

**Hiroshi Ichikawa, *Yudaya-kyo no Seishin Kozo*\***

(The Spirit of Law in Rabbinic Judaism)

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Recent years have witnessed keen interest among the Japanese public in issues and themes related to Judaism and the Jewish people: the harrowing tragedy of the Holocaust is now commonly regarded as an important historical lesson not to be forgotten, with a regular stream of literary and visual works on the subject finding appreciative audiences; the discrimination against the Jewish people through the history — often referred to as the shadow of European history — and their current status are popular research topics among Japanese scholars; the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where those formerly oppressed often appear to have taken up the role of the oppressor, receives daily newspaper coverage as well as discussion in such various media as scholarly writing, textbooks, and reports on life in war-torn areas. Public interest in Judaism seems to have increased markedly in Japan since the terrorist attacks of September 11, with discussions on the underlying clash of interests between the US-led West and the Arab world inevitably leading to the issue of Christian versus Islamic perspectives and drawing attention to their connections to the religion practiced in Israel. On another front, works of prominent Jewish thinkers, notably Sigmund Freud, Jacques Derrida, and Emmanuel Levinas, among others, are widely studied and appreciated.

I once had the opportunity to compile a list of Japanese publications on subjects related to the Jewish faith and people. While impressed by the sheer number of titles on that list, I could not shake the feeling that something important was missing. Upon reflection, I realized that most of the books were about Jewish-related topics — anti-Semitism, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and Jewish thought — and not about Judaism as a religion *per se*, revealing a relative lack of interest on the part of the Japanese research community in the Judaic faith, which is supposed to be at the heart of all of the issues covered by those publications. Indeed, it appeared that very few attempts had been made by this country's scholars to get to the very heart of the religion that has sustained this historically oppressed and dispossessed people, constitutes the foundation of a country now in conflict with its neighbors, and is the subtly

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\*This book review was originally written in Japanese.

evident background to the celebrated works of great Jewish intellectuals. To be fair, Japanese researchers of the New Testament are showing a growing interest in Rabbinical Judaism, regarding it as one of the keys to understanding the historical context of Christianity as it was in the days of Jesus Christ and of the Gospels. Still, the studies published here on the movement understood to have formed the basis of a religion that would survive the loss of a homeland are mostly translations, meaning that the subject in this country is still in the introduction stage.

This is the background for the release of *The Spirit of Law in Rabbinic Judaism*. Hiroshi Ichikawa, the author, is a Japanese pioneer in Jewish studies research, long noted for his multidimensional approach to exploring the world of Judaism. The book is essentially a collection of his published works supplemented with a few commentaries. In addition to being the first ever publication by a Japanese author to present a comprehensive overview of Jewish religion and philosophy, it probes the very essence of Judaism to effectively address the gap in this country's Jewish research. This in itself represents a major accomplishment that I believe gives the book a great deal of value.

Prof. Ichikawa explains that his focus in putting together this book was to highlight Judaism's basic characteristics as they contribute to the Jewish spirit and to examine their impact on the Jewish community's social and cultural institutions. *The Spirit of Law in Rabbinic Judaism*, therefore, neither chronicles the history of Judaism nor empirically analyzes nor systematically investigates any specific aspects of the faith. Nor does it attempt a focused and detailed analysis of any particular period in Jewish history. Thus, those seeking a textbook or reference work on this religion may not find it immediately useful. What Prof. Ichikawa does do in this book is to select certain phenomena and developments that seem to reflect the very essence of Judaism from various regions, ages, and sectors based on his own interest, and to try to trace the structure of the Jewish mind through those examples. This is an ambitious proposition. Such a valiant approach, supported as it is by a broad perspective, is another feature that I think distinguishes this work.

It occurs to me that most recent studies of religions and historical documents seem to lack the ambition to get to the common core of the religious, social, and cultural experiences they address. An obsession with diversity has blinded the research community as a whole to the significance of searching for the commonality that may lie behind everything. This tendency seems especially pronounced in the study of Rabbinical Judaism. This Jewish movement used to be considered the key to grasping the totality of Judaism, but the considerable differences among its regional and chronological variations — whose discoveries themselves should of course be appreciated as major research achievements bringing us closer to the truth — have eventually led most scholars to limit their focus to specific regions, time periods, and aspects so as to be able to set clear and attainable objectives for their efforts, resulting in today's fragmented research environment.

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*The Spirit of Law in Rabbinic Judaism* appears to defy this trend with its all-encompassing focus: the author freely discusses topics associated with diverse regions, ages, and even religions, including the Hebrew Bible, Judaism in the Talmudic period, medieval Jewish mysticism, the current status of Jewish studies in the U.S., and constantly cited examples from Christianity and Buddhism. This approach seems to reflect the author's sense of responsibility as a researcher dealing with existential questions as well as his understanding, formed out of his experience of living abroad, that knowledge of one's own culture is essential to teaching a foreign religion to one's compatriots. Reading this book, today's short-sighted researchers may feel, from time to time, an urge to look up from its pages to try to catch a glimpse of whatever might lie behind all the phenomena that they have been studying, perhaps a great presence that transcends religious and cultural boundaries. *The Spirit of Law in Rabbinic Judaism* will present its readers with an opportunity to reflect on their responsibilities as scholars, to ask themselves anew what it is that they have been looking for and why.

This book consists of three parts. Part 1, entitled, "Birth of the Religion of Laws," examines how the institution of Rabbinic Judaism as the foundation of contemporary Judaism came to be established, with particular attention to the questions of how the Jewish faith has defended its validity against Christianity and how Biblical ideas and ideals have been incorporated into the Jewish system. The author also investigates how the Talmud, defined here as a body of institutional knowledge that supports independence and the rule of law, has structured Jewish society. Part 2, "Manifestations of the Spirit of the Torah," discusses the interpretations of the Torah as expressed in midrashim, prayers, and Kabbalistic teachings, with a focus on their significance for the Jewish community's survival of the loss of its homeland. Part 3, "Challenges in Modern Times," describes how the system of complete reliance on the Written and Oral Torah crumbled with the emergence of mysticism and modern rationalism.

Reading through these pages, one sees a coherent picture of Judaism emerge out of the facts and ideas outlined and discussed and the essence of the faith express itself through midrashim quoted throughout the volume. The reader also gets to experience the Jewish world through the beautiful drawings and photographs that grace many of the pages. Another feature of *The Spirit of Law in Rabbinic Judaism* is a rare glimpse through Japanese eyes of exactly how the religion is practiced by Jews as the author shares his experience of regularly attending morning services at a synagogue in Israel.

Prof. Ichikawa's account reminded me of my own experience of Jewish prayer services, where I saw each worshipper recite prayers at his own pace, the whole congregation erupt in joy as the Torah was opened, and spirited discussions go on as to how the Torah should be read. The atmosphere was one of excitement and chaos. There was nothing solemn about the place, contrary to what most Japanese might expect based on visits to Christian churches. It was quite an eye-opener for me. *The Spirit of Law in Rabbinic Judaism* successfully conveys

this same atmosphere, especially in the sixth chapter, "Sin and Forgiveness" where the author's courage in venturing into a synagogue and his perseverance in regularly attending early-morning services has paid off in a vivid description of the ambience of the place.

What, then, are the keynotes of this three-part book? One would certainly be the author's consistent focus on the concepts of law and freedom. As the frequent appearance in the text of Japanese words beginning with the character *ji* (oneself) would indicate—*jiyu* (freedom), *jichi* (self-rule), *jihatsuteki-ishi* (own will), and *jiga* (ego)—Prof. Ichikawa's key interest seems to lie in those aspects of Judaism that appear to stand for the religion's emphasis on the ideal of freedom. The Jewish faith is commonly perceived as a religion of innumerable laws and commandments, and there is a persistent image of the Jews as a people obsessed with following the Torah to the letter. Judaism does have a comprehensive set of laws its members should follow every day, pertaining to food and prayer, for example. And there are of course the Mishnah, an extensive collection of laws, the Talmud, the compilation of discussions and commentaries on those laws, and midrashim, namely exegeses of the Hebrew Scripture. This emphasis on compliance with rules may seem antithetical to the ideal of freedom. If, however, Judaism were truly a rigid and stifling system focused solely on maintaining laws, one would think that it could never have survived for more than 2000 years without a homeland. Indeed, the religion appears to have grown, cultivated creativity, and sustained itself on a delicate tension between the extremes of potentially repressive restriction and respect for freedom. My hypothesis is that such a tension enables Judaism to survive and has fascinated Mr. Ichikawa all these years.

Freedom is largely taken for granted in democratic societies, including Japan. It is a universal truth, however, that one's freedom may cost someone else theirs. International conflicts are battles between countries for freedom. Thus freedom is subject to limitations in all kinds of relationships. With this in mind, it seems worthwhile to search the spirit of Judaism, which appears to be founded on a balance between laws and freedom, for principles that might help us find ways to balance our own needs for freedom with those of others. I am confident that *The Spirit of Law in Rabbinic Judaism* will provide its readers with excellent material for considering the issue of freedom in the context of their own experience.

Freedom in Judaism seems to derive from its apparent antithesis:laws. Jewish freedom is supported by rules that grew out of interpretations of the scriptures and became codified in the Oral Torah. The author's keen interest in the oral Torah is evident in various sections of the book, and seems to be the second keynote of this work. Prof. Ichikawa's fascination with Judaism began with his encounter with the expression *Moshe Rabbenu*, which means, "Moses, our teacher." The author became intrigued by the use of this title in Jewish literature for a man referred to in the Bible as "the prophet." What does this mean? The author thinks that Moses has been looked on by generations of his followers as the ideal model, and that this aspiration has shaped all Jewish customs, institutions, and community, the totality of which in turn

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reveals the spirit of Judaism.

To me, the title *Moshe Rabbenu* itself seems to express the very spirit of Judaism as a religion built on a tension between freedom and law. One of the midrashim that is referred to by the author as evidence has it that the entire Oral Torah, including the additional commentaries by later rabbis, was demonstrated by Moses (page 49). This implies that whatever interpretations and applications later generations of Jews may derive from the Scripture, their validity has already been established by the fact that the entire Oral Torah was demonstrated by the prophet. Although thus assured of their legitimacy to interpret the Scripture in whatever manner they please, Jewish people have gone to great lengths to develop an extensive body of law out of the text.

What has been driving these efforts seems to be the consciousness that the Jews themselves are responsible for following a Moses-like life. Judaism's spirit of freedom may be rooted in a combination of absolute confidence in people's freedom to create interpretations and self-control to follow the way of life exemplified by their teacher, Moses. In this regard, it seems natural that Jews' respect for law coexists with their sense of individual freedom and independence. The expression *Moshe Rabbenu* may well be the key to understanding the religion, as the author suggests.

Part 3 of this book, "Freedom and Law," discusses the Book of Exodus, which narrates the story of how Moses and his people survived a period of hardships and received the Torah. This may be considered the most important section of *The Spirit of Law in Rabbinic Judaism*. Here, the author explores some of the familiar questions about the Exodus, including why Moses and the Israelites had to wander in the desert and cope with so many challenges before receiving the Torah and why the Giving of the Torah had to occur in a wasteland. Other subjects discussed in Part 3 include the prohibition of idol worship, interpretations of the Song of Songs, considered the most controversial book in the Bible, the significance of mentioning the merits of the ancestors in prayer during the Ten Days of Repentance, and the Kabbalistic meaning of the allegory about a person with disabilities. This book does not discuss Jewish interpretations of the scriptures systematically, but rather describes their mechanics, characteristics, and history as appropriate, providing its readers with a progressively broadening perspective on the subject. *The Spirit of Law in Rabbinic Judaism* promises a deeply fulfilling reading experience thanks to its breadth of focus, offering a rare look at scriptural interpretation through examples from a whole range of sources that include midrashim and Kabbalistic stories.

As the third keynote of this work, I want to point out the author's apparent fascination with the model of Jewish history put forward by Gershom Scholem, whose works painted a lucid picture of Jewish mysticism and its significance in the history of Jewish thought. These achievements are sure to continue to be of great relevance to Jewish research. Scholem detected Judaism's potential for further development in its co-existence of both a conservative,

normative aspect and a radical, mystical aspect. This perspective should be applicable to the study of the histories of other religions as well as specific civilizations, cultures, societies, and history in general. Although some of Scholem's works on Jewish mysticism have been translated into Japanese, there has been no attempt to study his methodology itself. It is my sincere hope that *The Spirit of Law in Rabbinic Judaism* will help bring Scholem's broad perspective to a wider audience in Japan.

Conceived out of Prof. Ichikawa's personal curiosity, this book adheres to the author's own thought processes from beginning to end as he asks and then answers his own questions. This may give some readers a feeling of gazing from afar at a self-contained universe with no means of ascertaining the validity of its content. The author does make it clear at the outset that it is not his objective to provide an empirical analysis of any of the phenomena he covers, but I would be thrilled to see whether and how his observations and hypotheses might be verified using sources. That would of course require the involvement of numerous and diverse specialists. This thought makes me aware once again of the breadth of the author's interests and depth of his insight.