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Box 6, Folder 7, Book Review of *My Search for the Messiah* by
Mark Jay Mirsky, Undated.



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MY SEARCH FOR THE MESSIAH, Studies and Wanderings in Israel and America
by Mark Jay Mirsky, Macmillan, 240 pp., \$10.95

Reviewed by Marc H. Tanenbaum

(Rabbi Tanenbaum, national interreligious affairs director of the American
author.
Jewish Committee, is a lecturer and ~~writer~~. His recent writings include Religious
Values in an Age of Violence, Speaking of God Today, Evangelical^S and Jews in Dialogue.)

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My Search for the Messiah is cut in the generational style of Consciousness III
by Charles Reich, only the fabric out of which this book is sewn together is the
tallis, the Jewish prayer shawl, rather than Yale tweeds. The author, Mark Jay
Mirsky, a 36-year-old novelist and teacher, describes himself as "an overheated,
postadolescent, Jewish Don Quixote" and this book is a well-written autobiographical
account of his search for his self, his Jewish self. Inexorably, that ~~search~~ personal
search becomes linked with the 4,000-year-old quest for meaning and transcendence
of his rediscovered "Jewish family" of the extended past and the present.

While there are aspects of Mirsky's countercultural conceptions and rhetoric
about contemporary Jewish life, Judaism, the Synagogue, Rabbis, Jewish authors,
sex, women, and Israel that are exasperating, at times even vulgar, the appeal to
me of his spiritual odyssey lodges precisely in its countercultural flashes of
insight that ~~are~~ ring honest and true to reality. There is a good deal of hand-wringing
going on these days in the so-called "Jewish establishment" (including my own) over
the "defection" of Jewish young people to the Eastern religious cults - the Moonies,
Hare Krishna - and Hebrew-Christian sects (a defection which, I believe, has been
overstated by media ^{dramatization} ~~treatment~~)

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Whether they have apostasized or not, many Jewish kids, like their Christian counterparts, are genuinely fed up with the materialism, the sickening greed, the immoralities in Washington and nearly everywhere else, and the general brutalization of human beings and nature. A great many Jewish kids are searching for authenticity as Jews and as persons, for a humane and just community, and for experiences that convince them that it makes a difference by committing one's life to Judaism and the Jewish people in a nuclear-missile age. "They are not looking for Jewish rap groups," one sociologist recently wrote, "they are ~~looking~~ looking for God."

Mirsky's book - with all its contradictions, mockeries, and disdains - is nevertheless a good place for such "seekers," Jewish and perhaps others, to begin. His honest self-scrutiny is ~~exception~~ compelling. "I had no identity outside of my roots in the Jewish past," he writes, "The Jewish present, however, seemed vulgar, shallow, silly." Under the tutelage of a ^{Carroll} ~~wise~~ Harvard rabbi, he struggled with "the puzzle in which anger at Judaism and a constant obsession with it, that could only be love, contended."

After immersing himself in "the vast geography" of Jewish learning and scholarship, and meeting with such eminent Jewish scholars ~~like~~ as the great Harvard philosopher, the late Dr. Harry Wolfson; the dean of the Orthodox rabbis, "the ~~Rabbi~~ Rav," Joseph B. Soloveichik of Boston; and the ^{Sorensen} ~~eminent~~ authority on Jewish mysticism, Dr. Gershom Scholem of Israel (who, he says, "returned half of the Jewish soul to us" by putting "flesh on the bones of Jewish myth"), Mirsky celebrates his discovery of "that fabulous world of the Jewish past which Hebrew school had shut me out of."

It is both fascinating and instructive to accompany the author's spiritual trajectory from his childhood exposure to juvenile Judaism in a Dorchester, Mass., Hebrew school ("The American Hebrew school often seemed a conspiracy against it") to his maturer appreciation of the genuine liberating power and relevance of Jewish ideas and values encountered in their highest expressions. Mirsky truly

understands how radical a breakthrough in human consciousness have been the central Biblical and Rabbinic affirmations about God ("an Unknown that takes an interest loads me down with liabilities and responsibilities, but as I can't endure to live otherwise"), about man, society, and history.

His articulation of the Messianic obsession in Judaism is both traditional and futuristic: "A world perfected under law - Torah...what other people made a perfect social justice the sine qua non of their existence." And, Mirsky adds, "Soon I dream the radical implications of these traditions will out again and Judaism will begin to step into its vital and dangerous responsibilities among the nations. ...We, as a tribe, will outstrip the Swedes, the Danes, the Chinese, as innovators in modern man's social behavior. It's for this possibility that I remain a Jew - for I will not surrender my own spark of the Messiah."

The peak of Mirsky's search for Jewish self-knowledge is reached during his journey to Israel. "In the wake of the Yom Kippur war," he writes, "I have to realize that the State of Israel was bound up in the very center of Jewish existence. Our Covenant was struck here... It is in my blood this land, a deep inexplicable lust. To know there's an end to the wandering of my family."

But it is at the foot of Mount Sinai, in that vast desert emptiness, that he experiences a personal revelation, a mystical thunderclap of his Jewishness. "Small, I felt so small, and it elated me. I was a slave, a servant to something much larger than me. And I understood why my namesake Moses had brought his stubborn band of slave laborers into the ancestral ~~land~~ holy places of the Aramean wanderers so they could touch the old awe, the single God above them and beyond them."

If that is what is stirring in Consciousness III of young Jews, Consciousness I and II would do well to plug into its spiritual, Messianic electricity.

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