



Sh'ma Book Reviews

as Mohammed Ali and Jimmy Carter. The melding of text and discussion is impeccable. The equally extensive Glossary contributes to the accessibility of the book as a whole.

For this theologian-reviewer, the gems are the last three chapters dealing respectively with Knowing God, Fearing God, and Loving God. The subtle discussion of the tensions between the mind and the heart, knowl-

edge and feeling, philosophy and psychology – all in a few brief pages – are paradigms of exposition.

I've learned a great deal from this book. An enthusiastic thank you to the authors.

Dr. Neil Gillman teaches Jewish Philosophy at The Jewish Theological Seminary of America. His most recent book is The Death of Death.

The Language of Truth, The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet

*Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, translated and interpreted by Arthur Green
(Jewish Publication Society, 408 pp, \$34.95, 1998)*

S*efat Emet* is the commentary by Hasidic master, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter, who lived in Gur, Poland from 1847 to 1905. The commentary itself is a marvelous weaving of traditional, *midrashic*, Hasidic and mystical interpretations on the Torah portions. It is a surprisingly contemporary text that speaks directly to the spiritual search for meaning. In the original, it reads almost like a spiritual manual for the adult seeker. The Hasidic master's wonderfully radical and innovative readings of the Torah text reveal Judaism's treasure-house of spiritual riches hidden inside the very words themselves. As the Baal Shem Tov taught, the special light of the First Day of Creation was hidden away in the words and letters of the Torah. In his very methodology, the Gerer Rebbe shows how words can either conceal or reveal Divine Truth. In the substance of his teachings, he shows how this is also true of life.

Now, for the first time, Professor Arthur Green has brought to light these marvelous teachings and made them accessible to the "uninitiated and non-Hebrew reader" alike. As Green states, the *Sefat Emet*, from within his own historical context of battling secularism, materialism and differentiation from the non-Hasidic Orthodox world, necessarily presented his Hasidim with "...this constant emphasis on inward spirituality as the true goal." In so doing, the Gerer Rebbe creates "a post-kabalistic Jewish mystical language." He presents us with a "return to mystical consciousness...expressed in simple direct language." *Sefat Emet* reflects its influence of the "reformist character of Polish Hasidism and its desire to base itself on a search for the true presence of the spirit in the current moment rather than on tradition and memory..." These fundamental sensibilities truly form the serendipitous connection bridging what Green coins as "the old Jewish spirituality and the new." No matter what Jewish denomination the reader may be, Green's book provides a response to the pressures of the then approaching

20th century even as we envision our entry into the next millennium.

Providing this bridge becomes Green's express purpose. To this end he has given the reader not only accurate English translations and personal responses, but also the original Hebrew text. His Introduction provides an academically original and informative historical context within which to approach the Gerer Rebbe's teachings as well as an exploration of key concepts.

Green's insistence, that the book include original teachings along with his responses, underscores a respect for the teachings to speak for themselves. His responses, which also serve as a *supra* commentary, provide the reader with a nice balance of historical reference while modeling the importance of establishing a personal context and engagement with the text. Green's seamless shifting from the personal to the academic is part of the richness of the book, and invites the reader to engage with the text as well.

To do so would be to follow one of the book's opening and most radical teachings of all. On Shabbat, we sing, "*ki mitziyon tetzeh Torah*" (for out of Zion comes Torah). *Sefat Emet* teaches that "*tziyon*" is the inner point inside every individual that distinguishes his/her entire being — namely, their direct connection to God. How we transform ourselves, how we clarify that inner truth, becomes the story of our lives, and that, teaches the *Sefat Emet*, is the meaning of the Oral Tradition. With Green's newest book, continuation of the Jewish tradition of learning has been greatly enriched.

Janet Zimmern teaches Jewish adult education classes on text and spirituality, with Sefat Emet continuing to be a favorite focus. She is also a clinical social worker who seeks to help people weave together a reading of traditional texts with the unfolding texts of their lives.