

*"The Sabbath is for Shiksas"*

Ari Sussman

The theme of this dog-eared collection shows the transition of an Eastern European Jewish identity to an American Jewish identity. This is documentation in various forms -- narrative, proverbial, scholarly, historical, short stories, folk tales, and novels -- of two worlds, both inhospitable, crashing together.

Clearly, if one accumulates dozens of books on a theme, it could be assumed that the collection was of an immediate significance to the collector. This is, however, not the case with this collection.

These books came to my bookshelf over a long period of time, and were barely read until recently. They arrived from library book sales, garage sales and garbage bins from around the world, stuffed into suitcases-frequently at the expense of abandoned clothing and toiletries.

Why then did they stay on my bookshelf through so many moves, while other books were donated or otherwise discarded, if they were hardly touched?

I suppose I sensed that someday they would be important to me.

It should be noted that while I am Jewish, I love bacon. I'd eat an entire hog. I don't make it a point to date Jewish women, nor do I care much for ideas of God or theology. The scope of my observance is pithy. On Passover, when Jews recount how God saved us from bondage in Egypt by consuming unleavened bread, I eat my BLTs on matzo. A few weeks ago, I listened to the old-world melodies of Neil Diamond's "The Jazz Singer" while preparing my favorite delicacy, matzoballs deep-fried in lard.

One day a few years ago, I picked up the Tevye stories of Sholom Aliechem and found that I recognized the characters from my life. The fools, the degenerate aristocrats, and the matchmakers all seemed familiar.

Many of these books are old but the themes are perennial. The timelessness of the stories is not mitigated by the difference in setting, whether geographically, culturally, or temporally. As Rabbi Shabtai Zisel ben Avraham v'Rachel Riva, aka Bob Dylan, teaches, "the past is close behind."

As I read the old-world literature the characters, humor, poetry, relationships, neuroses, chutzpa, admonitions, death, desires, and sex all seem familiar. I also connect closely with the new-world literature, in which these themes collide with modern post-religious values.

It's something to have one foot in the Jewish community, where the past is remembered and revered, and the other foot in modern America, where the past-- even two weeks ago

-- is generally regarded as obsolete.

It's a possibility that as we age, we begin to see the connectedness of time. We see the ways in which our personal history, as well as that of our community, shapes our destiny. These patterns are not difficult to recognize.

Jews refer to themselves as "The People of the Book." I suppose people write so that they don't forget. I don't know much about history and I'm not sure why I collect these books. But it is possible that maybe I read to learn what not to forget.