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In *The Boy on the Door on the Ox: An Unusual Spiritual Journey Through the Strangest Jewish Texts*, Martin Samuel Cohen leads his readers through an imaginative and unexpected exploration of the Mishnah, or to be more specific, *Seder Tohorot*, the Mishnah's final and least-studied Order. *Seder Tohorot*, just as the rest of the Mishnah, is generally considered a book of law and tradition, but for Cohen it becomes something much more personal and far more relevant for today's modern Jewish reader. Rather than a book of antiquated legal tradition, Cohen sees the Mishnah as a text steeped in spiritual significance and teeming with non-legal lessons available to anyone who is willing to look for them. *The Boy on the Door on the Ox* is an illumination and explanation of the most important lessons Cohen has discovered during his time spent with this complex text.

Though the reader will immediately recognize that Cohen's writing style lacks almost any academic merit, one must keep in mind that this book is not written for the purpose of scholarship or for a scholarly audience, and it should not be read nor reviewed as such. Cohen is not concerned with legal history or cultural tradition; he is writing a spiritual guide meant for the open-minded seeker – the practicing Jew (8).

Crucial to Cohen's spiritual guide is the emphasis he places on its personal, idiosyncratic nature; everyone must come to God in his or her own way. Thus, the path will never be the same (23). *The Boy on the Door on the Ox* is meant only as an example to demonstrate that the journey is possible and to illustrate how it can be completed; it is not to be regarded as a step-by-step manual for spiritual fulfillment. To further accent this point, Cohen includes relevant autobiographical information – such as stories about his nonsensical move from British Columbia's Lower Mainland to Southern California (4) and buying a house in Jerusalem when he was unable to afford one in New York (232) – with each chapter in order to present the reader with the very personal context in which he was able to uncover each of the lessons he is now passing to the reader.

In addition to explaining the context of his own circumstances, Cohen also spends a considerable amount of time contextualizing each individual *mishnah* from which he seeks guidance.

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As a result, despite his insistence that he has no interest in writing a text concerning law or history (8), a significant portion of each chapter is spent explaining the legal history of each mishnah for the uninitiated reader.

It is only once he has completed these two exercises of contextualization that Cohen finally delves into the spiritual aspects of the text. To do this, he stops relying on evidence and tradition, instead applying imagination and speculation to the Mishnah in an effort to read between the lines and against the grain of the text so its deeper meaning becomes apparent. He gives agency to anonymous, seemingly unimportant figures – such as the book's title character – and allows them to take his hand and lead him through the legal text of a particular mishnah to the ultimate truth lying behind it. It is a unique and unorthodox method of approaching the Mishnah, and certainly Seder Tohorot, but it is unquestionably one worthy of attention.

Of course, this approach is modern and could only be possible under the circumstances extended by contemporary American Judaism, and it is here that the most critical error of The Boy on the Door on the Ox rests. Religion is dynamic – an ever-evolving organism – and it is the job of any religious teacher to recognize this and appreciate the implications. Cohen, however, does not seem to understand that religion undergoes continuous change, and as a result he has projected the ideals of individualism and sovereign self, as well as the notion of spirituality, onto the Tannaim, even going so far as to claim that the highest goal of any rabbi was to find a personal spiritual path to God apart from the community (126).

Another major flaw in Cohen's work is his inability to leave the reader out of the text. It is his claim from the outset that The Boy on the Door on the Ox is his own personal journey, and that others will almost certainly need to approach God from another direction (23), yet his spiritual lessons are rife with second-person narrative accounts. He leads his readers through the texts of the Mishnah, guiding their imagination by telling them what they see (25), and sometimes what they do not see (110). While this is an effective method for an author to lead the reader where the author wants him/her to go, it does not allow for the reader to experience his/her own personal journey. Moreover, it is an especially distracting narrative style that allows for minimal cognitive freedom and ultimately has more in common with the Choose Your Own Adventure novels of the 1980s than any respectable contemporary work.
Martin Samuel Cohen's *The Boy on the Door on the Ox: An Unusual Spiritual Journey Through the Strangest Jewish Texts* is an exceptional book for any Jewish readers who wish to progress in their spiritual walk toward God. Cohen's imagination is brilliant, his arguments compelling, and his methods undeniably original. However, as mentioned earlier, Cohen has not intended this book for a scholarly audience, and just as it cannot be reviewed as such, neither can it be recommended as such.