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The Modern Jewish Mind I - Ahad Ha-am, 1981.

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The modern Jewich mend - I

Daniel Jeremy Silver February 22, 1981

If I were to tell you that a hundred years ago next month, on the 13th of March to be exact, one of the most significant events to affect Jews in recent history took place, one that affected many of your lives and brought many of your grandparents to these shores, could you name that event? I won't collect the papers but that event on March 13, 1881 was the assassination of the Czar, Alexander II, by a small group of Russian revolutionaries, led by a young lady of twenty-eight who was the daughter of the former commanding general of the armies of St. Petersburg. One of the interesting parallels between the Weathermen and the radical groups in the United States in the late sixties and the revolutionaries in Russia in the middle 1870's was that both groups were drawn from the children of those who benefited the most from the inequalities and the privileges of that society. And one of the paradoxes of history, and as you know I delight in history's many paradoxes, is that on the very day that Alexander II was killed by a grenade which was thrown from very close range at him as he traveled by carriage to the winter palace was that he was going to the winter palace in order to sign a number of regulations proposed by the liberal group within the ministers led by a man named Lawrence Melikof which would have really set Russia on the way towards establishing some form of constitutional monarchy. And, of course, with the assassination the forces of black reaction won the day, Alexander III came to the throne backed by the authority of the most absolutist and reactionary groups both within the Russian Orthodox Church and within the government. His major minister was a man named Constantine Pobodinostof who was the head of the synod of the Russian Orthodox Church whose position was, as far as Jews were concerned, that the government should see to it that one-third of the Jews were starved to death, one-third of the Jews converted and one-third of the Jews exiled. And, in fact, within twenty-five years, by 1905, a million and a half Jews had left Russia in the pale of the settlement, the largest exodus of Jews at any time in our history. Now, the man who was assassinated, Alexander II, was not a bad man. He was a

weak man. He had no consistent policy, but he was basically a decent sort of fellow who when he came to the throne in 1855 had actually begun a series of reformist regulations which began to make it seem as if Russia would follow the way of Austria-Hungary and Germany, and particularly the way of France and England, and move towards a much more liberal and open form of government. In 1861 he freed the serfs who were until then slaves attached to the land. In 1864 he established provincial councils throughout Russia which were a rudimentary form of local government. He abolished the secret judicial proceedings which up till then and again now are the way that justice is dispensed in the Russian world. And as far as Jews were concerned there were a measure of liberalization rules which did have an impact though they were obviously not emancipatory regulations as far as our community was concerned. He abolished in 1861 the old cantonment system by which young Jews were in effect kidnapped into the army and pressed into the army for a period of twenty-five years at the age of eighteen, usually, actually, it happened long before that and they were simply pulled away from their families and they disappeared from the Jewish world. He abolished in the early 1860's the regulation which required that all Jews in secondary schools and universities attend religion classes in the orthodox faith. He promulgated a rule around 1863 which said that anyone who was converted to the orthodox faith before the age of fourteen had to receive the permission of his parents. In effect, what had happened until then was that the more zealous among the monks and priests would use the offer of food or schooling or candy in order to baptize young Jews. Jews had been prohibited under the earlier czars from living in St. Petersburg and Moscow and Kiev and Odessa, the major cities in Russia, and slowly

2

during Alexander II's rule these restrictions were modified, first for wealthy merchants, then for diplomats of Russian universities, and finally in 1879 for members of the various free professions. But in 1881, just a hundred years ago, when this group of young revolutionaries threw the grenade which killed the Czar, all movements towards liberalization within Russia came to an end and Russia was set on the path of revolution because reaction always breeds and equal and opposite reaction by the left, by those whose rights have been abused. From then until the 1905 era there was no attempt at liberalization. The first duma in 1905 was a minimal attempt at reform with really little chance to succeed and Russia was set on the path which led ultimately to the Bolshevik takeover.

Now, for our people obviously 1881 represented a watershed. Until that time there had been a number of men in the Jewish community in Russia, particularly those who had the advantage of a Russian secondary education and of a Russian university education who believed that Russia would follow the way of France, follow the way of England and of Germany, and ultimately there would be a piecemeal kind of reform which would bring the Jewish community into the larger community. Once it was clear that reaction was in place, and once it was clear that the reactionaries were not simply content to pass laws restricting Jewish movement, increasing taxes on the Jews, but they were actually out to murder Jews, to kill Jews, the great Jewish migration began to take place. The Czar was assassinated in March of 1881. There was in Russia at the time a secret society of nobles, reactionary nobles called the Black Hand, and members of this secret society began to go throughout southern Russia particularly, and in the pale of settlement in the area where there were cities where there was Jewish population and they indicated to the governors of the cities and to the police chiefs that the Czar would not be opposed, the new Czar would not be opposed to a popular punishment of Jews. By mid-April the first of the infamous Russian pogroms had taken place, first in Lezebeth grad, and then in Verdice and Kiev. Blood flowed in the streets. The police stepped back and did nothing. Jews had no means of self-defense,

3

and this process of semi-official attack on Jews was to continue right down to the first World War.

Now, what was the response of the Jewish community? There were four general types of response. The majority of people looked to themselves. They tried to escape. They tried to find some place somewhere else where there was a relative, where there was opportunity, and they came to the east side of New York, the south side of Boston, they came to the east end of London; many went to the Union of South Africa which during and after the World War there was a need for a middle-class there; some went to South America. It was a time of great migration and many simply took to the road.

But there were also those who began to try and analyze, to understand what had happened, and to ask whether or not just going on the road would solve anything. If anti-semitism is endemic within European civilization why not assume that wherever European settlers had gone they would have taken anti-semitism races with them, and that in time the very same kinds of pressures which had emerged in Europe and led to the Dreyfus Trial, abalijriffe in Paris, to the hep hep riots in Germany, to the pogroms in Russia, that these same situations would not reproduce themselves, duplicate themselves in some other part of the world.

A small group of Jews were determined simply to overthrow the government in Russia which was reactionary. And so although the revolutionary groups in the 1870's in Russia were almost entirely non-Jewish, the only Jew who had been involved in the attempt to assassinate the Czar was a young woman named Hesa Helfman whose major crime was that she had as a lover one of the young men who was actually a grenade thrower, and she had hid him before the attack.

But Jews were not involved in the revolutionary movements in a major way in the 1860's and 1870's, but after the May laws of 1882 which made it very clear where Russian Jewry might expect to go, that is to the baptismal fount or into exile. After these laws were promulgated an increasing number of young Jews joined the revolutionary movements and became among the most adamant and the most effective of those who were members of the various parties and groups which in one way or another were

4

opposed and the guerilla way and terrorist way are simply ideologically the continuation of Czarist rule.

And you find after the 1880's the emergence of Jews in major ways into the Menshivink and Bolshevik parties. Jews become young Communists and they become young terrorists.

A second group of Jews argued that anti-semitism can exist on the left as on the

right. They pointed to the fact that when the pogroms broke out in 1881 in southern Russia the various newspapers of the young revolutionaries applauded the pogroms. They didn't rush to the defense of Jews but rather they said that at least here we're beginning to see consciousness-raising on the part of the peasantry, let them learn that they can wreck their vengeance against Jews, and ultimately they will learn that they can wreck their vengeance against the Czar. Recognizing this, that it, the ubiquity, the universality of the feeling that the Jew was somehow the outsider, that the Jew was alien. To the black reactionary the Jew represented the intrusion of an unwanted way of life and of unwanted ideas into absolutist Russia. The Jew represented democracy. The Jew represented liberty. The Jew represented the prophets, the Bible. But most of all, the Jew represented the university where so many of these young people had gone andhad been trained in ideas which now allowed them to see Russia in lights other than those of their parents and their grandparents and those of privilege.

There was in Russia at the time an assimilated lawyer by the name of Leo Pinsker. Pinkser had had a university education. He had been allowed to live in Moscow. He had had a very special kind of life, but once the pograms and the mala broke out, and the malas were passed Pinsker began to rethink what he had believed would be the slow process of emancipation, assimilation and adaptation which he felt the Jewish community would follow, and early in the 1880's he published a book called <u>Auto-Emancipation</u>. It was an attempt to analyze anti-semitism which he analyzed as a universal type of racism that is endemic in European civilization. What was the cause of antisemitism? The fact that the Jew, unlike any other people on the face of the earth, had no state that was his own, had no nation and, therefore, could not be understood.

5

He said the Jew seems to the rest of the world to be a ghost. He doesn't know quite how to understand the Jew. A Frenchman has France, a German has Germany, an Italian has Italy, the Jew has no place. You can't identify him. You can't locate him. He defies the senses and because of that this anamolous situation creates an unexpected kind of identity and one you fear, that which you do not know. Now, Pesker was wrong in his analysis. There are many peoples, particularly in

the Mediterranean world, who have no nation of their own: the Kerds, the Druzes, the Kops, the Armenians, the Basques in Europe, the gypsies in Europe, but in any case, this was his analysis which led him to the conclusion that the Jew would never be able to assimilate individually into western society because the more he assimilated the more envy he created; the more he assimilated the more self-hate he created in himself because he had to lose his identity, his sense of self, in order to do so. And so he argued that a people without a land must find a land without people. And on that basis he argued for a national solution to the Jewish problem. He was saying in the East a few years later Theodore Herzl would say in the West when he wrote that famous pamphlet, "The Jewish State." For the Jew to escape from this endless recurrent round of anti-semitic outbreak, hate, the Jew would have to go to a place which would be his own, where he could be responsible for his own destiny, and where he would be seen for what he was rather than feared because of a series of ideas which had been projected upon him.

Over the last hundred years many men and many writers have attempted to devise solutions to the problem of Jews, and the record of the Jewish community over the last hundred years in support of Jews who require help in terms of a survival agenda, to use the jargon of today's Jewish community, has been a remarkable one. Wherever there has been a need, wherever Jews have had to take the road, the Jewish community has done all that it could in order to provide haven and support. And, of course, the symbol of all of this is the State of Israel, but there has been the introduction of massive numbers of Jews into Jewish communities throughout the world as we see most laterally here in Cleveland the introduction of the Russian Jewish escapees into our

6

society.

There's another problem, and it's to a man who voiced the deeper problem that

I would like to call your attention to today. We have been very good, remarkably so,

when it comes to help to fellow Jews. We've spent dollars, we've spent energy, we've

used all the political effort we can in order to make haven and a new life possible.

But, survival for what? It's one thing to save the Jew. It's another thing to place the saved Jew in a community where his Jewishness has life, has a sense of dignity, is inspiring, allows him to develop the resources, the emotional spiritual resources that are within his soul.

In 1856, one year after Alexander II, the czar who would be assassinated, came to the throne a young man was born in the depths of the pale of a settlement in Russia by the name of Asher Zvi Ginsberg. He came to be known as Ahad Ha-Am, one of the people, that's a pen name. It's a name that he adopted so that he could hide behind anonymity. The most interesting thing about the personality of Ahad Ha-Am is that he had no absolutely no aplomb. You had a sense of a man who had temporarily rented a body for his mind. He was brilliant, incisive, ineffective. As a businessman he was an absolute failure. I'll tell you the story of his marriage and you can understand the kind of man that he was.

Ahad Ha-An was born into a family which was unique among families in eastern Europe in that it was rich. He was Hasidic. His father was something of a mathematical and business genius as well as a very pious hasid, and he made some money and he found, after the new czar had come into power, an impoverished nobleman who was willing to rent him his estate. And he rented this estate in about 1854 or '55 and he farmed the estate and he made a great deal of money from the estate. And Ahad Ha-Am was actually raised in a magnificent twenty-room house on 150 acres with formal garden, the way you don't expect a hasid in eastern Europe to be raised. Unfortunately, the pond, the garden, the trees, the forest, the hunting, the horses, nature, all this meant absolutely nothing to this young man Asher Zvi Ginsberg. The only thing that was important in the house was that it had a library. He lived with books. He lived in his mind. And when at the age of fourteen his father came to him and said it's time that we arrange for your marriage, you remember how marriages were arranged and at what age they were arranged in the old world, the young man did not protest against this, but the father gave him a choice. He said there are two women

whom you can be engaged to/ One is the daughter of a rather wealthy but rather simple merchant in the nearby community who is a friend of mine; and the other is the pious orphaned daughter of the rabbi of Jitomir who comes from the famous Schnierson family. You know what the name Yuhas is? Well, this girl had yuhas, she had the right kind of pedigree, you can choose. Now, the fourteen-year old, this timid fourteen-year old, really did not want to marry into the famous rabbi's family because he had already begun to feel that he was not quite at ease with piety in the Talmudic and Hasidic sense, he'd already begun to read the forbidden books, and he really didn't want to marry this girl because he thought she would pull him back into a world that he was seeking to free himself from. But he didn't know how to tell his father and so, being a bookish boy, he remembered a very famous quotation in the Talmud which reads: "What you ought to do is to sell all you have in order to marry the daughter of a scholar." Now, that's a very self-serving statement written by some scholar two thousand years ago in order to guarantee the dowry of his daughter, and it's repeated again and again and again in Talmudic literature through a lot of poor scholars with a lot of daughters.

But there's also another phrase written by another scholar who obviously had sons, and this scholar in the Talmud says: "You should sell all that you have in order to buy a good pair of shoes." In other words, survive and worry less about the yuhas of the girl whom you marry. a state

He thought his father would understand if he only quoted the first half of a phrase, sell all that you have in order to - and he would understand that he was referring to the fact that there were two possible answers to this and he really wasn't

8

taking the most familiar of the answers, so he answered his father by saying, sell all that you have in order to. And his father, being a straight-forward kind of guy, it was one of the reasons he was successful in business, understood him to want to marry the daughter of the rabbi of Jitomir and he arranged the marriage and they met under the marriage altar and they were married and they lived together with some degree of happiness for the rest of their lives, which all goes to prove that if you're going to arrange your children's marriage alavai and they quote to you Talmud make sure you understand what they're really saying to you.

Now, Zvi Asher Ginsberg, Ahad Ha-Am, lived on this estate for nearly the first thirty years of his life. He was tutored. He lived alone with the books, and he lived a life which had a kind of intellectual progression from the mastery of the Talmud, he was what is known as elui. He was an absolutely brilliant Talmudic scholar. To the reading of what was called Haskalah, the books of Jewish enlightenment, the books which began to bring a critical spirit, an academic spirit to bear on the body of Jewish knowledge, and then he began to read absolutely forbidden books, the books of John Stewart Mill, Hagel, Kant, the social Darwinists, books which had to do with forbidden ideas and somehow, unlike most autodidacs, unlike most of those who are denied the opportunity of a university education who read voraciously in order to make up for it, his mind was such that he could synthesize these ideas into a consistent whole.

Sometimes when you talk with an autodidact what you find is that there's a great deal of information but it doesn't all pull together. But he had the ability to synthesize, to pull things together. In eighteen hundred eighty something or other the father lost the estate because under the May laws you could no longer rent it. They moved to Odessa and there the father made the very bad judgment of bringing his son into partnership with him and proceeded in two years' time to lose all the family's money which seems not to have bothered Ahad Ha-Am one bit because he had the time during all of this period to write, to write in Hebrew a series of brilliant Hebrew essays which introduced the question which I am trying to raise up before you today. Yes, Jews must survive. Yes, obviously, staying alive is the first law of nature. But survival for what? What was the purpose of Jewish survival? Did we want to survive simply as we are now, simply living an obscurantist life, caught in a world of ceremony and custom which we use to draw ceremony and custom around us, we don't have to think about the problems that the new science, the new learning has opened up to us? Shall we live a life which is cramped morally, ethically, socially cramped?

You must remember that during the pogroms a great deal of criticism began to be written for the first time about the manhood of the Jewish community, about the cowardice of the Jewish community. Chaim Nahim Biyalik, one of the great poets of the Hebrew renaissance, one of the first poets of the modern state, wrote a poem about one of the pogroms, Kishnev, in which he describes the men cowering behind the oven, hiding in the cellar while their wives were being raped and their children were being murdered and he says, where are you, you descendants of the Maccabees, what kind of people are you, what's happened to you over the centuries?

They looked around and they saw Jews who were always peering over their shoulders, wondering what the non-Jews would think about them if they spoke what was on their mind. He saw the Jewish community of the shtetl which was not the Jewish community of Fiddler on the Roof, Fiddler on the Roof is a lie, it was a community filled with social pathology, with all kinds of not only physical misery but of spiritual misery, and there obviously needed to be a renaissance of the national spirit, a new understanding of what Judaism and Jewish spirit was all about. This is what concerned Ahad Ha-Am, and when he looked at the various solutions which were being offered to the Jewish problem he looked at those, the majority, and said let's go to the Golden Medina, to America, and he said fine, you go to the Golden Medina and you'll work hard and you'll become Americans, that's not a solution to your becoming Jewish. And he said you'll become exactly like the emancipated Jews of France or England. Yes, they are emancipated. Externally they are free, but internally they are enslaved. They are no longer able to speak their minds. They're always timid about their positions. They're fearful that they have an esthetic, a way, a custom, a habit, a man-

10

ner of speech which is different from the non-Jewish world. They must change this to conform to the majority. They've lost all sense of themselves and their own dignity. And he said if we become revolutionaries we've lost our own dignity, we've lost our own sense of self. What's the solution? Well, he said, Pinsker and Herzl have argued for a political solution, that is

for the establishment of a Jewish State but if we simply use the Jewish state as a dumping ground for the unwanted, what will we achieve? How will it change the Jewishness, the sense of Judaism, for the Jews who remain outside of Palestine because not all can go, the numbers are too many. And for the Jews who are there what does it mean to create a Jewish state unless it has a sense of purpose, a sense of its own integrity? And so in this series of essays he argued that Palestine should be established as the Jewish national home, but those who should go should be the pick of the nation, our scholars, musicians, our physicians, our philosophers, our scientists, the best of our minds, and there they would create a model Jewish community and the modelness of this community would become the measure against which the diaspora communities would begin to measure themselves. Out of Zion shall go forth the law, the phrase that I read to you this morning, became for Ahad-Ha-Am not a statement that traditional Torah will go forth from Zion, but that Jews would find in Zion the opportunity to create a state, universities libraries, theaters, literature, which would be of ourselves, shaped by our own national spirit, and of such a quality that it would raise the quality of Jewish life throughout the diaspora, throughout the Jewish world. He was concerned always with substance, this kind of question. We bring the prisoners of conscience out of the Soviet Union. We bring them to Cleveland or to New York, it doesn't matter where. We provide them the training in the English language. We provide them vocational skills. We provide them, if we can, jobs, housing. We've saved the Jew but for what? What kind of model does this Jewish community or any Jewish community give to the refugee as to what Judaism is all about? What do we stand for? Where is our literature? Where is our wisdom? That's the question he raised. Ahad Ha-Am bound social Darwinism into Jewish thinking. His argument was this. Religion, religious civilization as he liked to speak of it, is constantly in the process of evolution, of change, of growth. Rabbinic Judaism is itself an evolution from the Judaism that existed in Biblical times, and he gave numerous historical examples. We've now come to another of those important cultural and political watersheds

where a new form of Jewish life must evolve and it will evolve, he said, around the traditional central values of the Jewish tradition, the oneness of mankind, faith in absolute justice, faith in truth in action which is a favorite phrase of his, a sense of the unity of all that is. He said these are the unique Jewish perceptions and somehow, in each age, Jews have shaped their traditions, their institutions, their way of life around these basic commitments. He said there are no guarantees what Judaism will be like ten years out or fifty years out, but it has to evolve naturally from the best of our minds and the best of our wisdom and the best of our spirit.

We need a social reformation. What was wrong with Reform Judaism which was the other attempt to renew, revitalize Judaism in the nineteenth and twentieth century? He said, the problem with Reform Judaism is that it reduced Judaism to a series of little mottoes: ethical monotheism, prophetic Judaism. It reduced a living national community, a living national spirit, to a series of taglines, and once you had the word ethical monotheism, a nice, denatured set of simple ideas, you could add to them anything that you wanted or take from them absolutely nothing in the way of custom, of ceremony, of philosophy, of insight. There were words that floated up here, not part of a religious community, not part of the life, ongoing living vitality of the nation itself. He said Reform Judaism essentially in his mind cut away ideas from people, and that the importance of the nation-state, he said, would be concrete, a reality, a living community, not simply a set of disembodied ideas. And out of the community itself and its needs and the challenges of the time, its attempt to organize its own social and political life, would come the new spirit of which he spoke.

The continuity that he saw is in the Hebrew language. The continuity that he

12

saw was in the great literature of the community. He believed greatly in Jewish education. One of the most important battles that he fought was a battle over the kind of schooling that should take place in Palestine. In the early settlements which had been established under the Rothschilds and the Hovacion education had been in French or in German, and the classes were entirely classes based upon the value system and the curriculum of western Europe. Ahad Ha-Am was the great polemicist, that Hebrew education, that Jewish education in Israel should be in Hebrew, and that the classics that were taught should be Shakespeare and Gerte but, most importantly, should be the Bible and the materials which come directly out of the Jewish literature. And in fact he won that battle in the early years of this decade. And much of the sense of national spirit which exists in Israel today is the result of that particular achievement.

Palestine was not to be simply a state of Jews but was to become the model state in which the Jewish spirit might flower. That was his solution to the question: survival for what?.

Now I submit that this question is one that our Jewish communities here and in Israel and elsewhere have tried not to face in the last one hundred years. We've done, as I suggested, a remarkable job in saving individual Jews, saving Jewish communities. We spent millions of dollars, billions of dollars to that end and exerted 'a gneat deal of political action, activity, but very few Jews have asked the questions that Ahad Ha-Am asked. Why? What are we saving Jews for? To assimilate? To become Germans of the Mosaic persuasion? To become American Israelites? What's the future for this thing we call Judaism or Jewish civilization, or the Jewish religious civilization? What has this entity to which we are committed, what has it of value to us and for our world, but most importantly, for us?

We've been outer-directed and Ahad Ha-Am called us to be inner-directed, and it's a question we're going to have to face. Our communities are well-established as we've been reminded again this past week in one of our local magazines. Our communities are wealthy. We have many institutions. We have a great deal of social and business and professional success, but does it really mean something of great value when one says I'm part of the Jewish community? What does it mean for our souls? What wisdom does it give us that we would not get somewhere else? Are we tied to an ancient wellspring or fountain of wisdom, of Torah or are we simply calling Jewish whatever catches our fancy provided it's not too demanding or restricting on our lives?

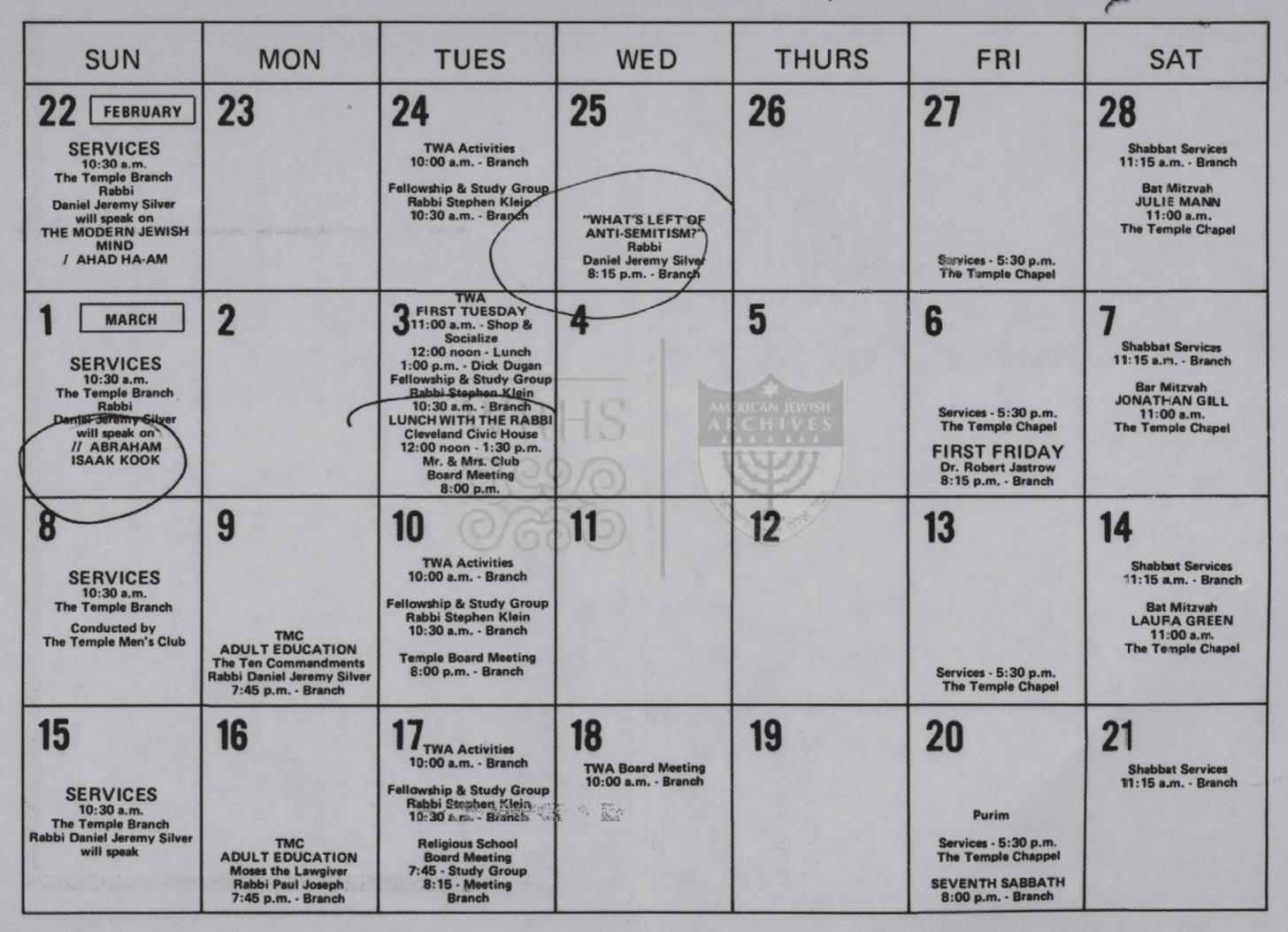
Ahad Ha-Am spent his life raising these questions. He made no great business success. He was never leader of a community, but he had the wisdom and the knowledge to raise these questions poignantly. And when we deal with modern Jewish thought, as I'm going to try to in this rather erratic series of lectures this spring, he asks a question which we must try to answer - survival for what?

	Kaddish	Friday	FEB. 22
0650	Chose who passed away this week DORA HART LESTER J. KERN		
		Yahrzeits	
	JANE ELLEN UDELF HENRY H. HIRSCH BEATRICE DEICHES COHE DR.MORTON MORGENSTERN SIDNEY SWOLFF	N (DYE-QHUSS)	

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DAVID STROMBERG FANNIE MARKMAN ARTHUR KELLER IRWIN H. MILNER SANFORD LIEHABER ROSE ROSENTHAL SCHOENBERGER HORTENCE C. HILL MILDRED M.GOLDSTEIN ANNA WIRTSHAFTER RICH DINAH SILVER (DEE-NAH) WILLIAM SCHWARTZ PAULINE L. GLICK EDWARD J.SCHWEID MAX DUCHON UNIVERSITY CIRCLE at SILVER PARK 791-7755

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26000 SHAKER BOULEVARD

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Readings for Meditation

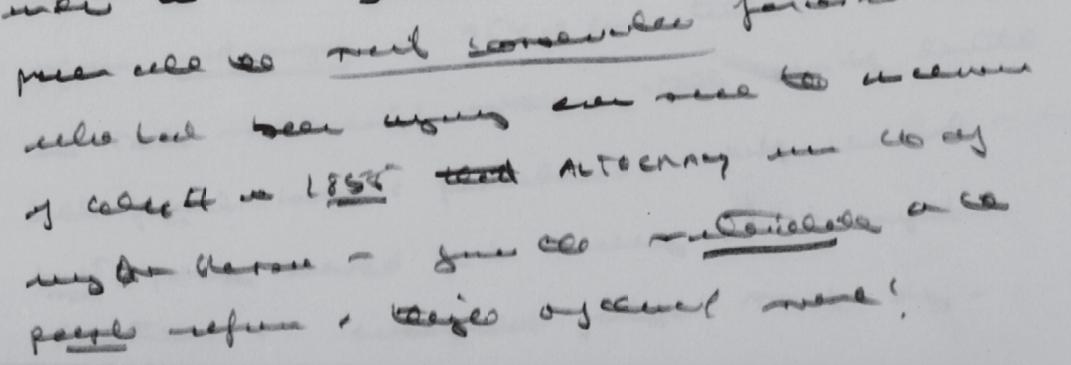
1. Thoughts on Prayer

The pious men of old used to wait a whole hour before praying, the better to concentrate their minds on God.

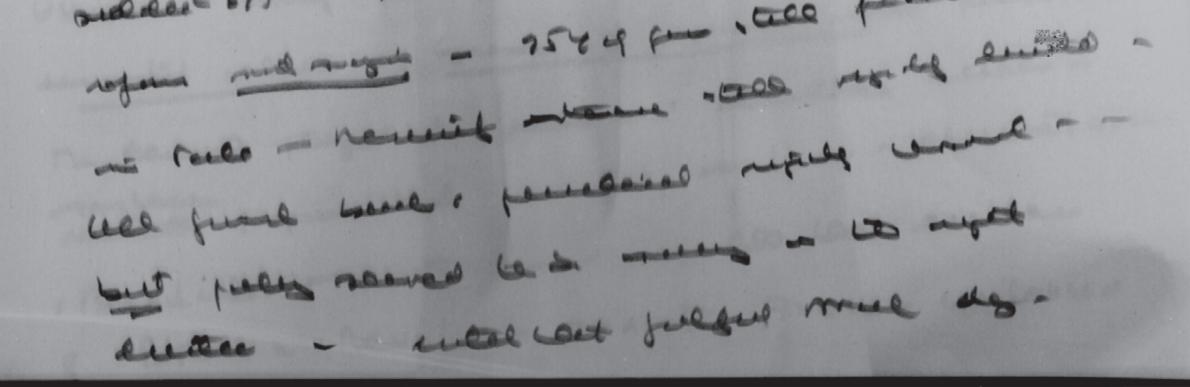
The Tzanzer was asked by a Hasid: "What does the Rabbi do before praying?" "I pray," was the reply, "that I may be able to pray properly."

If I knew that I had answered a single 'Amen' as it ought to be said, I would be contented.

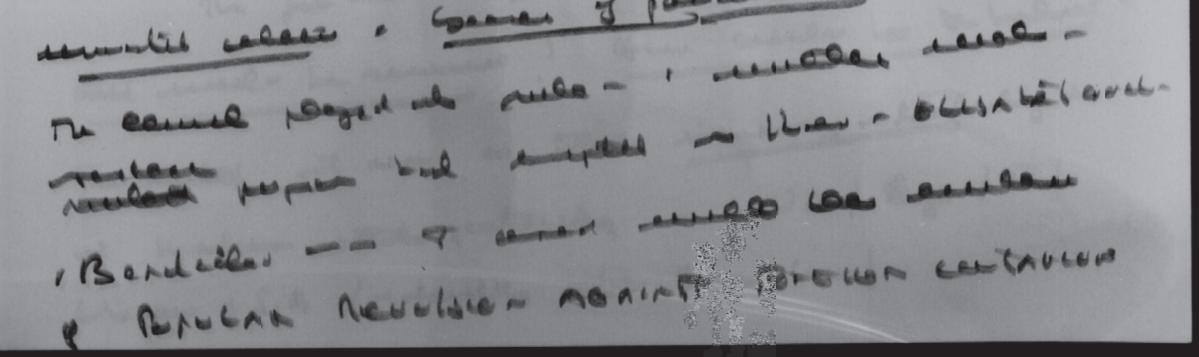
I have always found prayer difficult. So often it seems like a fruitless game of hide-and-seek where we seek and God hides. ... Yet I cannot leave prayer alone for long. My need drives me to him. And I have a feeling that he has his own reasons for hiding himself, and that finally all my seeking will prove infinitely worthwhile. And I am not sure what I mean by 'finding'. Some days my very seeking seems a kind of 'finding'. And, of course, if 'finding' meant the *end* of 'seeking', it were better to go on seeking.

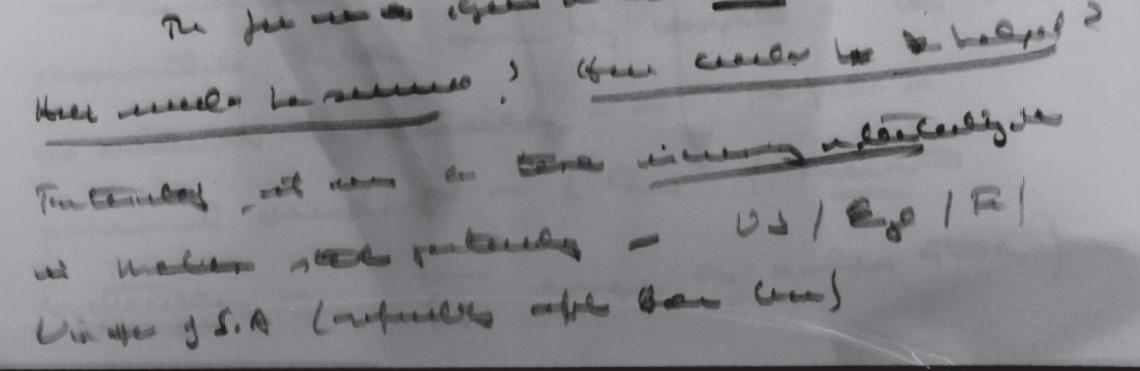


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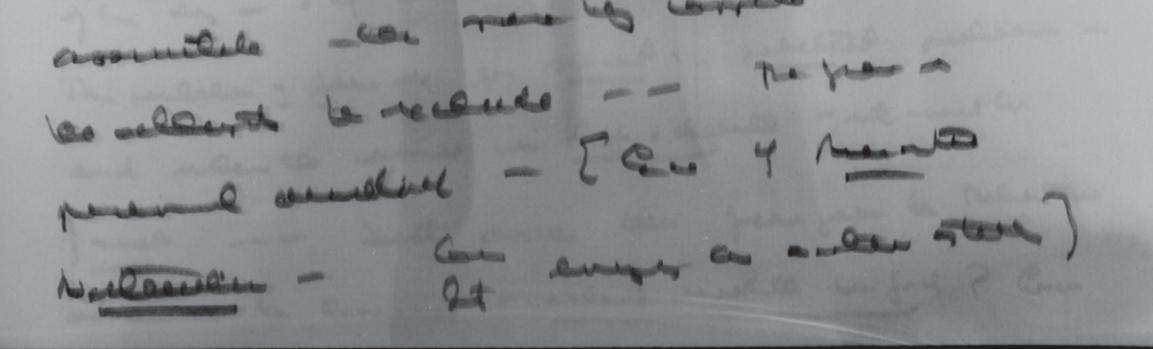


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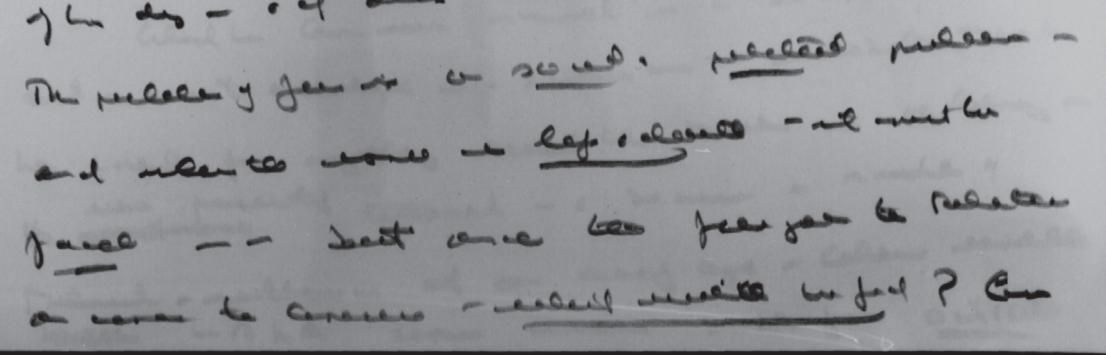




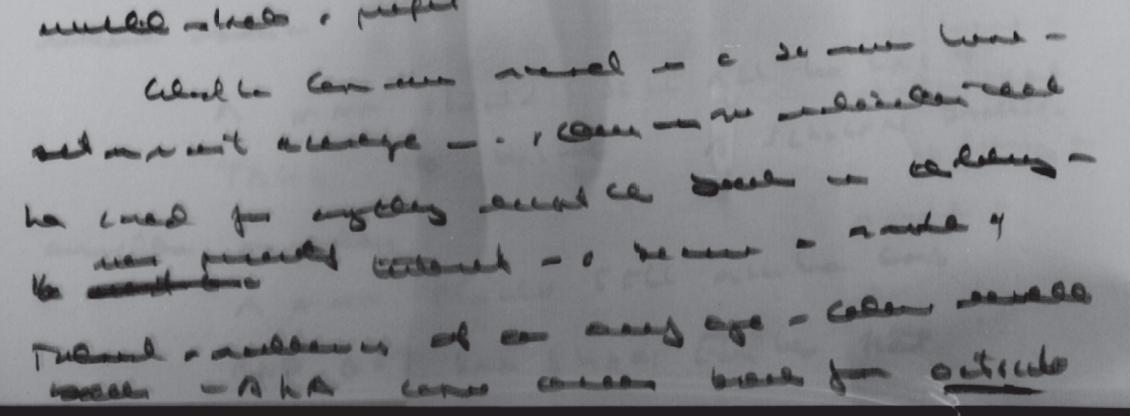
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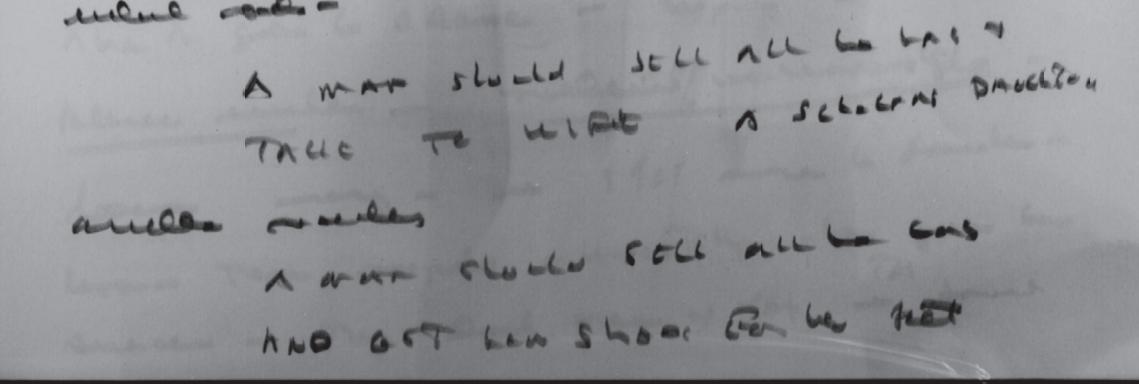
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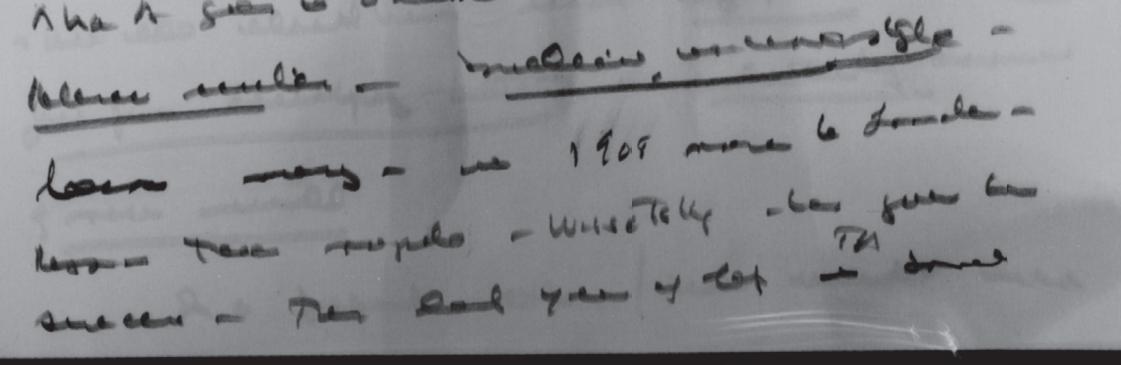
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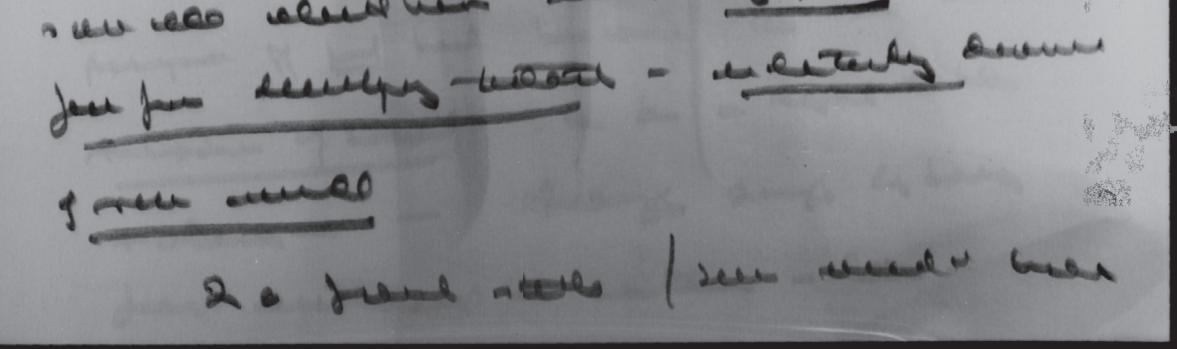
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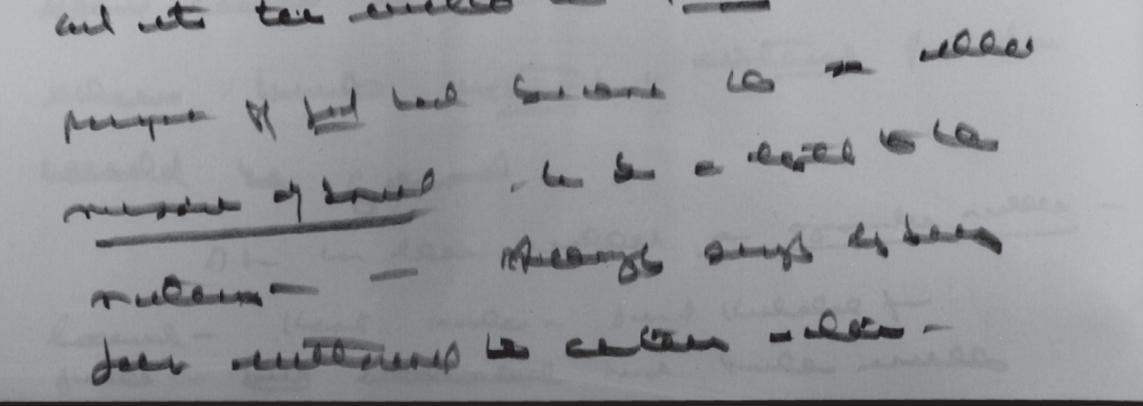
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