

Century Marks

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Listen up: Judaism is a noisy religion, according to Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of Great Britain: Jews pray together loudly. They study scripture in groups, and argue passionately with each other. But sometimes, says Sacks, you learn something about your own religion through an encounter with another one. Sacks tells a story about Mother Teresa, who, when asked by an interviewer what she says to God when she prays, replied: “I don’t say anything. I just listen.” When the interviewer asked what she hears God say, Mother Teresa answered: “He doesn’t say anything. He just listens. And if you can’t understand that, I can’t explain it to you.” Sacks concludes that though there are many words in faith, “there is also a listening beyond words, a silence that gives meaning to speech. In that silence, we know and are known by God” (*Celebrating Life*, Continuum).

Don’t be a hero: Christians are called to be saints, not heroes, says Samuel Wells (*Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*, Brazos Press). Heroes are the center of stories told about them, whereas saints are part of a story in which God is the center. A hero is willing to sacrifice himself—perhaps even give his life—for some cause, whereas the saint rests assured that Christ has already gained the greater good. The icon of heroism is the soldier, for the saint it is the martyr. A hero cannot fail, lest some great calamity occur, but the saint expects to fail, and knows that repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration are needed. Finally, by their heroic actions, heroes stand out from the rest of society, whereas saints depend upon their brothers and sisters in the faith community. All of the 64 New Testament references to saints are plural; saints are never alone.

Hold the “L” word: Physical courage is valued in American culture—the daring of a firemen fighting a great conflagration, for instance—but moral and intellectual courage is not flourishing at this stage in American history, according to novelist Marilynne Robinson. She cites two examples in which such courage has waned: First, political liberalism is so out of favor that liberals either capitulate to illiberalism, avoid using the word or drop out of politics entirely, leaving that domain to the cynics and bullies. “This is a time when it actually requires a certain courage to

declare oneself a liberal, even among presumptively like-minded people,” says Robinson. Second, Robinson notes that, while the narratives and traditions of Christianity form her most inward thoughts and ponderings, it takes a double dose of courage for her to declare she is a mainline Protestant. On one side are the sneers of the secularists who associate Christianity with fundamentalists like Jerry Falwell; on the other side are the Jerry Falwell conservatives. A lack of courage in culture has its consequences, says Robinson: the silencing of both political liberalism and mainline Protestantism, she claims, is part of the collapse of social criticism and social reform (*Harper's*, August).

Free the slaves: Despite the fact no country legally permits it, slavery is not dead; it is just less visible. An estimated 27 million people are in bondage worldwide, many of them bonded laborers—especially in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal—who have given themselves over for debts they can never repay. Even in the U.S. there are between 52,000 and 87,000 slaves at any given time. The fastest growing form of slavery is human trafficking, the transporting of slaves across national boundaries; many of these are women who end up in the commercial sex trade. In 1850 a slave cost \$40,000 in today's dollars; today a slave can be purchased for just \$30 in the Ivory Coast. “Bondage can be compared to living in a prison or a mental institution,” says Kevin Bales of Free the Slaves (www.freetheslaves.net). “Those who get out have to learn about living in the ‘real world’” (*Christian Science Monitor*, September 1).

Coming of age: There's a new trend among wealthy gentiles: throwing coming-of-age parties for 13-year-olds, patterned after Jewish bar or bat mitzvahs but without the religious dimension. The parties are so lavish and indulgent in some cases that families take out a second mortgage to pay for them. One mother in suburban Chicago spent \$40,000 for her daughter's party, even renting a synagogue for the occasion, despite the fact that she's Roman Catholic. The mother said it was worth it, as her daughter now has so many more friends. One rabbi termed this a dangerous trend: “It communicates narcissism instead of obligation. It's the worship of the child, instead of the child's worship of God.” Besides, he says, the best bar or bat mitzvah is one in which the child and family spend a year or more working on a service project, such as shopping for a housebound elderly person or working at a shelter for the homeless (*Chicago Tribune*, August 29).

Civil War flicks: The movie era began barely 40 years after the end of the Civil War, and Hollywood has created more than 700 Civil War-related films, almost three

times more than those about World War II. Bruce Chadwick, an expert on Civil War movies, chooses his top ten favorites: *Glory* (1989), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Roots* (1977), *Gettysburg* (1993), *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) and *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1940), *The Searchers* (1956), *Friendly Persuasion* (1956), *The Horse Soldiers* (1959), *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943) and *The General* (1927). He deliberately left out *Birth of a Nation* (1915) because, though it is on the American Film Institute's list of the 100 best movies, it is full of racist tripe (*American Heritage*, August/September).

Just the facts:

- The Census Bureau reported that 45 million Americans were without health insurance in 2003, up by 5.2 million since 2000. The number of uninsured folk in American is equivalent to the population of California, Oregon and Washington states combined—or four times the population of Greece.
- In late August a billboard was unveiled on Times Square in New York City that constantly updates the cost of the Iraq war. The sign started at \$134.5 billion and increases by \$177 million each day (Center for American Progress).
- By a 3-to-1 margin, people now think that the Iraq war has increased rather than decreased the threat of terrorism. Six in ten Americans polled believe the president has no clear plan for bringing the conflict to a resolution (*Boston Globe*, August 30).