

Aharon Appelfeld's Religiosity

Aharon Appelfeld is one of Israel's best known writers. Although often thought of as a Holocaust writer, his work and thought is much deeper and richer. When I came across his work *A Table For One – Under The Light of Jerusalem* - his short memoir of his early years in Israel, I was enchanted by his nuance and passion. He was comfortable to be an outsider – a Zionist, but not swept up with the mass ideologies. Although by no means an Orthodox Jew, he nevertheless describes a deep and profound religiosity and appreciation for Judaism, a rare trait amongst Israeli writers, then and now.

A Table For One, pp 80-81

According to accepted norms, I would not be considered a religious Jew. I neither go to synagogue nor do I keep the commandments according to the strict letter of the law, but Jewish creativity is indispensable to me: the Bible, the *Mishnah*, the Gemarah, the literature of the medieval period, the mystics and Hasidic literature are all my books. I study them daily for an hour or two, sometimes more. They accompany my waking thoughts.

Whenever I have to go abroad for a short time, I put two books in my bag. One, a work of Kafka, and the other, chapters of the mystics or a Hasidic text. I can't be without a Jewish book. I love the Russian classics and some works of modern literature, but I have this intimate connection to Jewish books. They are as necessary to me as air to breathe.

Once Yeshayahu Tishby, who would sometimes come into Café Hermon, saw me sitting and studying *Likutei Moharan*, a Hasidic classic. He came up to me and said musingly, 'that's a difficult book, what do you get from it?'

'An attitude to the world'.

'Are you a religious man?'

Yes' I said, and I was happy I said it.

I found his direct question annoying. It was as if he were looking for a defect or something that was wrong in me. I live Jewish life in my own way. I love observant Jews and have cause to love them. During the war all Jews were tortured, but observant Jews were singled out for greater torture and ridicule. Their beards and sidelocks were sometimes plucked off from their faces, they could be forced to crawl naked on all fours while pork was forced into their mouths. You cannot forget such sights.

My grandfather was an observant Jew. When I think of him or write about him, I find myself embracing his gestures. And there are moments when I know that real prayer is only possible when you are wrapped in a prayer shawl. I have no pretensions of being observant, but it's impossible to deny my connection to prayer, to the mitzvot, customs – not to speak of the books – only because I don't keep them in their entirety.

A Table For One – On The Eve Of The Six Day War, pp 92-93

I was called up a few days before the war broke out. It was a swift war. With such a resounding victory, the human losses were swallowed up amidst the vast jubilation. Just as the danger and threat had brought to the surface words from the Holocaust, victory brought with it terms from Jewish mysticism. In the radio and in the press people talked of miracles, of Redemption, and the coming of the Messiah. These terms were beyond me. I love the mysticism of daily life, the colours and the

shadows that surround me, particular spots in Jerusalem toward evening, the light that glints out from the ancient walls and the rocks, the plants that rise out of the parched earth. And even more than them, I love the people who embrace children and the people who pray. This mysticism is close to my heart, but for me cosmic or historical mysticism remains a complete abstraction. My friend Leib Rochman, who always lived on a lofty plane, used to say that I was blind to miracles. I didn't take it as a reproach. When I was a child my grandfather told me that God dwells everywhere.

In the trees as well, I asked.

In the trees too, he replied.

In animals too?

In animals too.

In man as well?

Man, replied grandfather, is the partner of God.

Man is God? I was shocked. No. but he has a little of God in him.

This conversation has been etched in my memory. Grandfather was a believer – he believed with all his heart and soul. That belief of his was expressed in his every gesture: the way he gripped an object, opened or closed a book, picked up a child and placed him on his knees. Sometimes I feel that I have inherited his religious feelings from him. I never learned much from abstract ideas; the figures from childhood and experiences in the Holocaust, are what stand before my eyes and have molded my thoughts.