The Inescapable Truth: A Book Review

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Rabbi Dr. Sanford H. Shudnow is a retired US Navy Chaplain. After his 22 year naval career, he retired as Staff Chaplain and Jewish Department Head at the National Naval Medical Center, Bethesda [now Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, Bethesda].After the Navy, he served as Chaplain at the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Washington. Currently, he divides his time between Silver Spring, Maryland and Sydney, Australia.

BOOK REVIEW

THE INESCAPABLE TRUTH

by Rabbi Dr. Sanford H. Shudnow

Rabbi Eli J. Gottlieb. The Inescapable Truth: A sound approach to genuine religion. New York: Philipp Feldheim, Inc., 1971.

"It has already become clear that 'good' is life, and 'evil' is death. True ideas are referred to as 'life' and the untenable as 'death.'"

-- from *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Book I:42

by Moses Maimonides, 12th Century

Perhaps the name of the review should be a "Retrospective on the book ***The Inescapable Truth*** and its author, Rabbi Eliezer Y. Gottlieb." The reason is partly because Rabbi Gottlieb had a profound affect upon me in my younger years. It was a privilege seeing him in class, and his kind and patient way, especially with some of our younger students. I was one of his older students.

It's about time for this review. More than enough time has passed since my teacher Rabbi Eliezer Y. Gottlieb had written his book ***The Inescapable Truth***. I was studying at the Hebrew Theological College in Skokie, Illinois, the famed Skokie Yeshiva. Rabbi Gottlieb, was my teacher in Talmud. He was a wonderful, friendly, brilliant teacher, who requested of me that I write a book review of his newly released book.

Rabbi Gottlieb was especially hoping that I might write a favorable review that would appear in a variety of rabbinic journals of the day. I thought at the time that I could do this for my beloved teacher, but once I started reading the book, I felt that it was a little too fanciful and could only be accepted by serious so-called 'Torah True' believers. I kept my thoughts to myself and did not write the expected review

It is now over forty years since those days, and only now do I feel the need to write a review of Rabbi Gottlieb's book. Perhaps it is really a retrospective on Rabbi Gottlieb, as well as on his book. Why now, and why write from my home in Sydney, a world away from the Skokie Yeshiva in the suburbs of Chicago?

I was sitting in the newly refurbished *beit midrash* (chapel), in our local synagogue in the eastern suburbs of Sydney, and noticed on one of the book shelves of the new library, Rabbi Gottlieb's distinctive 1971 book, its lovely yellow dust jacket adorned with the Star of David motif. More than nine thousand miles (fifteen thousand kilometers) from the scene of my unfulfilled promise, that book on the shelf served as a witness, pointing a finger at me, saying, "Haim Shudnow, you know what you promised your teacher in July of 1972. Now do it."

I thought a great deal about the book and Rabbi Gottlieb. I waited until I returned to my home outside Washington, DC and retrieved my copy of the book from my personal collection there. I knew exactly where it was.

The book with his handwritten Hebrew inscription to me is precious and personal. He had bestowed the book upon me, inscribed the frontispiece with a moving, flowery message, writing a blessing of excellence in Torah and pure fear of God and that I may cause light to shine. It is signed E.Y. Gottlieb.

I pulled the book gently off the shelf and looked at it, reread the impressive blurb on the author, learning things about him that I never fully realized, of his birth in Kolno, Poland and intensive Torah learning under the greatest rabbinic sages, including Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, and receiving his *semicha* (ordination) under Rabbi Aharon Kotler, He then managed to escape from Poland to Lithuania, and from there to Japan in 1941.

While I knew nothing about his earlier years when studying with Rabbi Gottlieb, I am now so personally touched, since my own mother was born in Poland and I spent three years as a U.S. Navy Chaplain stationed in Japan. While in Japan, I heard many stories of the yeshiva students saved during the Holocaust, having sought refuge in Japan.

Looking to see the name of the publisher, I was amazed to realize that my teacher's book was published by the premier Jewish publishing house -- Philipp Feldheim Inc. Once I started my rabbinic studies in Manhattan, I would spend much time visiting the various Jewish publishers, which especially included Feldheim Publishing and Behrman House, on East Broadway.

I should have known then, that if Rabbi Gottlieb's book was worthy of being published by Feldheim, it must be a truly worthy book; but I didn't realize that in those halcyon days.

Why didn't I write a review of the book back then in 1972? The simple answer is, after having delved into the book and reading his perspective, it didn't fit with my Jewish Torah worldview at the time. My problem was that Rabbi Gottlieb's belief system was so deep in *Torah Min Ha-Shamayim* -- Heavenly or Divine Torah -- trying to prove that the Torah could not possibly have been written by human beings, and that all of our Judaism, all of the Torah -- everything, comes directly from Heaven

Rabbi Gottlieb set about proving this premise. Today, I believe that his proofs are persuasive, eloquently presented and fit with what eventually became my perspective on Torah.

The intended purpose of ***The Inescapable Truth*** is clearly set forth at the outset in the preface. Rabbi Gottlieb writes:

> "The purpose for which this book is intended is twofold. Its first and principal aim is to share with the many who hold true Orthodox beliefs identical to my own . . . . These are the ideas which have formed the basis for my own strong beliefs in Orthodox religious ideology."

> "Secondly, I fervently hope that most of what is expounded herein may have a convincing effect upon many people who were heretofore skeptics about religion in general, and Orthodox Judaism in particular." (p. ix)

In retrospect, I find that many of his ideas, while quite extreme, are convincing. For instance, the Sabbatical laws: if one is trying to establish an agrarian-based society that will be successful in the Land of Israel, how could it be that any human author/leader would set up laws requiring the land to lie fallow for an entire year? That is, that one would not plant, not tend the crops or harvest them, nor sell the produce. This means a full year and into the next. That year is known as *Sh'nat Ha-Shemita*.

The Jubilee year, which is the 50th year -- the *Sh'nat Ha-Yovel* -- is also to be observed. What is the actual meaning of the Jubilee Year? The society observes the usual *Shemita* or 49th year, which is 7×7 plus the 50th year or the Jubilee year and then into the next year, the 51st year, in reality the first year of the next cycle. That is almost three years that the land has not been worked. It would take months to bring the fields and farm land back into condition for productive agriculture.

Why would any human being write and impose such unworkable laws? Only God could have given these commandments and assured the people that He would provide them sustenance during those years.

Rabbi Gottlieb adds that even if a human being came up with such a system, he would eventually retract the rules, since he would in no way wish for the next generation -- for his children, for his grandchildren to suffer such restrictions and burdens. He would have to admit that he had made up the laws himself, and that they are no longer obligatory.

Looking at the chapter headings, it is easy to see what amazing an undertaking Rabbi Gottlieb had taken upon himself. There are ten chapter headings: Positive Skepticism, Nature Testifies To Its Creator, Why Religion?, Which Religion?, The One and Only *True* Judaism, Torah From Heaven, Free Will Vs. Secular and Religious Determinism, The Immortality of the Soul, Christianity and Zoological Anti-Semitism, Did The Catholic Church Finally Ordain The Truth?.

My particular focus on Rabbi Gottlieb's book has been his chapter six: Torah From Heaven. This chapter includes subheadings that could make one's head spin: Ten Proofs, Acceptance of the Burden on Themselves and Their Progeny, Uniqueness of Judaism's Beginning, The Obvious Necessity of the Epic of Sinai, Liars or Fools, Beliefs Transformed into Historical Facts, The Ordinance of the Sabbatical Year, etc.

Sitting here in Sydney in my usual prayer seat and pondering many of the learned challenges emerging from ***The Inescapable Truth***, I realize just how brilliant and profound the teachings of Rabbi Gottlieb are and the profound impact he made upon his many students.

Rabbi Eliezer Y. Gottlieb may not be a household name and his book may not be on everyone's book shelf, but he and his book deserve a second look and deep thought. We must all revisit the questions raised in his book. Rabbi Gottlieb was very clear, very correct, and his perspective in seeing the Torah as a Divine document, not only a divinely inspired document, rather *Torah Min Ha-Shamayim* --Torah From Heaven.

I hope and pray that this retrospective review of Rabbi Gottlieb's book will lead to it receiving proper recognition. It is quite a brilliant and beautifully written exposition, dealing with many of the questions that arise as we endeavor develop a deeper connection with our Jewish heritage. This is my prayer.