of support for parental independence and involvement in life. □

Touching

Elaine Starkman

Then your Ma takes your hand
and you take hers back
because lately you talk
with friends and shrinks
on this mother/daughter business
you've read about for years
even though you still
hold your childhood grudge
go mad with her crying
and try too hard not to be like her.
You don't love her purely
even if she was there with lamb-
chop lunches, tightly tucked sheets,
and tried to raise you right.
But she's really getting
old now, and you are too.
So you hoist up her hand in yours
even though you're faking,
even though this morning
you swore under your breath

ELAINE STARKMAN is a writer living in Walnut Creek, California. Her books include *Love Scene* and *Learning to Sit in the Silence: A Journal of Caretaking*.

you won't let her complaints repeat
themselves onto the next generation.

And there you are touching,
holding Ma's crooked fingers

to your puffy thumb,
your fat, look-alike noses almost

touching--the way you always
wanted in childhood.

Older adults: our only surviving natural resource

Harry Citron and Janet Kurland

The greeting, "May you live to be a hundred and twenty" has taken on new meaning in our time. For advances in medical science have added years to our lives and we are experiencing what some have referred to as an "age wave", "a senior boom". The demographers tell us that the older population--persons 65 years and beyond--represented 12.6% of the United States population in 1991. In the Jewish community, for whatever reasons, the number projected is as high as 18% with one third over the age of 75 and 10% over 85. There are twice as many "old old" (80+) in the Jewish community as in the American population as a whole!

The 1995 White House Conference on Aging struggled with the major issues facing older people in our country today: 1) the need for comprehensive health care, including long-term care, 2) economic security, 3) affordable housing and housing with support service options, and 4) maximizing options for a quality life.

Before discussing these difficult issues, we need to address some frequently asked questions beginning with *Who/What* is old? Ever since the United States Social Security Administration made retirement benefits available to 65 year olds in 1935 (later lowering the minimum age to 62), 65 has become our guiding light. Yet few people are aware of the origins of this figure. Retirement age as a concept did not exist before the 1880s. It was Otto von Bismark of Prussia who established pensions at

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age 65 with the hope of garnering votes and satisfying a disgruntled work force. Since life expectancy at that time was 47 years, it did not appear to present a drain on governmental coffers while workers viewed this "gift" as protection against poverty in old age.

Defying Definition

There have been numerous attempts in recent years to characterize, define and re-define aging. It is our collective experience that the key to any definition is the *diversity* one finds among the elderly. Indeed, we promote the tenet that "if you have met *one* older person, you have met *one* older person".

A second piercing question arises: Other than sheer numbers, are the Jewish elderly any different from the non-Jewish elderly? Allen Glicksman has concluded, and we strongly agree, that while they are not different in the problems faced, they *are* different in their responses to many of these problems. For example, the desire to maintain strong control over a situation, a tradition which provides the elderly with more status than they are accorded in general society, different attitudes towards the use of formal services.

An administrator of an acute Jewish hospital was asked by lay fundraisers what was Jewish about his hospital? His immediate response was that older Jewish patients behaved differently at his facility than they did at the Catholic or community hospital. In the Jewish hospital their behavior was more demanding, their expectations higher, a sense of ownership, a sense of pride, of communal connection seemed to drive their behavior.

Traditional Jewish values emphasize that we owe the elderly reverence, care, respect. With this as our framework, we return to the major issues faced by our Jewish elderly.

Comprehensive Health Care, Including Long-Term Care

In 1965, Medicare and Medicaid rose in brilliant display on the health care horizon. These combined programs cover 63% of all health care expenses of people aged 65 and over. Yet they fall short of protecting older Americans against the burden of health care bills or of assuring access to quality care. Persons over 80 devote 29% of their incomes to health care expenses. Cost and affordability, inadequate supply of services, transportation difficulties all create barriers to accessing services. Ageism--an attitudinal barrier--also rears its ugly head in the delivery of services.

(continued on p. 8)

❖ Introducing sh'ma mina ❖

Sh'ma mina, "learn from this", is an Aramaic phrase used throughout the Talmud to introduce some insight or conclusion that emerges from the preceding discussion. *Sh'ma mina* is also the name we chose for our new text-based feature.

A Roundtable In Print

Coordinated by CLAL scholar, Rabbi David Nelson, and scheduled to appear occasionally throughout our publishing year, *Sh'ma mina* is constructed like a page of the Talmud. It begins with a "*mishnah*"--a core text from the tradition situated in the center of the page, followed by a "*gemara*"--a central commentary expanding upon the core text. Surrounding the "*mishnah*" and "*gemara*" are the marginal notes, written by CLAL faculty and lay leaders, that offer an array of voices speaking to both the core text and its commentary.

The voices of CLAL are diverse, even contradictory. They do not so much explicate the text as respond to it. The voices are often personal, revealing the ways the tradition touches their souls as well as their minds.

The Shape Of The Page

The construct of the page was chosen with great deliberation. Its very design emphasizes the multi-layered, multi-vocal nature of Judaism. As readers of text, we are not only the recipients of our tradition but its creators as well. We shape the narratives of Judaism through our responses to them. Whenever we engage in the study of texts, we do so as part of the eternal echo of the ages that came before us. By engaging us thus, the text is never finished.

A Guide To The Reader

Begin reading at the top of the center column with the "*mishnah*" or core text. Then continue down the same column with the "*gemara*" or primary commentary. After that, dip into the commentaries around the page. Consider them, question them, craft your own responses.

The goal of the page is not to reach a neat conclusion, not to wrap the issue up in a tidy package of "what Judaism says about..." or "what Judaism believes about...". Rather, the goal is to invite you as a participant to join in the never-ending experience that is Judaism.

DAVID KRAEMER: Though, by Rashi's figuring, Isaac was 123 years old when he was declared "old" by the Torah (Genesis 27:1) he was 180 years at the time of his death (Genesis 35:28)! Whatever the condition of his eyes, then, how weak could he possibly have been? He lived from this point more years than the full lifetimes of most people of his period! According to the midrash, the weakening of his eyes was precipitated by his tears when bound on the altar by his father Abraham, many years before. Thus, weakness of eyes should not be taken as a sign of a more general weakness of old age. His body remained strong. It was his vision, with which he could see the injustice of this world, that increasingly weakened.

In contrast with Isaac's great longevity, Moses died when he was only 120 years old. The Torah tells us explicitly that his strength was unabated at that time (Deuteronomy 34:7). How could this be? How could someone live in this world 120 years, seeing slavery, death, rebellion and cruelty, without those things taking their toll? I am suspicious, even a little fearful, of such immunity. I am more comfortable with the decline of my father Isaac than I am with the unnatural vigor of my master Moses.

DR. DAVID KRAEMER is a Senior CLAL Associate.

BRAD HIRSCHFIELD: Both Moses and Isaac die without the help of their two sons. Nowhere does the Torah indicate that the brothers Esau and Jacob, cared for their father during his declining years, or even during his final days. Whatever "contentment" Isaac felt at the end of his life, it surely did not arise from the warm relations that he shared with his sons. The brothers came

together only to bury Isaac. Not a single word between them is recorded in the text. They do not see God in each other's faces, as they might have for the brief moment when Jacob declares in Genesis 33:10, "to see [Esau's] face is like seeing the face of God". By the time that they bury their father, the two brothers have lost whatever measure of that ability they once possessed. But Isaac was never very good at seeing, and so for his two sons to bury him without burying the deep tensions between them, fits with both sons' experience of their father.

RABBI BRAD HIRSCHFIELD is Assistant Director of Professional Education at CLAL.

WILLIAM LEWIT: When we age and approach the finish of our earthly days, we understand that vision is much more than that which we perceive through our eyes; it is the integration of the meaning in one's own particular lifetime.

We can believe that by the end of his life, Isaac had made his peace with that God-intoxicated father who had prepared him to be a sacrifice.

In his final days could Isaac have called both his sons together to attempt a reconciliation and ask forgiveness for the pain and dissension he had inflicted upon them?

To "bury" one's father inside means to identify with and accept the person in all his frailty and strength. The task of aging is to bring close those whom we love and have hurt so that they may gather strength and vision for themselves.

Where is our vision so that our children may live?
WILLIAM V. LEWIT, MD, a psychiatrist who lives in Scarsdale, NY, is active in CLAL.

Sh'ma mina*

It is written (Genesis 27:1) "When Isaac was old his eyes were too dim to see..." and it is written (Deuteronomy 34:7) "Moses was 120 years old when he died; his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated..."

I might have thought that the Torah wished us to understand that Isaac's last years, with both vision and strength sapped, were tragic, while those of Moses, whose strength and vision were still those of youth, were triumphant. However, it is also written regarding Isaac (Genesis 35:29) "...he was buried by his sons, Esau and Jacob." But regarding Moses, (Deuteronomy 34:6) "[God] buried him in the valley...and no one knows his burial place." Learn from this that it is not one's strength or weakness in old age that signifies the quality of a life, but whether the elder has friends and relatives who remain close enough to care for him/her to the end. For Isaac, in old age, was cared for by his sons, and is described at his death (Genesis 35:29) as "...content [or "sated"] with his days." Moses ascended the mountain at the end bereft of human companionship. The Torah is silent regarding his state of mind, but its physical description of him at death, young and vigorous, suggests that he was not yet sated, but wished to live on. From this we may learn that it is preferable to come to old age blind and weak, but surrounded by those who care, than bright-eyed and strong, but alone.

RABBI DAVID NELSON

*Learn from this -- a page of text study by CLAL

Medicaid--a program intended for the impoverished--has become the principal source of payment for long-term care. Less than 20% of the overall U.S. population can afford commercial long-term care insurance. *However, despite the shortcomings in these publicly funded programs, they are currently threatened with severe cutbacks or extinction and we must find ways of preserving, adding to, funding, and developing new systems to provide dignified, affordable, accessible health care to our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents.*

Economic Security

Today's generation of elders are the most economically well off of any prior generation. However, more than 3/5 of persons aged 65 and over depend on Social Security to provide half or more of their incomes. The financial solvency of Social Security has been at the forefront of many older persons' concerns. They remember conditions before the program began and many recall the depression with fear of becoming impoverished. Social Security must be protected at all costs.

Affordable Housing And Housing With Support Service Options

The physical space in which we live is one of the most important elements in our daily lives. Older homeowners find security, continuity, memories in this, their most valuable asset. Many elderly renters spend too much of their income on housing; still others live in sub-standard dwellings. Older frail adults often exit their community precipitously because of a lack in their environs of physically supportive features and/or personal care services.

A disproportionate percentage of Jewish aged are apartment dwellers. Over 130 elderly and independent living facilities are currently operated under Jewish communal auspices with in excess of 25,000 units. Yet most Jewish communities suffer from a dearth of resources--waiting lists for subsidized housing to benefit the low-income elderly is often years long; housing with physical and human resources to assist the frail elderly is equally problematic.

We must look to the private as well as the public sector for more resources while at the same time linking services with housing more effectively. There must be a range of options available to an older person based upon his needs.

Maximizing Options For A Quality Of Life

Quality of life is a concept difficult to measure and equally difficult to define. Individual perceptions of quality of life are personal and arise from one's ethics, values and belief systems. While material concerns (economic, health, etc.) play an important role, creativity and spiritual fulfillment are at the heart of quality. While a high percentage of Jewish elderly serve as volunteers, we need to find additional social roles which maximize a sense of well being and address the need for self-fulfillment in aging.

The Challenge

We live in challenging and changing times. "The test of a people is how it behaves toward the old." Jewish communities have to see the needs of the elderly, realign priorities, develop new services. Social agencies, health care facilities, religious institutions need to form new partnership free of "turf". We have a long and strong history of caring for our own and our goal must be to make every Jewish elder a significant being.

"Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy" (Heschel). □

Book reviews

We Are Children Just The Same Krizova, Kotouc, Ornest, Trans. JPS. \$29.95.

"No," says the heart. Even Nazis would not hurt the darling teenage boys who wrote these excerpts from *vedem*, the magazine they published in Theresienstadt. Yes, they wrote like able young adolescents anywhere--only their promise was cut off. Blessing on all who have given them this well-deserved if odd immortality.

Auschwitz And After Charlotte Delbo. Yale. \$25.

Where much writing by non-writers about the Holocaust is burdened with efforts to "write off," this telling pastiche of poetry, anecdote and meditation commends itself for its masterful spareness. Delbo's sophisticated *zimtzum* has its own quiet, primal power.

