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Come On In, the Water's Fine, unpublished manuscript, first draft,  
chapters 1-6, pages 1-141, undated.

**COME ON IN, THE WATER'S FINE: An Investigation  
of Jewish Identity**

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*old person*

## Introduction

### TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHY OF JEWISH SURVIVAL

Mid-morning. A middle-aged rabbi in Pendleton shirt and gray flannel slacks, seated on a bench in front of a rustic lodge. A dozen or so campers sprawled on the grass. Sunshine. A not untypical camp institute scene. The Institute had invited me to lead a discussion on the theme: why be a Jew? I had prepared a two-word response: why not? Everyone must have an identity. We are shaped by and belong to one or several communities. The jargon term is reference groups. No one is just himself. I could think of many labels less noble and of many religious cultures less inspiring and colorful than ours, so why not be a Jew?

As a child I complained long and loud when my parents insisted that the family be together each Friday night around the Sabbath table and that I give up schoolyard baseball for after-school Hebrew lessons. But I came to appreciate the ties of family and, in retrospect, am grateful that I was nurtured by a coherent religious culture rather than by the inconsistent values and disintegrating structures, not to mention the vulgarity, which mark so much of our world. I do not want my children to have a mass media identity. I have been a child and I am a parent, and I can testify that a Jewish home and the Jewish world can be an emotionally secure and culturally exciting environment. So, why not be a Jew?

Such reasoning may satisfy a fifty-year-old who has enjoyed his Jewish experience and has come to terms with himself, but it cannot satisfy a restless young adult who is eager to discover for himself who he is and what life is all about. At eighteen or twenty-two, you want the best, not just the familiar. A young adult wants to try his own road, not settle for the life of his parents. There are so many places to go and experiences to savor. My two-word response turned into a week-long conversation which ranged over theology, philosophy, politics, the institutions of Jewish life, ethics and the realities of being a Jew in a convulsed world.

I hesitate to call what follows a dialogue, not only because this is not the transcription

of a tape, but because I did not restrict myself to the role of a passive adult who sets such a high value on the expression of feelings that he is unwilling to correct errors of fact or challenge youthful dogmatism. I am not by temperament a facilitator. I am a rabbi. I have convictions and I am prepared to defend them. I tried as best I could to disabuse those who offered misinformation and to force everyone to take a second and third look at conventional assumptions. Though I'm pleased to be told that I am a good listener, I wanted in the week we would spend together to present ideas and a challenge.

Our conversation took place at a particular time, in a particular context and among a particular group of people. Most were unmarried, products of middle-class homes, suburban school systems, and the late nineteen-seventies. They were sufficiently involved in Jewish life to risk a week at such a camp. A few had toured Israel. Though a number were, or had been, active in their congregations, none considered themselves pious. They did not ask for, and I did not present, an outline of basic Judaism. The issues were personal. They asked whether it was possible for Judaism to play an enhancing role in their lives. Several had come simply to be with friends, but most seemed interested in the problem to which we kept returning: why be a Jew?

As we began, I recognized that earlier rabbis rarely had to face this question. In their day few questioned the fitness of the familiar ways and customs of their community. A Jew was a Jew and that was the whole of it. The outside world knew them to be Jews. Their domestic world provided a tightly woven web of custom and commandments which shaped their routines, gave a particular color to their personalities, and provided the structure of a close-knit communal life. Education was parochial. Relationships were regulated by religious tradition. You were married under a huppah. When a son was born there was a bris. When a parent died you sat shivah. Belonging to the Jewish people was not only a fact of life but the determinative fact of their lives, not only inevitable but proclaimed a blessing. They accepted the myth that God had declared Israel an am-segulah, a people especially beloved to Him, and had given them a



central role in His plans for the world.

In their day, they struggled to do their duty rather than to know themselves. Self-awareness is a mixed blessing. The child is comfortable as he is; the adult talks nervously of a need to find himself. In the ancient world where change occurred at a snail's pace, philosophers taught that nothing new appears under the sun; and most folk agreed. History's sign was a serpent with its head in its mouth. People knew who they were, where they fitted into their community, and what values and skills to teach their children. Classic literature, like the Bible or Homer's epics, was generally written in the third person and described wars and adventures rather than an individual's interior life. A settled society focuses its imagination on events rather than in emotions. Personal feelings were not special enough to be interesting. Our world is a quite different place. Ties the ancients took for granted have become for us problematic. Our literature tends to be an exploration of private feelings. We are keenly aware of our individuality, less likely to be submissive to authority and more likely to be anxious about ourselves.

Perhaps our deepest fear, next to the fear of loneliness, is that we may be wasting our energies and days in misguided pursuits. His myths reassured the Jew that he was doing what he should be doing. God had given his ancestor full and clear instructions about right and wrong. Instruction is, by the way, the root meaning of Torah. Because God had made known His commandments, the Jew's life was graced by the peace of mind which comes from confidence in the direction of one's efforts and from that buoyancy of spirit which derives from being sure that God is in control and that all will turn out right in the end. Few Jews could have described just how obedience to Torah would bring about their redemption or hasten the millenium, but they knew it would. The Messiah would be one of theirs; dayyenu, that was enough for them.

A word about my use of the term, myth. I use it to describe a story that is among the precious possessions of a society because it explains the mysteries and meaning of life. A myth is true because it is believed and believed to be significant. Philosophy dissects truth through

analysis. Myths express the truths which defy scientific analysis and so allow a culture to express dynamic truths. Myth animates ideas and so is a uniquely effective vehicle to express assumptions about value, wisdom and purpose which otherwise defy language.

Until quite recently, for the Jew to cease being a Jew required apostasy. Everywhere Jews were a barely tolerated minority, and over the centuries some converted under threat while others could not resist the economic and social opportunities which were reserved to the religious majority; but conversion was rarely a matter of sincere conviction. There was little that was spiritually compelling in the way the dominant religions presented themselves. Christianity and Islam were the enemy. A gospel of love might be taught in the churches, but the Jew associated the Cross with the Crusader's lance and with pastors who, during Holy Week, exhorted their flock to attack the Christ killers. The sword of Islam was equally ferocious and, in Dar-al-Islam, the practice of religious persecution was endemic.

Our situation is quite other. There are bridges across the religious divide. We share the privilege of citizenship in a pluralistic society. The old rhetoric can still be heard, 'only if you join us will you be saved,' or 'God doesn't hear the prayers of Jews;' but most folk, certainly most Jews, think of other religions as complementary ways to spiritual growth. There is a social comity in our communities which the medieval Jew did not enjoy and probably could not have imagined. The identity issue was once a largely political issue. Today the self-confident and self-validating assumptions with which rabbinic culture insulated the Jew and with which Church teachings isolated the Christian are no longer accepted uncritically; indeed, they are daily brought into question by the freedom of our social lives. Children of all faiths mix and mingle in school, sports, and society. Lifelong affiliation is no longer inevitable or necessarily applauded. As he grows up, almost every young person will ask at some point, 'why remain a . . .'

We assumed in these discussions our immediate environment. In the Islamic world, the social and religious conditions of Jewish life remain as parochial as they were in medieval

Europe. Those few Jews who remain in places like Morocco and Tunisia exist on tolerance and are subject to a wide variety of social restrictions. Their Jewish identity is inescapable. In the Soviet Union where 'Jew' is passport designation, atheism a dogma of the party, and Zionism a crime, the identity issue is still a political issue. A young Israeli speaks Hebrew, learns Jewish history in school, never worries that the Hebrew University will schedule registration on Yom Kippur and lives under political tensions which create a considerable distance and suspicion between him and his Arab neighbors. For him, the identity problem is quite different than it is for American Jews.

Our talk reflected the conditions of the American diaspora where options do not exist: one can be active in a congregation or Hillel chapter, sit at the feet of a guru, hitch one's destiny to a back-to-the-soil communitarian experiment, join an anarchist cell, The Jewish Defense League or The Jewish Peace Fellowship - separately or sequentially.

At first my group spoke as if identity decisions represented entirely private commitments without social or family consequence. They thought of themselves as autonomous and self-reliant. I argued throughout, I hope persuasively, that questions of identity cannot be disentangled from political or social considerations. A non-observant Jew or a Jew who practices TM, or even one who converts to Christianity, may find, to his surprise, that he continues to be seen as a Jew by friends, neighbors and employers; he may even, again to his surprise, find that he still sometimes thinks in these terms. Even in the aftermath of World War II when evidence of the Holocaust shocked many non-Jews into a recognition of their participation in genteel prejudice, being Jewish was rarely allowed to be a matter purely of private conscience. Certainly it is not now as memories of the Holocaust dim and questions of ethnic and religious quotas are debated across the land. I've yet to meet a college admissions officer who couldn't tell me how many Jews there are in an entering class or a senior executive who didn't know which of his top assistants was Jewish.

The question, 'why be a Jew,' can be treated with theoretical detachment only by those to whom the question is not an immediate one and their theorizing is likely to be more

intellectually than personally satisfying. Religious decisions are existential decisions which grow out of private needs, not analytic decisions which grow out of the force of conceptual analysis. I tried to focus our discussion on 'becoming an active Jew' rather than defining an abstract Judaism; and tried to deal with the questions they raised within the context of shared experiences. I believe Judaism to be a helpful, and I would even say inspired, tradition, but I've never met anyone who became a more involved and active Jew because someone successfully debated the tradition's comparative merit.

Questions clustered around personal issues: can living as a Jew be an ennobling and healing experience; and does the world-wide community of Jews play a consequential role in what a traditional thinker would call God's plans and most at the Institute simply called civilization?

In terms of pure logic, there is no unassailable rationale of Jewish survival, nor, for that matter, of any religious tradition. There is no totally convincing argument why a Jew ought to remain a Jew; or, a Christian a Christian, or a Communist a Communist. Survival is a given, not a demonstrable argument.

Some Jews simply respect and love their parents; for them affiliation is simply a continuation of family. Some Jews are determined to be Jews to spite those who are determined to destroy the Jews. Emil Fackenheim has written that since the Holocaust an eleventh commandment exists: you shall not give to Hitler a posthumous victory. Others are moved to be active out of a deep and sometimes unexpected emotional response to the State of Israel, not simply because it is there or because it is theirs, but because Israel represents a triumph of the human spirit. Mankind can be brutalized, yet the human spirit is indomitable. The victims of the Holocaust built a State. Civilization can rise from the ashes.

Life establishes its own right to be. On the most elemental level, I am because I am. I have an inalienable right to be what I am or wish to be. The Jewish people is because Jews are.

Jews gave Europe and Civilization its Bible and its vision of social justice. Islam derived

its unitarian theology and its patterns of worship from the Torah tradition. In the Middle Ages Jews brought civilization to Europe when they translated much of the literary and philosophic legacy of Greece from Arabic and Syrian into Latin and the languages of the West. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Jews taught Protestant Europe to read the Bible in its original Hebrew and to value the careful study of Scripture. In the nineteenth century Jewish social thought stimulated many of the political reformers who set about establishing a classless social order. This small community has been remarkably creative, but abstract discussions of Jewish contributions to civilization, however historically interesting, are not personally compelling.

I am convinced that it is best to begin any discussion of 'why be a Jew' on a personal level. The importance of the survival of Judaism for the world is a question that cannot be overlooked, but the thrust of our discussion would be to determine the consequences for the Jew of active involvement in Jewish life. What can/does being Jewish mean? Will I be a better person for it? What can I find in Judaism which allows me to grow, to become, to transcend my limitations?

There was a good bit of resistance, which I found quite childish, on the grounds that Judaism was familiar and that our new age required new attitudes. I found myself often repeating the obvious: that what is new is not necessarily better, and what is different is not necessarily more distinguished and that, in any case, we cannot jump out of our souls. In determining the future, talents and force of will are important, but, to a surprising degree, we become what we become because of the place in which we find ourselves and the influences which bear upon us. I am what I am because of my family, because of the schooling that was available to me, because of the social context in which I grew up and now live, because I had a Jewish home and a Jewish education. Part of my identity is a given, but my mature identity is an achievement. I am not a carbon copy of my parents.

I believe in the far mystery. I believe that the survival of the Jewish people is of consequence to the world. I believe that God endowed Jewish history with significance. How

else explain our significance to civilization despite quite limited numbers? In almost every field of letters and research Jews have made a noticeable contribution. I also believe that it is foolish to try to unravel the mystery. I have always been put off by writers who know God's mind and often quote the rabbi who advised his colleagues: "Seek not to explain God's ways to man for these are beyond your understanding."

I do not know how the tomorrows of Jewish history will affect the world, but I know that our past has ennobled many. I know that because of my exposure to this people, its sacrifices and its heroism; and because of my exposure to this tradition, its wisdom and its humanity, I have been helped to grow into a sensitive and responsible human being.

As I took the experience of being Jewish into myself, I found that I was not only encouraged to be part of a long-lived, historic and courageous people, but that my life had taken on a satisfying shape and that I had gained a sense of purpose and confidence in my purposes. So I have concluded that the value of Judaism for the individual and the reason for the survival of the Jewish people is that it allows us to shape our lives within a grand, rich and wise religious civilization. How do I know? I know. It happened to me.

What follows, then, is not systematic theology but some personal reflections on the question, 'why be a Jew.' Since I believe that Judaism is best and correctly defined as a living, developing tradition, as the religious civilization of the Jewish people, rather than as a formal and unchanging doctrine or way of life, I have attempted to suggest how we can bind ourselves to a dynamic tradition and be enlivened by its force. These pages present a way of thinking about being Jewish and about becoming an active Jew which, I hope, has the value of at least asking the right questions.

## Chapter 1

### DOING WHAT COMES NATURALLY

- We had met on the bus and discussion began without preamble. I was immediately challenged. It doesn't bother me that I'm a Jew and that's what bothers me. I've no major theological hang-ups, but I want my religious decisions to be positive ones. Being Jewish or being anything has to make a difference in me, and that's the problem. My home is much like the Smith's next door. I went to Sabbath School and John went to Sunday School, but as far as I can see the only difference religion makes is that we celebrate holidays at different times of the year. We've gone to the same schools, we like the same music, and we generally think alike. I suppose there were some minor differences in table talk. My parents spoke about the Holocaust and Israel. My grandparents often told me how close-knit Jewish families were and took pride in the large number of Jewish Nobel Prize winners; but I can't feel that these conversations made me different and, in any case, they dealt with past or someone else's accomplishment. For me the question is personal and immediate. If I'm to become an active Jew, I want my involvement to add something significant to my life, and I'm not sure that it can or will.

I asked them to be patient with their personal expressions. We'd get to them. If our discussions were to be meaningful, it was important that we agree on terms and understand our terms as clearly as possible so that we would make sense to each other. But patience does not come naturally to young eager minds.

- If I ever need a religion I'll find one that's good for me. Until then I'll reserve judgment.

I gave up my attempt at being systematic. No one acquires a religion by going shopping one day and picking off the rack a religious garment which happens to catch their eye. Religion involves what we are, not what we wear; you can't decide in the morning what religion you'll wear that day.

We derive our identity from experiences, from our environment and from reflection on all that happens to us. We are born into a given family, community, and culture and are conditioned by our world long before we begin to think critically about its values. A child does not as yet separate his self from all that happens about him. He lives, as an animal lives, largely by doing what comes naturally. As we mature, as our mind and imagination develop, we begin to make judgments about our environment. As we grow we weave into an identity ideas which have come to us from our parents, our reading, the talk and actions of our friends, television, and our private reflections and experiences.

We become not only what our talents and our will allow us to become but, to a large degree, what home, school, and culture permit us to become. Life may take us far from our roots but, as Dr. Freud taught, we never free ourselves completely of them. In religious matters the community's religious spirit always precedes an individual's faith. Judaism seems natural and comfortable to me while Hinduism does not. Judaism was a reality to which I had to respond whereas Hinduism was a distant abstraction which did not impinge on my development.

- Wait a minute. I do my homework. No one does it for me. I chose my major and I'll choose my career. No one is going to tell me what to do.

Did you see a Jean Truffaut film called The Wild Child?

About a century ago in France a boy was abandoned by his parents and



raised by wolves. When he was found at about the age of nine he was not only illiterate and fearful of human contact but unable to use speech to communicate ideas. His environment had been wild and so was he.

- But that's a movie.

It was based on an actual case. Without family, schools, books, music, friends, we would not develop more than a few rudimentary survival skills.

There are no self-made people. George Bernard Shaw said it with customary verve: "Independence, that's middle-class blasphemy. We are all dependent on one another, every soul of us on earth." The wild child had only his instincts to rely on. Adults can make sophisticated decisions precisely because as children we absorbed ideas and skills others had developed and were taught to use that knowledge to enhance our lives.

- You're saying be a Jew because your parents are Jews and I can't buy that. I don't vote the way my parents do. Our political ideas are miles apart. Why should I worship as they do if our religious ideas aren't the same?

You've mistaken my point. I'm not arguing that you must become what your parents are. That's manifestly not true. I'm saying that you have internalized many Jewish attitudes and are positioned to make the most of the Jewish way and that it is unlikely that you could gain as much from a tradition whose attitudes and values were not natural to you. I'm suggesting the natural benefit of building your life within a familiar framework.

- There were still statements to be made. Another voice cut in: I read about those prayer breakfasts where senators, businessmen, and generals begin the day with bowed heads and then spend the rest of the day manipulating the levers of power. Aren't they a bunch of hypocrites?

The calm voice of reason, obviously my voice; If we are going to talk intelligently about religion you must learn not to dismiss out of hand experiences and attitudes that you do not understand or agree with. Let me give you an example of what I mean. In April of 1979, under not so gentle pressure from the United States, the Prime Minister of Israel, Menachem Begin, and the President of Egypt, Anwar Sadat, met at Camp David to draw up terms for a peace conference between their nations. When the negotiations were successfully completed, a public ceremony was organized at the White House for the formal signing of the accords. On that occasion each of the heads of state made an appropriate speech. I remember being struck that each man, during the course of his remarks, quoted the same line from the prophet Isaiah: "They shall beat their swords into plough shares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Neither shall they learn war any more." The next day Sadat and Begin put the peace conference behind and went up to the Hill to petition Congress to sell more arms to their respective military forces, and the American President held a press conference in which he explained the treaty in the cold terms of geo-politics.

Politicians have been known to quote Scripture for no better purpose than to gain votes, but I am convinced that in this case each leader spoke from the heart. Each is a confirmed believer, in fact a rather traditional believer. Jimmy Carter affirms an evangelical form of Protestant Christianity, Menachem Begin practices orthodox Judaism and Anwar Sadat follows the Sunni tradition of Islam. Why then the sudden shift from a vision of peace to an agenda of national defense? As traditional believers they know that Isaiah's speech begins, "in the end of days it shall come to pass,"

and that it describes a utopian future rather than a practical possibility for our times. Each has been taught by his tradition that realistic prudence as well as prophetic commitment are required of human beings, at least as long as the world remains unredeemed.

- Are you suggesting that religion tolerates, even applauds, military preparations? Aren't war and guns the interests of the devil rather than of God?

In order to be a peacemaker you must be alive. I take it to be a sign of wisdom that Judaism has a sensitive appreciation of the complex emotions which course in the human soul and of the mixture of morality and greed which govern the politics in which human beings engage. Judaism was the first among the religions of mankind to project the vision of universal peace; but our sages also taught: 'if one comes to kill you, kill him first.' A religious tradition which did not offer practical advice for the years until the Messiah arrives would fail its community.

- Define religion. As I had hoped, the conversation had come back to the starting line.

Harvey Cox defines religion as "that cluster of memories and myths, rites and customs, ideas and institutions, that pulls together the life of a person or group into a meaningful whole." A religion certifies and confirms a group's aspirations and values. Human beings need to feel that there is more to life than frustration, illness and the grave. Put bluntly we need to know that they are not running around in circles. Our religion assures us we're following a straight and direct path.

We did not choose to be born. We will die not by choice or, if we die naturally, at a time of our choosing. Life is not only brief but confusing. We cannot prove that one way of life is better

than another or that the goals we have formulated are worthwhile or attainable; yet, because we are thinking beasts we need to believe that what we do is right and that our commitments have been intelligently chosen and that their effect will be consequential. We need to find life an ennobling and exciting experience rather than a bitter life sentence without hope of parole. To do so, we must resolve the contradictions of our existence, which is what our religious structures do for us. Every society has, or has had, a religious component for the good reason that no group can function successfully unless it is satisfied that its energies are directed meaningfully, that its values are valid and that its efforts will be rewarded. The religious need is as natural and as necessary as the need to love and be loved. Religions exist because we cannot manage without them.

Animals respond out of instinct to their environment and consequently lack this religious need. They struggle to survive as we do but they are not blessed, or is it cursed, by curiosity. Alone among animate creatures, the human is aware of being alive and conscious that life is full of contradictions and options; all too brief and often terribly bruising. We cannot help wondering what life is and what death is and whether there is any purpose to all our exertions. Nor can we help wondering whether we know what is right and what we can or should do to make our world a better place.

Apparently we can tolerate any thought except the possibility that life is chaotic and aimless. We cannot survive, certainly not sanely or successfully, caught in a web of paralyzing doubt. Something in each of us reaches out to appropriate hope and meaning. Psychologists speak of a will to believe as one of the built-in

primitives of our emotional apparatus. We need to feel that there is a way that we ought to go, a way which will give meaning and grace to what would otherwise be a hapless journey. On the High Holidays Jews read a portion of the book of Deuteronomy which includes the imperative: "Choose life." Someone once said to me, why make such a todo about the inevitable? We have no other choice. Actually, we do. Being alive is not the same as feeling alive. Without hope and a vision, a religion, each day is a burden. Caught up in a vision each day is an opportunity. Religion allows the human being to experience life as a challenging journey rather than a joyless endurance contest. I could give you a number of sophisticated definitions of religion; but perhaps it's easiest to simply quote Salvador de Madriaga: "religion is all that we do to prove to ourselves that God is not mad."

- You've been speaking of individual needs and hopes. How does a private vision become a religion with millions of members?

We are by nature social beings. The sense of assurance, the vision, may begin with one man: an Abraham, a Paul, a Mohammed; but, inevitably, others are caught up in it, and a religion emerges.

- I thought religions taught us how to qualify for Heaven. You focus religion on the here and now.

Religions consist of the insights, symbols, rituals and ethical principles by which a society confirms a certain order and affirms a particular hope. Immortality is one possible form of a religion's redemptive promise. The various religions hold out a variety of promises: long life, health and wealth, the lasting significance of your labors, a Messiah, a *Messianic Age*, peace of mind, a Promised Land, triumph over enemies, Aryan conquest, the victory of the proletariat; and when we look not at the lot and recognize

how varied the particular hopes are, it becomes apparent that to be redeemed means simply to feel that your values are confirmed, your efforts significant, and that your influence will have some lasting value.

Those who survived the German death camps have commented that prisoners remained sane as long as they could hold on to any kind of hope. When they gave up on the possibility of escape, on an Allied victory or on God, they rushed the electrified fences. Religion is the mechanism through which a society lifts up and certifies hope. Faith is our individual appropriation of that hope. We are religious not because we believe but because we need to believe and, whether we are conscious of the fact or not, we all believe.

- But I'm not religious. A ripple of laughter ran through the group.

Then you don't know yourself, or, more likely, you are using, without being conscious of the fact, a conventional and institutional definition of religion. You're saying, are you not, that you are not involved in what happens in your synagogue? I'm saying that, to understand religion, you must be willing to look beyond institutional affiliation to the phenomenon itself. Religion is not the sum of the activities that takes place within a religious institution or which are labeled as religious in ordinary speech; but the cluster of ideas, values and hopes which we accept on faith, "know" to be right and which guarantee to us that our lives are meaningful. Not everyone belongs to a church or synagogue, but everyone operates with a set of religious beliefs.

- I don't follow.

I'm sure that you believe in democracy and justice. You believe that our world can be made a better place. You think you can shape your life and find fulfillment. These are common enough

convictions. On what basis do you hold them?

- They're right.

How do you know?

- Everyone agrees.

Not so. In China the individual is taught to subordinate his ego to the collective. Harmony, not initiative, is the standard; the individual has no inalienable rights, and the function of the state is to organize duties equitably. Chairman Mao taught: "We must all learn the spirit of absolute selflessness. . to proceed in all cases from the interests of the people and not from one's sole interest." The assumptions of Mao's Little Red Book are no more scientific than those you live by; and both are, in fact, religious positions though both you and he, or his ghost, may object to the label.

As in every other aspect of life, one must learn to be discriminating in matters religious. Every religion consecrates a particular set of actions which it declares to be necessary if redemption is to be realized. Some religions promulgate their views by example, others by coercion. Some traditions go out aggressively to convert the "unenlightened". Others approve actions which restrict the rights of non-believers. Puritanical attempts to enforce Sunday Blue Laws or denominational pressures to re-introduce prayer into the public schools are cases in point. In matters religious, as in most other aspects of life, the old adage applies: 'by their deeds shall you know them.'

- Above the Ark in our synagogue there is a wooden replica of the stone tablets on which Moses incised the Ten Commandments. I've always thought of ethics and religion as synonymous terms and, therefore, of churches and synagogues as institutions of similar purpose.



Religion includes but transcends ethics. The ethical goal is goodness. The religious goal is redemption.

- Define your terms.

Ethics are the norms by which we manage our day-to-day relations as honorably as we can. Ethics deals with right and wrong in contextual terms. It asks pragmatic questions about practical benefits. A religion's understanding of redemption will include the requirement of ethical behavior, but it will define the right in terms of the beliefs and loyalties which are central to its special message. Godliness and goodness are not synonymous terms. A hermit may do nothing but fast and pray. A religion which values asceticism will call him a holy man; you and I may wonder if he is not simply a deserter from the real problems of his society.

Ethical standards tend to be situational. Religion raises up norms which it claims to be unconditioned. When we try on purely logical grounds to decide what is right we soon recognize, if we are honest with ourselves, that our judgments reflect a particular cultural context and probably a good bit of self-serving rationalization, as well. Religion affirms moral law and resolves our doubts about moral standards precisely in that it teaches us that "right" actions conform to an ultimate standard. The familiar image of God, the Holy One, revealing the law to Moses is, among other things, a metaphor of this idea. When God speaks the believer feels that His commandments define right and wrong and are beyond question and unconditional. Micah said it simply: "It has been told you, O man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you."

- Do you really believe that at Sinai God defined right and wrong for all times and that the Torah contains all we need to know in that regard?



No, but I do believe that the Torah contains much we need to know about virtue and purpose and would not have been known otherwise, seminal ideas. We'll come back to the Torah and its claims on our beliefs. For the moment let's stay with the task of defining religion.

- Judaism and Christianity teach many similar values. Why make an issue of religious differences?

Judgments must be made. Each religious culture shapes its communicants' ideas about right and wrong. Rabbinic Judaism insisted that suicide is wrong. God gave us life and He alone should determine its limits. In Shinto ritual suicide, hari-kari, is considered a virtue since a life without honor is no life.

- All religions do good.

Not so. Let me ask a question: do all religions encourage those values we instinctively label as ethically valid: love, honesty, family loyalty, and social justice?

- Yes.

- No.

Silence. Finally, I filled the void. When Germany's best and brightest went to Hitler's youth camps, did their counselors and the Nazi rituals encourage them to be sensitive, generous, and peace-loving? You know the answer. Naziism taught the virtue of racial purity and total commitment to the state. Hitler disparaged the Bible as a blueprint for people of a slave mentality. He taught the right of might. Sympathy was a weakness. He denied the very idea of humanity. He labeled Aryans a master race.

- Naziism was not a religion. It was a political philosophy, perhaps a madness, but not a religion.

Why not?

- It was evil.

Must religions be good?

- Yes.

Why?

Again, silence. After a moment I filled the void. Couldn't we describe Naziism as a collection of myths, rites, customs, ideas and institutions which pulled together and certified the aspirations of much of the German nation? Naziism displayed most of the features which we associate with better-liked religion: strong faith in a charismatic leader, total commitment to a set of values which are held to be of cosmic importance, certainty that there is only one truth and that all error must be suppressed, grand public pageants at holy shrines like Nuremberg, a bible, Mein Kampf, a messianic vision of a redeemed world purified by Aryan values and Aryan leaders; in short, a redemptive vision.

For many this was a bit much, but determined to make the point, I pressed on: How would you define a religious person?

- One who takes faith seriously and who lives by his faith.

Wouldn't that include the Nazis?

- Someone who is affiliated with a congregation.

Couldn't you call the Nazi Party a congregation?

I felt I had made my point, so I went after another common misconception. Are there religious and non-religious folk?

- I know you'll disagree, but I've got to say yes. Half of all Americans don't belong to a church or synagogue.

You're assuming that the unaffiliated are, by definition, non-religious. Affiliation is a peculiar Western practice. In India people go when they wish to any available Hindu, Buddhist or Taoist shrine, and the temples are supported by coins tossed by the worshippers into a box placed in front of the idol.

- Do you mean that these religions are interchangeable?

At the peasant level the promise of a religious tradition is reduced to its simplest level: rain, sons, health and immortality; and all the religions of a particular area refract similar social and cultural attitudes. It's only as civilization becomes more complex and social classes arise that significant differences in the religious message appear. A Hindu Brahmin and a Taoist priest will be conscious of differences of which their peasant neighbors are unaware.

In any case religion is never limited to the activity of a shrine or temple. The religious cluster permeates life. This can be seen most clearly in medieval societies where there was no constitutional division between church and state. In the shtetl the school taught the Torah curriculum. The courts dispensed Torah law. Homes and shops kept the Sabbath and everyone observed the dietary laws. Judaism set the norms of everyday life. Religion and the daily routines were intimately connected, and even those who were not pious lived within a world permeated by Judaism's traditions, values and hopes, and were shaped by it.

- But that world doesn't exist any more. Judaism is only one facet of my life. I don't see Jewishness very much outside the synagogue.

Our society is a pluralistic one, one of the first and the few that the world has ever known. No single religion permeates and dominates the culture. Our law creates neutral space so that people of various religions can work together. We can affiliate or not with a traditional religion; but non-affiliation and irreligion are not identical terms. Those who are not caught up in Judaism or Christianity are, consciously or unconsciously, affiliated with America's civil religion.

- What's a civil religion?

When writers describe a civil religion, they mean a set of ethical rules and a utopian vision which enjoy widespread agreement among the citizens of a nation, ideas and hopes which are affirmed and celebrated by that nation's institutions and holidays. Civil religions are modern phenomena. As long as a community's culture was homogeneous, its church lifted up national as well as theological values. With dis-establishment of the church and the growth of secularism, the civil life began to take on an independent religious aspect and to refract its own cluster of consecrated values. The law will refract shared assumptions about human nature and broad purpose which also will inform public debate and the school curriculum and be sanctified in national holidays and anthems.

- Why?

Because no community can exist successfully without them. Religion involves a set of widely shared convictions about the meaning and promise of life and activity which then shapes the social order and its culture, and that is precisely the force of a civil religion. A religious vision is the glue that holds a body politic together.

America's civil religion has been described as a secular humanism which affirms social justice; the autonomous individual, the Bill of Rights, public welfare, the work ethic and human brotherhood. Honesty compels me to add that this cluster of ideas and institutions also includes intense individualism, happiness through having, and a goodly amount of chauvinism. America's civil <sup>religion</sup> provides all the necessary elements of a religious faith: a promise of the future, a sense of common purpose, and a social and personal ethic. Instead of Micah's synthesis of the Biblical tradition I have cited, this faith's watchword is President Kennedy's famous motto: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country. . . ." Its commandments are those of social service. Its holidays are the

Fourth of July, the second Tuesday in November, and Thanksgiving Day. Its symbols are the flag and the ballot and its liturgy includes the Pledge of Allegiance. Its messianic vision is of a humane republic, secure in peace and established in justice. Not every American who is unchurched belongs to this tradition; in our heterogeneous society there are a number of racial and ethnic sub-cultures which march under their own banners; and counter-culture groups who hold to their own distinct visions and consciously espouse an anti-civil religion. Every religion has its dissenters and heretics and America's civil religion is no exception.

- By your definition I'm a Jew and a civil religionist, if there is such a word. I thought that in such matters it was one religion to a customer.

Jewish religious values and institutions are not the only ones which affect American Jews and Christian religious values are not the only ones which affect most Christians, even the born again. All of us are deeply affected by America's civil religion.

Because many of the major promises and premises of America's civil religion are, after all, the creation of people whose roots rested in the soil of Biblical civilization, and because they supported cherished values, these seemed quite acceptable to most of America's Christians and Jews. There was a sense of finding in the civil religion an extension of the older faith.

- Isn't that an illusion? The medieval faiths were considerably more other-worldly and authoritarian than what you call America's civil religion.

The civil religion emphasized those elements of the traditional teachings which were congenial to the emerging social order: "proclaim liberty throughout the land," God's rebuke of Israel when

they cried out for a king; Sinai and the concert of freedom under law:  
 "Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us all?"

- Are Americans more Christian or civilist?

Most Americans are products of the public schools and so share many values, including that of openness, which the civil religion emphasizes. When the President of the Southern Baptist Alliance pronounced that God did not hear the prayers of Jews, his proprietary attitude towards God grated against the assumptions of the civil religion and he was widely criticized. It takes chutzpah to insist that you know to whom God listens, but had this narrow-minded fellow spoken as he did to a society where the civil religion did not encourage openness all that Martin Luther King suggested when he said: "We must learn to live together as brothers or we shall perish together as fools," most would have nodded in agreement. After all, classic Christianity accepts literally Jesus' words as repeated in the New Testament: "No one shall come to God except through Me."

- I can understand civil religion because I see its impact on the society and on my life. What I don't see is Judaism's impact. A few candles and a few holiday meals hardly add up to anything significant. I know I'm an American, but how am I a Jew?

It's my hope, obviously, that Judaism's role in your life will grow. I'll try to show you what becoming an active Jew can mean. Today, I'll answer only that part of your question which goes to your present Jewish identity. You're a Jew in more ways than you're aware of. The religious imprint is, like indelible ink, almost impossible to erase and, under certain conditions, strikingly legible. Everyone here has been, or is, in college. The Jew may never read a Jewish classic, but college is a must. The importance of education has been

drummed into us. One of the hardest counseling tasks a rabbi can have is when he tries to convince parents that their child is not college material and ought to learn a trade. Judaism has conditioned all of us in many ways. Judaism never equated wealth with worth and so we have few hangups about public welfare programs. We may not think about the stewardship implications of the creation story; but we accept the idea that we have no right to claim and abuse for private gain the earth's natural resources. "The earth is the Lord's."

- Go back to your original thesis; you have said that there are no irreligious people, but I've got a friend who is an atheist.

Atheism is an article of faith not proof of irreligion. I suspect your friend is an active member of America's civil religion without being conscious of his affiliation.

- I've always assumed you don't have a religion if you don't have a god.

The most successful religious movements of this century, Leninism and Maoism, consider the God-focused traditions to be opiates of the masses.

- Communism is anti-religious. How can you call it a religion? Despite Communism's uncompromising materialistic ideology, it is, in fact, almost a mirror image of medieval Christianity. Portraits of saints hang high in vast ceremonial halls. Mausoleums which contain the bodies of the patriarchs are objects of pilgrimage. A consecrated scripture is interpreted officially and anyone who questions received dogma is condemned as a heretic. Books are censored. Only the official truth may be preached. The formation of a person's faith is carefully supervised in parochial schools by a zealous clergy. There is even a messianic promise: the great day when the contradictions of history will be resolved and an age of classless joy will envelop the



earth.

- I once looked up religion in a dictionary. The first definition was faith in God or gods.

Dictionaries reflect their times. If you had picked up an earlier edition you would have found religion defined as faith in God, the Father, and the Christ, which is the way the first European dictionaries reflected the parochial self-confidence of medieval Christendom. As the West came to recognize that it did not represent the whole of human culture, the list of religions was enlarged to include Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and the Chinese traditions. Religions were understood as those elements of a culture which revolved around shrines, scriptures, worship and some promise beyond the grave. Then it began to dawn on dictionary editors that there were scripture-based religions and those which had only an oral tradition; that some worshipped in shrines and others in the open air; that there were clergy in some traditions and none in others. If you had read further you would have found other definitions: "A way of life in accord with authorized teachings" or "faith that the truth is known."

The modern study of religions began when students shifted their interest from form to function. Rituals are colorful, but a religion's redemptive ideas are crucial, determinative of its character and impact and representative of the heart of the enterprise. There is now a growing awareness that the field of religion includes any cluster of ideas which pull a society's values together and certify its hope. Like it or not, idol worship and Marxist ideology are religious phenomena, and the next generation of dictionaries will certainly reflect this understanding.

- Aren't a lot of Israelis anti-religious? Our cousins visited us recently. We invited them to go to services with us.



They made it clear that they weren't interested. They hadn't been in a synagogue since they left Europe thirty years ago.

There is an Israeli civil religion just as there is an American one. Israel's civil religion picks up many traditional Jewish elements: the sense of peoplehood, the vision of Zion redeemed in justice, and the centrality of the Hebrew Bible and calendar to Jewish life. The Bible is treated as a literary classic rather than Scripture, but its values and idiom permeate the society, validate the nation's claim to the land, provide the wellspring of an important tradition of social idealism, express their special sense of Jerusalem's holiness and root the national calendar and language in a distant and romantic past.

- Defining religion is getting complicated.

The label is a tricky one. In Israel there is a well-known political division between those who call themselves dati, religious, and lo-dati, the non-religious. Lo-dati oppose administrative arrangements which give rabbinic authorities control over the laws of personal status. They propose the separation of synagogue and state. Not surprisingly, many active and affiliated synagogue Jews are lo-dati. If I lived in Israel I would be among them.

- I've always felt that my friend, John, is religious though he protests that he is not. He believes in human decency, the public school system, affirmative action, the inevitability of arms control and world government. He argues that these ideas are purely rational statements, but he's uncomfortable if they are challenged. I have tried to tell him that his idealism comes from a faith in the goodness of the human being and the possibility of transforming the social order for the better, ideas that can't be proven from history or by any research, but he insists his ideas are purely scientific.

When an idea is hotly defended you can be pretty sure it's part of that person's religious system. Sometimes I simply describe religion as that cluster of ideas and hopes which we couldn't give up without changing what's in our souls. Our dependence on a religious system whose teachings and symbols confirm our sense of order is decisive in maintaining our composure and balance in the face of life's challenges.

- Is that why I rarely have had an easy conversation with non-Jewish friends about religion?

The question was rhetorical. The camp loudspeaker crackled with a call to sports. I asked them to think over a paragraph from George Santayana's Reason in Religion: "Every living and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncrasy. Its power consists in its special and surprising message and in the bias which that revelation gives to life. The vistas it opens and the mysteries it propounds are another world to live in - whether we expect ever to pass wholly over into it or no - is what we mean by having a religion." Let's talk more after lunch about the fact that religions perform the same functions in all societies, but bring quite distinct messages.

- Do you mean that Judaism and Christianity are not as closely allied as I tend to think?

Go play tennis. We've got a week to talk.

## Chapter 2

### MY FAITH AND OUR RELIGION

We picked up the conversation as if there had not been a break.

- Religion is a private matter. I will make up my own mind. No one is going to tell me what to believe.

They already have. No one lives solo. You speak and think in English. Your attitudes have been shaped by the mass media, suburbia, what you have read, the conventional wisdom and your home. No one starts a religious search with an unprogrammed mind.

- My friend's parents kept her out of religious school and ritual out of their home so she would be free as an adult to make up her mind.

They may have kept Judaism out of her life, I'm sure they celebrated Thanksgiving and Labor Day. At the very least she has been conditioned to America's civil religion.

I used to suggest to such parents that an informed decision was wiser than one based on ignorance, but that argument, despite its validity, made little impression. Major segments of our culture make such a virtue of independence that many will not admit, however often it is demonstrated to them, that self-reliance often develops best in an environment characterized by conviction and standards. I now simply observe that children left on their own may not have to shed a Jewish imprint when they become adults but that they will have to free themselves of the imprint of the rather coarse and self-indulgent materialist and hedonist culture whose values are consecrated on the television they watch every Sabbath morning and most other times.

- I'm puzzled by all this talk of environment and community.

I was taught that religion was what a person does with his solitariness and the idea made sense to me.

Someone quoted Alfred North Whitehead to you; unfortunately this is a case where a fine logician was guilty of imprecision. He wrote religion when he meant faith. Faith is your private understanding of your religion. Faith says: I believe. Religion presents and promotes what a community believes. It is a corporate expression of values and vision. Our religion involves the synagogues, scriptures, holidays, rituals, proverbs, myths, liturgies, ethical mandates and sacred symbols which present and represent Judaism's special and surprising message.

Faith is a private affair but never an unconditioned one. In building a faith we draw on our religious tradition. Moreover, a Jew, a Christian and a Muslim may each have faith in a personal god, but will inevitably express their faith in distinct ways, and the consequences of their faith will be quite distinct since it will involve them in the activities of their separate religions.

- How does one build a faith?

With what's at hand. No one invents a religion. Certain values and attitudes become part of us without our knowing it.

- You're talking conditioning. I'm talking about conscious decision.

- Logic is not the key to faith. I care deeply about being Jewish, but I don't remember ever sitting down and deciding to do so. It's more a matter of its feeling right. I sense something powerful and special at a Yom Kippur service.

Some call such a moment a religious experience. I think of it more as a binding experience. A binding experience, involves a reaching out to something apprehended but not yet comprehended, during

which the religion ceases to be out there somewhere and becomes part of us.

- How does one become a Jew?

- By going through a Bar Mitzvah.

A Jew is a Jew from birth and remains a Jew unless he becomes an apostate. Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah are simply rites of passage. Every society has some test or performance which signifies the end of childhood and admission into the adult community and to adult responsibilities. Young Indian braves were sent out to survive in the forest. English squires knelt before the sword they would wield as knights. Societies reveal a good deal about their priorities in their choice of a rite of passage. The young Jew is asked to master a portion of the Torah. Here you have the emphasis on learning and ethical sensitivity and trained judgment which have characterized the rabbinic tradition.

- I love the songs and chants but had never paid much attention to the liturgy - in fact, it bored me and I went out of respect for my parents - until one day, "a word got through." I don't know why, exactly, but I began to listen and to care.

Whether native-born or convert, one develops a Jewish identity in much the same way: through a process that combines feeling, knowledge and familiarity. It's a question of letting Judaism in. When I'm asked, how can I come alive as a Jew, how can I have a lively faith, I answer: "Light Chanukah lights and Sabbath candles, sing Hatikvah and Jerusalem the Golden, join in the synagogue worship, work in the Jewish community. Give Judaism a chance. Open yourself up to it. Don't sit in services daring the music and words to get through to you; involve yourself in the moment."

- I tried. I went and nothing happened.

Try again. The first time it's a strange experience. Binding tends to accompany familiarity.

I use the word "binding" to describe a particular moment or experience that opens up feelings about your religious tradition that you've never had before. For many in my generation, we were in our late teens and early twenties during the second World War, the binding experience was the shattering reality of the Death Camps and/or our surprise that a Jewish state could actually be established against seemingly insuperable odds. On May 15, 1948, the day Israel proclaimed her independence, I was working for the Jewish Agency securing materials needed for the struggle against invading Arab armies, and as the news of independence flashed on the electronic tape over Times Square my eyes clouded up, all doubts were swept aside and Jacob's phrase crossed my mind: "Surely God is in this place, and I knew it not."

Early in this century a German scholar, Rudolph Otto, described the sense of coming alive to one's religion as a response to ultimate reality, a sense of touching and being deeply affected by a reality beyond what is known in everyday experience. Otto used the term numinous to describe the emotional aura which surrounds the moment when we become aware of the mysterious reality which lies beyond the world of common experience. Otto, a non-Jew, found the numinous present on various occasions, including a Yom Kippur service in a small North African synagogue. The worshippers were in white. The chant was minor-keyed and repetitive. The congregation moved with an hypnotic sway which swept the worshippers out of themselves and clearly took them beyond ordinary feelings and thoughts.

I am sure others have sensed the numinous in a May Day parade or a Nuremberg Rally or an African tribal dance. In each case the moment was special and the music and ritual distinctive; emotions flowed

and the participants felt confirmed and consecrated. Jews use the term Kedusha, holiness, to describe our moments with the luminous. Early in his career the prophet Isaiah entered the Temple in Jerusalem, felt the inrush of a quickening spirit, God's spirit, and spoke spontaneously, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory," words which we have kept alive by using them in the daily liturgy.

- Religion's public nature was a troubling idea. I don't believe in indoctrination. I don't believe in parochial schools.

Why does the idea bother you so much?

Because, once institutions emerge, coercion is inevitable. Religions organize crusades, inquisitions, and censorship.

Schools educate and indoctrinate. Hospitals cure and unnecessarily prolong lives. Religious institutions, being human institutions, always leave a spotty record. All human institutions are ripe with contradictions. They are the creation of human beings, not angels; but we cannot do without them. If Judaism were disconnected from people and institutions, the dream would float irrelevantly high above us in the air. Since it is connected to us it inevitably absorbs all our limitations and complications. Why must religion be pristine when nothing else in life is?

- It's a question of living up to self-professed standards. Synagogues can be snobbish and class conscious, and rabbis aren't saints.

You're quoting Jeremiah perhaps without knowing it. "From the smallest to the greatest, they are all greedy for gain: priests and prophet alike, they all act falsely." Congregations are made up of fallible people like ourselves and operate in the confusing world which is where we live. Rabbis are human and subject to all the infirmities

of the spirit.

Where did you get the idea that synagogues or rabbis claim either infallibility or saintliness? The synagogue is an entirely human institution. We have no priesthood which takes upon itself special disciplines like celibacy which suggests that a special holiness accrues to our person. When a rabbi speaks from the pulpit he does not claim his statements are free of error.

I'd be the first to agree that terrible crimes have been committed in the name of religion. In mosques across the Near East Islamic immams regularly preach jihad, a holy war against Israel. The Pope, John Paul II, has censored well-known Roman Catholic theologians who questioned the Church's doctrine of papal infallibility. Maoism has its rectification centers and Russian Communism its mental hospitals. In Israel the rabbinate have imposed their authority in the area of the rules of personal status on those who willingly accept the yoke of the law and those who do not. We confront here an inescapable human dilemma. We can't do without religion and few groups possess enough humility and self-discipline not to need to impose 'true' values, their values, on others.

- I'm finding it hard to break myself of the association of religion and goodness. I think of religion as white.

Religion's function is to certify 'the right'; but we can't allow these claims automatic deference. In Judaism's case, at least, the theology's in place. Ultimate truth belongs to God alone. An old teacher of mine used to say: "Our ability to do justice and love mercy will often depend on how well we have learned to walk humbly with our God." We believe, but, when all is said and done, we cannot be sure. The Torah takes pains to drive home the point: "My ways are not your ways, says the Lord; and my thoughts are not your thoughts. Just as



the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my thoughts higher than your thoughts." Somehow we must marry patience to principle; it's not easy, but the problem is not the institutionalization of religion, which is in any case necessary and inevitable, but our blindness to the fact that religions are human and not divine institutions. Many serve God, but none is God-like - infallible.

- Don't institutions compound a religion's ability to cause pain? A group can do more harm than the single person.

And more good. You need institutions to transform moral positions into programs and theological insights into educational programs which develop sensitivity and spiritual disciplines. You need organization to establish schools, synagogues, libraries, retreats, welfare service, self-help agencies, and the like.

A synagogue offers congregation, an end to loneliness; a calendar of effective ceremonies and holidays which remind the Jew of the joys and duties of the religious life, the wisdom of the tradition and its moral challenge. Synagogues exist because we are social beings whose ideas and values are both refined and strengthened by being shared. Song, liturgy, drama, the sermon are creations by the congregation for the congregation.

- I've always thought of a synagogue as a sanctuary, a holy place.

The synagogue was not accorded any special deference. It's a people's place. There are no rooms you can't enter. The service is not conducted behind a screen beyond which the laity may not pass. In fact, there is no laity. Anyone can lead the service, read from the Torah or preach. Often between services the worship room is used for other purposes.

- The Temple in Jerusalem was a sanctuary.

The Temple had a Holy of Holies which only the High Priest would enter and various courtyards reserved for various elite groups among which the priest class was preeminent. It was accorded special veneration and was the goal of pilgrims. The Temple service was organized by priests. No ordinary Israelite could perform at the altar. But once the Temple was destroyed the Jewish tradition broke with the pattern of shrine worship which had been customary in the ancient Middle East and created a brand new, never before seen, entirely human institution which reflected Judaism's recognition that truth belongs only to God. Actually the synagogue had been incubating for centuries in the informal community centers which Jews organized wherever they lived, where holiday and Sabbath prayers were sung, the Torah read and discussed and community business debated.

The first rabbis attached the aura of holiness to these proto-synagogues by ruling that such rituals as the blowing of the Shofar and the handling of the lulav and ethrog, once limited to the Temple, could, now that the Temple had been destroyed, be observed in the synagogue. However, they did not allow the synagogue to become a place whose forms were said to reflect God's will. Synagogue ritual and liturgy was devised and shaped by caring and learned people. It represented their feelings, expressed their needs and voiced their faith; and its forms could and did change as the times changed. The synagogue is a meeting house not a cathedral. Anyone can enter, anyone, at least any male, conduct services. The synagogue is a place where the individual counts. Nine rabbis do not make a minyan. Ten laborers do.

- But why are religious folk so difficult to deal with? My Freshman year, I had a 'born again' roommate. She was always so certain and so condescendingly patient.

Religious questions are not cool questions which are asked

calmly and answered dispassionately, but urgent questions which must be answered convincingly if we are to live happily and sanely. There is tremendous psychic energy behind the religious quest and, once we have answers that satisfy us, we do not readily let loose of them. Redemptive ideas integrate our personality and provide strength and sanity. We gamble our lives on them. It would be madness to let go, which is why we humans tend to be at our most unreasonable and unyielding in this area.

Imagine a Martian, one who is not like us, come among us. Imagine that sometime during his visit he reads a history of Europe's Jews. Surely, he would shake his head sadly over the long chronicle of people penned into ghettos, made to wear badges which declared them as pariahs, and repeatedly beaten and massacred by Crusader and Cossack. He probably would also wonder why these Jews didn't simply accept baptism and get out from under. Wouldn't mass conversion have been the sensible thing to do? Holy water cannot drown the soul and, since no one can look into another's soul, the Jews would have survived and even bettered themselves economically, all the while continuing to believe whatever they wanted to believe.

- Our Martian friend had better be told about the Marannos and the Inquisition. Those who converted were segregated out as New Christians and for generations their actions and faith were subjected to constant scrutiny by the Inquisition and their families were subjected to various forms of social discrimination. In the real world, 'once a Jew, always a Jew.'

The point of this illustration is that most Jews never considered conversion a live option. To convert would have been to adopt a set of sacred symbols which did not convey any real sense of reassurance and to deny the teachings which did. They held fast because

they could not have lived with themselves if they had done otherwise. They would have had to give up their sense of dignity, their sense of purpose, their confidence in God's reward - the religion that had meaning for them and gave coherence to their lives.

You smile, but would we do otherwise? If suddenly America were ruled by those who demanded that we affirm an alien ideology and submit our lives to foreign authority, we, too, might make a desperate stand for the values, the dignity, and the sense of self we now take for granted. Our defiance might be hapless, but there are values we cannot and will not compromise.

- You've made a distinction between faith and religion which I find persuasive. My problem is that my faith and my religion don't fully mesh. I don't agree with some of the traditional doctrines. How can I honestly belong if there are areas of disagreement?

Religious bodies tend to formulate their teachings, but these formulae are never more than an approximation of what the tradition actually affirms. Catechisms look precise but in reality are no different from any set of propositions which attempt to reduce to language feeling, hope, a vision, an awareness of ultimate meaning, which is to say that they suggest but do not exhaust, point to but do not circumscribe.

Historically some traditions have used catechisms as a form of loyalty oath and excluded or punished anyone who could not or would not subscribe. In this respect, Judaism has shown remarkable restraint. There are informing ideas. Religions, after all, form around a special and surprising message, but the tendency has been to stay fairly loose in such matters. Synagogues do not require that prospective members sign articles of faith. Before I was ordained, I was not required to publically affirm a creed.

- You haven't answered my question. How can I affirm ideas I don't accept?

You can't. You shouldn't.

- Are you saying that Judaism has no doctrines?

That would be impossible. The essential religious function is a defining one. Every service includes Deuteronomy 6:6: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." God is. God is one. I suggest only that Judaism does not require an articulated confession of faith as a test of admission and that more weight is given in rabbinic thought to the specifics of duty than to dogma. I'm also saying that I don't look on anyone's inability to agree at a particular moment with a traditional thesis as any reason to push them out the door.

- Then I can believe what I want?

Who can stop you? I'm also saying that Judaism will continue to hold up and hold sacred its special and surprising message.

- Isn't that a form of domination?

Don't make a dogma out of freedom. When a religious body has the power of the state at its beck and call, that power can be both dangerous and corrupting, but when, as in the case of the American synagogue, the only power it possesses is the power of suggestion and example, then calling its forms coercive is inappropriate.

- If dogmas aren't critical why are religions so busy ringing doorbells and sending out missionary literature? Why can't they leave others alone?

- I've always been proud Jews don't maintain missions.

Two thousand years ago, the Roman Empire was the scene of an active Jewish missionary campaign which ended only when such activity was proscribed. Our religious ideas are critical to us and it's only natural that we should assume that they would be good for others. You

question missionary activity; you've read of the damage done by missionaries to the social fabric of tribal cultures, and you are sensitive to any form of coercion. Promising food or an education in return for conversion is contemptible; but offering your ideas for consideration certainly cannot be faulted. I've often suggested to those I thought were seeking for a meaningful faith that they might like to come to our services and talk over religious questions with me.

- But you'd agree that coercion is wrong.

Emphatically.

- Talking about coercion, in Israel the National Religious Party has gained control for the rabbinate of the administration of the laws regulating personal status. Isn't this a form of coercion? Why are Jews doing it?

I've already suggested that I disapprove of this arrangement. Why some Jews demanded it is both easy and difficult to answer. Rabbinic Judaism shaped itself during the centuries when the Jewish community was self-governing and assumes as a matter of right that, in a Jewish state, Jewish law should be enforced. They argue that there must be law, and what better law could there be than God's? Calvin's Geneva and Khomeini's Iran were/are based on the same deceptively simple logic. The problem is not that rabbinic regulations are necessarily unacceptable; in general rabbinic law is both functional and sensible, but that the present arrangement was imposed on the citizenry as the result of politicians bargaining rather than by a democratic process and, so, does not command the legitimacy public law must have to be effective in a free society.

- Why can't religion intrude itself into people's lives: Sunday Blue laws, the right-to-life campaign, Federal aid to parochial schools?

How can it not involve itself? A religion's special and surprising message involves the whole of life and so necessarily includes public as well as private concerns. If God is just and merciful, what is more natural than to assume that Judaism requires the creation of a just and merciful society? The prophets understand this clearly and the Torah presents the rules through which holiness, as the Israelites understood the term, would become part of the social order: tithing one's field, freeing the slave each sabbatical year, just weights and just measures, a carefully organized judicial system.

- But why is religion so often on the wrong side?

It's not. You notice the politics of a preacher or the activities of a religious body when you disagree. When you agree, you say they're doing what they should be doing. Did it bother you that Reverend Martin Luther King led the early struggle for racial justice or that rabbis like Stephen Wise and my father led the struggle for a Jewish State?

- You're saying that the church and synagogue should be in politics.

It depends on how you define politics. No religious body ought to align itself with the narrow ambitions of any politician or political party; but, when it comes to social policy and the questions which involve the future of life on this earth, a religious group must enter the political arena if only to witness to their convictions.

- Aren't there Christians who argue that their tradition is one of piety, not politics? I've heard them quote such texts as "Render unto Caesar those things which are Caesar's and to God those things which belong to God" and "My kingdom is not of this world."

Many were surprised when, during the 1980 Presidential campaign, many evangelical groups which until then had followed a 'hands



off' attitude towards politics abandoned that approach. I'd long felt that those groups avoided politics, not because of a few texts than because so many of America's institutions had been shaped by their traditions and were seen as part of their religious world. Schools are out during Christmas and Easter week. Sunday is not a work day. The President takes his oath of office on a Bible. Their attitude changed, I believe, as they recognized that American life, now wonderfully pluralistic, had reshaped its institutions so that they no longer fully supported their values. I was intrigued that the politics of the majority and other evangelical groups focused on the issue of prayer in the public schools. This issue is symbolic of an attempt to regain control of that all-important institution so that it returns to a curriculum which will educate youngsters in the values and virtues evangelical protestantism affirms. Evolution, sex education and values clarification would be out and courses in civics, Christian ethics and special creation would be introduced.

Jews have always accepted public policy as a legitimate area of religious involvement because our tradition's piety is not treated as an end in itself. God did not allow Moses to stay quietly in Midian enjoying domesticity with his wife and sons. Isaiah heard God say, "Who has asked this of you to trample my courts. . . I cannot endure iniquity alone with the solemn assembly." The rabbinate is an active profession, not a withdrawal into secluded piety.

- We spent a good bit of time in religious school talking about civil rights and race relations. I brought a non-Jewish friend one day and when we left she said: "Except for the service, it didn't seem like a religious school."

The synagogue is not set apart from the community. I once visited an old synagogue in Lisbon. The wall facing the entrance



door contained perhaps a dozen slots, each large enough to receive folding money. A brass plate above each slot bore the name of a service organization: Hachnasat Kallah, society for providing dowries to brides; Bikkur Holim, society for the care of the sick; Hevrah Kaddisha, burial society. The welfare of the community was the business of the synagogue. No nonsense in this, or any, synagogue about the shiftless poor. A roof over one's head and food on the table are the result of hard work and mazzal, good fortune. The people who worshipped here accepted the idea that today's giver might well be tomorrow's recipient, they spoke familiarly of a wheel of fortune, and this community by conviction and necessity was a primary element in the structure of their sustaining fellowship.

A by now familiar voice stopped this line of thought.

- I want to go back to this business of religions as necessary but not necessarily good. I was always told: it doesn't matter what you believe so long as you believe. You're saying that faith can be bad.

Every religion forms around a special and surprising message. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Leninism, Maoism, Naziism and, yes, the Moonies and the People's Temple, each represent a religion, yet, obviously, we would pass quite different judgments on each. Religion is not good. Religion is not bad. Religion simply is.

Religions impact significantly on their communicants and their communities and must be judged by these consequences. A religious tradition like Naziism, which excites the blood lust, feeds an imperialist national ego, lauds a racist myth, and subordinates men to a Fuehrer, clearly is pernicious. One tradition encourages independent study and interpretation of its Scripture, another demands total total submission to ecclesiastical authority. Buddhism encourages asceticism and withdrawal. America's civil religion encourages

involvement and social action. Classic Christianity and Islam teach the damnation of non-communicants while other religions, Judaism among them, are not so sure that God approves only of their membership. A religious tradition like Judaism which encourages moral discipline, social justice, the cultivation of the mind, an individual's freedom under God and the ties of human fellowship, has much to commend it.

Some years ago the National Advertising Council sponsored a campaign to promote religion in American life. Billboards went up emblazoned with the motto: "It matters not where you go on Sunday, just go." In the background, behind the legend, you could see a dome, a spire and a number of other identifiable ecclesiastical roof lines. In point of fact, it is a matter of moment, not only which religion you affiliate with, but which group within a religious polity. The religion of the Crusaders was the same, yet quite different, from that of Francis of Assisi. Liberal Judaism differs in emphasis and assumption from that of the ultra-orthodox in Israel who hurl anathemas and stones at those who ride on the Sabbath.

- Everyone has a right to believe what they want to believe.

You cannot stop a person from believing errant nonsense.

I decided to teach my group a Hebrew phrase, le'havdil, to distinguish. In common speech when someone suggests that there are differences in quality or kind between phenomena of the same order they say le'havdil. So the sentence: Jim Jones, the charismatic leader of the nine hundred and some who drank the cyanide in Jonestown, and le'havdil Martin Luther King were ministers in the Civil Rights Movement; or the Jonestown commune and le'havdil an Israeli kibbutz represent rural utopian communes. In the religious area one must constantly make le'havdil judgments.

- I think of Jonestown as a cult not a religion.

You're making a distinction which is without real significance except as it reveals a certain cultural squeamishness about taking a long hard look at the phenomenon which is religion. We and our media tend to reserve the term religion for people and traditions we approve: Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism; while cult is reserved for the likes of the Moonies, the Church of God and the People's Temple, activities of which the society does not fully approve. Yet, until the fatal day when the community drank cyanide, the People's Temple remained an accredited member of the Disciples of Christ, a mainline Protestant denomination.

- What's the difference then?

I would suggest that the difference between a cult and a religion is not a distinction based on social value, one would hardly call Naziism a cult; but, rather, a distinction based on intensity and size. Cults are small groups of religious people who are a little hotter about their faith than ordinary congregations and who feel that they alone will be redeemed or that they alone possess The Truth.

Whenever the mainline traditions cool down, or whenever the society is convulsed, cults appear bearing a compelling dream, demanding a transvaluation of values, the kind of whole-hearted commitment which will hasten salvation. Like sun spots, cults signal an eruption of spiritual energy: sometimes there are more eruptions and sometimes less, but there is always an outflow of power from the source. Cults are led by prophets who have heard God or seen the light rather than by pastors who have read about those who have heard God. Most cults, like Jonah's gourd, appear one night and disappear the next. Some abort. Some explode. A few emerge and become mainline religions. When Jesus and his disciples wandered about the Galilee the citizens of Tiberias dismissed them as bizarre cultists who refused to attend to

their family, civic, and business responsibilities out of a crazy belief that the world was about to end and that it was imperative that they prepare for Judgment Day. When the Pharisees refused to eat at any other table but one set by their own, they, too, were scorned as cultists who set ritual pieties above the normal courtesies of hospitality, and even the ties of family.

Cults are not by definition good or bad. Cults are, and, like the mainline traditions, must be judged on their activities. But this much can be said of all cults. Cult people are intense and make the cult's teachings the unmediated focus of their lives. Most people have a family life and a work life as well as religious interests. The cultist has no time for anything else. He's totally involved and unlikely to have any perspective on his group or its actions.

- You're talking about fanaticism.

What one person calls fanaticism, another labels commendable zeal. Cults can be salutary or dangerous, depending on the beliefs around which the group has rallied, the leader who gains authority, and what subsequent generations make of their inheritance; but all suffer from the dangers which flow from an excess of zeal. Judaism has not been immune to zealous excess; no religion is; but untrammelled zeal has never been held up as an absolute virtue. The Talmud warns: do not be righteous overmuch. The Torah tradition does not exalt radical anti-rationalism. According to Isaiah, God, Himself, says to Israel: "Come, let us reason together." An often quoted line from the book of Proverbs makes the point: "only fools scorn wisdom and discipline." Joseph also held that one of the principles of Judaism was "that the Torah never obliges us to believe absurdities." No sage argued as Martin Luther did that "reason is the greatest enemy that faith has; it never comes to the aid of spiritual things, but more often than not struggles against the Divine Word, treating with contempt

all that emanated from God." In Israel learning was a form of piety and wisdom was pictured as piety's handmaid.

- Explain to me then why we read the Akedah every Yom Kippur. As I remember the story, God demands that Abraham sacrifice his son Isaac; Abraham submits and is clearly praised for his actions. Yet, only a man who had set aside reason and good sense, not to speak of fatherly feeling, would have agreed to the act. Luther would have been proud of him.

The Protestant theologian and early existentialist, Soren Kierkegaard, in his classic book, Either/Or, used the Akedah story as an illustration of his argument that the man of faith must be prepared to put aside family feeling, all normal sense of morality, when he hears the commanding voice. Kierkegaard argued that the demands of faith are unconditional and that the way of salvation requires a total commitment to the spirit of God as it moves within the human soul. The believer must be prepared to risk all: family, security, love, position. Kierkegaard calls this attitude "a teleological suspension of the ethical." There is high drama in bold commitment, but his approach sends shivers down my spine. How does anyone who is absolutely convinced of the rightness of his position know that it is right or, to use symbolic terms, that God, not Satan, has spoken to him.

-That's my point.

Those who set the schedule of Holy day readings understood the Akedah differently. The Akedah myth serves the same function in Judaism as the myth of the crucifixion in Christianity. Christianity begins in the Cross. Christians believe Jesus' death atoned for Adam's sin and, for the first time, opened the way of salvation to the believer. Judaism begins with the Akedah which is seen as a once and only event, not a model after which you or I shall shape our behaviour.

Jews believe that Abraham's loyalty to God's command, his willingness to put his beloved son to death, earned election, God's special concern, for Abraham and his descendants. As Jews understood their history, were it not for Abraham's merit, God would not have chosen his descendants to receive the Torah and so to enter into a redemptive relationship with God. Jews tend to emphasize the reprieve with which the Akedah story concludes, which is taken as symbol of redemption. A ram is caught by its horns in a nearby thicket. Isaac need not be sacrificed. A well-known folk tale/tells that, after Abraham sacrificed the ram, angels gathered its horns and hid them and that they will remain hidden until they are needed to announce that the Messiah is about to arrive.

- But the story does glorify excess.

Not excess so much as commitment. Kierkegaard focused on a critical issue which all religions must face and none can fully resolve. Beliefs should be acted on, so the inescapable and never fully resolvable question, how far should you take your beliefs? At what point, if any, must prudence and empathy override commitment? You can find Biblical incidents which illustrate Kierkegaard's 'obey at all costs' position. When Elijah saw the people accommodating themselves to Baal worship, he cried out: "How long will you hold between two opinions? If the Lord is God follow Him, if God is God follow Him;" either/or; Elijah had no patience with compromise and in his zeal he ordered the slaughter of the priests of Baal. Moses provides a contrasting example. When the community builds the infamous Golden Calf and dances before it, God pronounces the nation's destruction and tells Moses He will raise up a new community out of Moses' own family. Moses will not have it. He takes his life in his hand, remember God is livid with anger, and intercedes with God to restrain His anger and

and to rescind the sentence which He has pronounced. Judaism has and has had its fanatics. Some we revere: Jeremiah, Akiba, Eliezer Ben Yehudah. Others we are less certain of: Daniel, Shabbatai Tzvi, the Neturei Karta. By their deeds shall you know them. If our fanatics have rarely put others to the sword this may in part be explained by the fact that minorities are rarely in a position to do so. Since power corrupts, being of a persecuted minority is good for the soul.

- I remember hearing my rabbi say that at Sinai the Israelites agreed to the Torah covenant without hearing its terms and that their trust counted as a virtue. Doesn't that qualify as excessive zeal? I'd want to know what I'm committing myself to.

Sinai stands for the original insights. These are the given, the axioms, Judaism's special and surprising message. I've always looked on the Sinai episode as a dramatic statement of the truth that a religion's special and surprising message is just that, a given; but I also believe that, once the message is in place, reason and experience can and should come into play and literalism or authorized interpretation must always give way before evident need. An approach which says "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" has taken an attitude of restraint towards revelation which warns the believer not to set the needs of humanity aside out of zeal to obey the letter of the revelation. Some religions demand absolute submission to the interpretations of the message by a central authority while others like Judaism welcome the trained and inquisitive mind and suggest that there is benefit in constantly re-examining the meaning of the founding message and that no interpretation is infallible. In Judaism we praise God for revelation and reason. The daily service includes the petition, "Favor us, O Lord, with knowledge, understanding



and discernment. Praised be You, O Lord, gracious Giver of knowledge."

- What about the Sabbath stone throwers?

Energy surges around and within any religion. It's there because religion is not childish pageantry but our gamble that our lives have meaning.

Prudent people shun excess and prefer Aristotle's rule of the Golden Mean: everything in moderation. Patience wedded to principle; but Bertrand Russell, with some merit, once described Aristotle's rule as a rationalization devised by and for the respectable middle-aged to justify caution and compromise. If redemption depends on sacrificial living, can we be satisfied with the rule of cautious prudence? It's a puzzlement.

Religion is not good. Religion is not bad. Religion is. The religious spirit is insistent. The resurgence of powerful religious energies, and hence of fanaticism, has been for many one of the most surprising features of our century. Religion was supposed to be in an advanced stage of senescence. Yet, this century has seen the conversion of hundreds of millions to Communism and Maoism and a powerful revival of traditional religious groups in the Muslim, Christian and Jewish worlds. Nor is this phenomenon limited to backward countries. Here in America we have seen Billy Graham draw thousands to football stadia, an explosion of cults, 'better red than dead' bumper stickers, the born-again phenomenon and the rise of evangelism as a political force.

- We're caught, aren't we, between judgment and commitment?

We're caught in life. I left them with a statement of Reinhold Niebuhr's which I've always liked: "Religious fanaticism in the name of a rigorous monotheism is obviously possible only because men falsely identify historically contingent values with the God of their own



devotion. . . This inclination cannot be overcome by abolishing  
'religion'."

### Chapter 3

#### CAN THE LEOPARD CHANGE HIS SPOTS

As I thought about our first day's conversation I felt that somewhere at the heart of it was an assumption - how widespread I couldn't tell yet - that a person can switch religions as he might turn on or off a light switch. They talked as if someone might take a good look at Judaism and decide whether to join or go elsewhere, and that once that decision was made - to be or not to be - that would be that.

It's not that simple. Ask any convert, I suggested. Most will testify to a good bit of guilt, cultural awkwardness, and a nagging sense of being adrift. We've already talked about, and agree, how much we are what our environment allows us to be. We speak the language of our times and native community. We internalize the lessons the community prescribes, take on the habits of our peers and, inevitably, are shaped by their interests. We tend to feel most comfortable when we're among people whose reactions and signals we instinctively understand. The cultural imprint is deeply etched and doesn't erase easily.

- Then do you believe what the Jesuits claim - that if they could have a child during the first six years of life that person would belong to them forever?

That claim may be apocryphal and, anyway, it certainly overstates the case. So does the Biblical proverb: "Train up a child in the way he should go and he will follow you the rest of his life." But nobody should minimize the power of conditioning. Whole-hearted converts to Judaism have told me, "I can't help it, I miss Christmas," or "I checked the wrong box at last fall's registration before I remembered," or "I feel more at home every year, but I've never stopped

expecting the collection plate." Any change in familiar ways is disconcerting. A recently married man who'd been raised in a traditional congregation and had joined his wife's synagogue told me: "I agree intellectually with the Reform position but I'll never get used to a woman rabbi." My college advisor, probably the most learned Jewish philosopher of his day, Harry Austryn Wolfson, suffered stomach pains when he first began eating in his non-kosher rooming house, and for months he never associated the pain with his break with childhood custom.

However disconcerting the thought may be, no one completely shakes off the influences of home and neighborhood. A person can renounce citizenship - in his native country or native religion - and years later feel himself drawn back. Around every synagogue you'll find a cluster of spiritual returnees - there's even a familiar name for them, ba'alei teshuvah, usually middle-aged men and women who for years went their separate ways but eventually felt a need to come in out of the secular cold. Perhaps you've noticed that those who convert to the Christian gospel often try to create synagogue-type institutions so they can maintain many of the familiar forms as if nothing has changed.

Margaret Mead once told me that similar feelings tug incessantly at the emigrant. Need drove him abroad and loneliness drives him back home. The peasants who left the country villages of Eastern and Southern Europe for the Pennsylvania coal mines or Ohio steel mills fled poverty, but even those who prospered rarely felt rooted. A considerable number, once their children were safely educated, returned to the old country to retire and die in familiar surroundings.

- Is this why many people instinctively and often against their sense of fairness, tend to doubt the authenticity of any conversion?

In Communist Russia and China children of privileged families are never free from the suspicion that they are "capitalist roaders," and in our country both Jews and non-Jews label as a Jew a public figure who had a Jewish background though he may now be a member of some mainline church.

Yes.

- Haven't you overstated the case. There are whole-hearted conversions. I know some who have made a good adjustment and are completely at home and loyal.

At home and loyal, yes. Completely at home, I'm not sure.

I remember one convert: liberal, well-read, sure that her nominal Christian upbringing was no impediment to a full partnership in the Jewish life of her future husband. She told me before her conversion: "I never went to Sunday School. My family aren't Church folks. I've always believed in God but never in the Christ myth. So I have no theological problems at all about becoming Jewish." Some years later she came and asked me to deconvert her. I told her that no such ceremony exists. Besides, it wouldn't be my place to organize one. But we kept talking, in part because she was so determined that I understand her feelings: "I don't want to become a Christian. I don't believe in the Cross. But I find I can't give up Easter and Christmas and somehow I feel disloyal to my parents." The call of the cradle faith is a compelling, often an unyielding, summons.

Conditioning affects us in many ways. There are Jews who have given up formal affiliation but who take an active interest in Israel or who simply can't let go of the Jewish "problem". An old Stalinist, Isaac Deutscher, called his autobiography The Non-Jewish Jew. As a young man he had renounced the synagogue and converted to Communism, but he still thought of himself as a Jew and remained

fiercely proud of being heir to a tradition of prophetic outrage at injustice. I have a philosopher friend who's a confirmed atheist and a tireless religious explorer; he goes cheerfully to services in Indian temples and Shinto shrines but he hasn't been inside a synagogue since his Bar Mitzvah. He says he doesn't like to be "tied" down, but he just happened to take his sabbatical at the Hebrew University, and he's profoundly involved with the political security of the State of Israel. It's hard to let go.

- I won't argue about the force of conditioning but in my home Judaism was a word not a way of life. I could leave without ever looking back.

Perhaps you could. For a person raised in a home where Judaism is a nonessential, there's probably not much tension in sliding over into the civil religion or whatever other tradition really refracted the family's values. In a pluralistic society a religion's tag can be a misleading label.

- You've been talking about the religious imprint. I also don't see it - not in my home, not in the way we live. We live nicely and we're decent people, but an occasional candlelighting doesn't seem to me to have anything to do with my character or beliefs.

Your home called itself Jewish, but it treated the tradition formally and superficially rather than as a cluster of values and duties and you understandably still think of Judaism in those terms. Your problem is a conceptual and not uncommon one. I know your parents. They are politically active and politically liberal and unaware how greatly their attitudes towards welfare legislation and the race issue reflect the values of Jewish communal life in which they were raised; remember the Lisbon synagogue I told you about and the prophet's insistence that there is only one human family: "Have we all not one Father,

has not one God created us all?" How many of your non-Jewish friends have as many books in their home?

- My folks are bright. Why don't they realize that some of their values are 'Jewish'.

Because the civil religion shares these values and because they think of religion as ritual rather than as a relevant, ethical message. One of the paradoxes of modern life is that many Jews don't realize how Jewish they really are.

- My parents talk about Israel, anti-semitism, Soviet Jewry and synagogue politics, but never about what they believe.

The reticence you describe is fairly widespread among Jews, and it needs examining, though I don't claim to understand it fully. For some this silence masks theological doubts. For many it's a question of embarrassment. They're afraid their beliefs will be dismissed as childish or incredibly old-fashioned. Many are afraid that they can't find the right words to explain a half-formed feeling. I can't tell you how many times teen agers have asked me about some religious matter and added: 'I asked my parents who told me to ask you.' I'm belaboring defining religion because Jews are uneasy and uncomfortable talking about their religion. It's one of the few areas where many Jews are tongue-tied.

- Along this line, I went to a Wednesday night service at a local church. From time to time people got up and told how they had found Jesus. I'd never heard anything like it at any of our services. I found those testimonies moving.

One of the advantages of an institute like this one where we talk openly is that we break this silence barrier. I remember a camper at another institute who told me he'd never before met anyone who took Judaism seriously.

- Why the silence barrier?

A Jew is a Jew. Jews don't have to prove that they have a right to be part of the congregation. Then, too, being Jewish involves a whole way of life, not simply an affirmation in belief. When the Jesuits began missionary work in China in the sixteenth century, they felt that they could convert people without requiring them to break formally with the Confucian social patterns. Conversion was seen as acceptance of Christ as one's saviour. The crucial act was an affirmation. The Jews of China kept Kosher, and anyone who joined had to accept the rule of the community. It's a different approval altogether.

- I don't know about public testimonies, but I do know that my parents never talked with me about God or asked to hear my prayers when I was a child. When I went to services with my Confirmation class, they drove me to Temple and arranged to have me picked up afterwards. I've never figured out why they bothered to send me to religious school.

To be Jewish is to belong to a community of fate, only part of which is also a community of faith. Your parents obviously felt part of the community of fate but somewhat distant about the community of faith. You were sent to religious school, I suspect, because they recognized that, though the forms of the religious life did not seem crucial to them, their interests, attitudes and activities derived to a large degree from the cluster of ideas, hopes and institutions which are rooted in the religious life, and they wanted you to be exposed to the full range of the Jewish experience. The community of fate cannot disentangle itself from the community of faith.

- My home may not be an old-fashioned home with two sets of dishes and my mother doesn't wear a sheitel, but there's a mazuzah on the door and a palpable Jewish atmosphere. We've adopted a Russian emigrant family who celebrate the holidays with us. My folks are active

in the congregation. They took me to Israel for my Bar Mitzvah.  
When grandfather died we sat shivah.

Others nodded in agreement as he spoke. The Jewish community includes the active as well as the indifferent. It shows all the heterogeneity of the larger society: Reform, Conservative, Orthodox: affiliated-unaffiliated; learned-uninformed; some have models to pattern themselves after and rebel against; others can only guess at what becoming Jewish involves.

- With such a mixed bag I'm surprised that you can still speak of a Jewish community.

So am I sometimes. But then conformity has never been a Jewish virtue. Moses led twelve fiercely independent tribes. During the century before the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, the Jewish community included Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Therapeutae, apocalyptic, the Dead Sea monastics and Hassidim, my list includes only those who cared deeply enough to create a special sect; later sages insisted that the destruction of the Temple had occurred because those divisions had arisen, but in truth there has never been a time without division. We're a fiercely independent lot, you know the old line, 'two Jews, three opinions,' yet, with it all, let there be need and the divisions are overlooked and most of us pull together.

- Well, then, what makes a Jew a Jew?

According to rabbinic law, a Jew is a person born to a Jewish mother or one who converts. The Hebrews, like all the peoples of the ancient Middle East, practiced polygamy, and some rule based on maternal descent was required to settle questions of inheritance and precedence among the many sons of a chief. In effect, it means that you become a Jew in the same way that anyone becomes an American citizen - by being born to parents who are citizens. Beyond this there is conversion,



which parallels the process of acquiring citizenship through naturalization.

- All this sounds both archaic and formal.

Despite its antique flavor, I rather like the law's matter-of-factness; despite all our pretensions to being free spirits, in the final analysis we are in large measure what our early environment allows us to be, and mothers have a lot to do with that environment.

It also says that the Jewish community is an open community. Anybody can join. Our tradition is not racist like that of the Athenians who, for all their philosophy, never outgrew feeling that all non-Athenians were barbarians, lesser breeds, and who routinely denied citizenship rights to all aliens.

- I thought we didn't seek converts.

As I mentioned yesterday, we did when we were allowed to. The New Testament describes Jews who crossed and recrossed the Mediterranean for that purpose. Jews sought converts until prohibited to do so by Roman authorities. The medieval world insisted that error had no right to be promulgated. Until quite recently it was unsafe for Jews even to suggest conversion. If someone converted to Judaism, the convert and the converter, if caught, were tortured and executed.

- Well, there aren't any Jewish missionaries now.

Missionaries, no; but most cities have classes for those who come to a rabbi and say, "We've found our way to you and want to learn more." Every year I convert perhaps a dozen who came to experience the Jewish way and study with me. Since the Torah Tradition does not claim that only Jews will be allowed into Heaven, there has been no compelling reason to organize a missionary program to save souls.

- I've had a bolt out of the blue experience. It happened to me at the Wall. It was late afternoon. There was just enough sun left to bring out the golden glow in Jerusalem's stone. A few old Jews

were praying. I don't know what happened, but suddenly I felt that the whole of Jewish history was alive for me.

Moses had a similar experience when he unexpectedly came across the Burning Bush and heard the commanding voice that transformed his life. Such bolt out of the blue experiences do happen. But, more often, I suspect, we simply find that the familiar has become part of us. Unlike some other religions Judaism never made this kind of transforming experience a requirement of belonging. We don't accept a convert simply because he testifies that he has seen the Jewish light, he has no way of knowing if it's really Jewish or not, nor have we. A binding experience is by definition an emotional moment, but love can grow on us as well as surprise us.

It's to the everlasting credit of our religious leaders that they were unwilling to focus Judaism on feeling alone, or to orchestrate the religious life so that it tried to take advantage of people's suggestibilities. The synagogue rarely took on the circus aspect of a revivalist tent meeting and leadership in the community went to the learned not to the money sensitive. Deep in our culture lies a profound distrust of feeling cut loose from its moorings in a defining tradition. Judaism takes a patient approach: schooling, as well as experience; a familiar liturgy as well as prayers spoken as the spirit moves us.

- Reverse the coin. Isn't one reason the leopard can't change his spots simply that a leopard is expected to have spots? I'm always arguing with a roommate who insists that public figures like William Simon and Casper Weinberg are Jews. I tell her they converted years ago, but she comes right back to their Jewishness.

In 1492 the long crusade to reconquer Spain from the Moors finally succeeded; and that same year Ferdinand and Isabella, as rulers

of a united and Catholic nation, gave their Jews the cruel choice of baptism or death. Those who allowed themselves to be sprinkled with holy water found they weren't accepted as Christians; they were called New Christians and treated as outsiders, a practice that lasted for at least three centuries during which the faith of these families was regularly and rigorously reviewed by the Inquisition. In Nazi Germany the children of a Lutheran father and his pious wife were classified as Jews if two of their grandparents had been Jews. In the Soviet Union descendants of Jewish heroes of the revolution remain Jews by nationality, whatever the fervor of their allegiance to the Communist Party, and increasingly, as the Soviets woo the Arab world, they are included in the educational and job restrictions which have been imposed on all who carry an identity card which carries the label: Jew. Enrollment in Russia's universities has been severely restricted, and careers in diplomacy, the officer ranks of the army, and in advanced physics are closed to them.

- Here in America it's different.

- What about Sarah's roommate? Bearing the label has less consequences here; but it does make some difference.

- What can we do about anti-semitism?

Very little. Human beings seem to have a low tolerance for differences. I suspect prejudice goes back somehow to some primitive survival mechanism. Animals protect their herd against all strangers. Whatever the reason prejudices are not amenable to reason. Worse, those who are persecuted are often half-convinced by their persecutors that they are at fault.

I got the question I expected:

- Well, aren't we? Nobody likes people who feel superior.

Haven't we claimed to be a Chosen People?

Those who justify their prejudices by claiming that Jews are arrogant about a special relationship with God are often precisely those who claim that Christians are the New Israel, specially beloved of God, and that only they will be saved. Someone defined prejudice as a way of transferring our sickness to others; a way of pointing the finger at someone else so no one will ask us embarrassing questions.

- Yes, but this Chosen People idea does suggest exclusivity.

The Chosen People concept is not a racial one. The law is specific: the Jewish community is an open community. A Jew is a Jew by virtue of birth or conversion, and the convert is the full equal of one born a Jew. Ruth, a convert, was worthy of being the great-grandmother of King David and, by inference, a direct ancestor of the Messiah.

Jews never related the Chosen People idea to any claims to superiority. Abraham was a semi-nomad of no particular nobility. Those whom Moses led out of Egypt are described as an asafsuf, an undistinguished motley. When he brought a harvest offering to the Temple, the Israelite affirmed a nondescript ancestry: "A wandering Aramean was my father." The Bible is innocent of the sort of myth common among ancient peoples, that they or their kings were descendants of the gods.

If there was pride of community, it was based not on genes but on the quality of Jewish life. Eastern European Jews were as impoverished as the illiterate peasants who subjected them to daily humiliation, but they were literate and the local nobility depended on Jews to treat their illnesses, manage their estates and keep their books. Understandably Jews felt some superiority over their neighbors and goy, originally a Hebrew word which denoted simply a nation or a people, became a put down term. But nothing in the tradition

sanctioned such expressions. The tradition never claimed that the followers of other religions were damned or encouraged Jews to treat non-Jews with contempt even when they were so treated by others.

- What about the Arab in Israel? Aren't they treated as second-class citizens?

Yes and no. There are restrictions. The situation is not ideal and, to a large degree, the result of security considerations, but there are Arab members of the Keneset, Arab-owned and run newspapers, and Arab professors and students at the Hebrew University. Israel's police force protect mosques and Muslim holy places from any attack by fanatics, and many Jews are among those who are pushing for the maximum relaxation of these emergency measures consonant with national security. Incidentally, Jews do not enjoy, and have never enjoyed, comparable rights in any Arab state. The significant point is that Israel's restrictions are temporary measures and are not justified by anyone on a religious basis. Israelis generally accept the Biblical injunction, "Zion must be established in justice," and they know that the Torah requires that there be one law for the home-born and the stranger who is within your gates.

- Jews do feel different. I know I do.

I once wrote A History of Judaism, and someone asked why I had bothered. Part of my answer touched the intrinsic fascination of our history. We are a long-lived people who have been around almost as long as the Chinese and longer than anybody else in the Western world. We've not only been around, we've been highly visible. It's been said, "Jews are like everyone else, only more so." It's the "more so" that makes us interesting. Even people who don't like us admit our significance. Indeed, scholars who search for the roots of anti-semitism sometimes argue that it is rooted in jealousy of Jewish energies and

abilities.

- I don't want to feel different. Distance breeds misunderstanding.

It also makes civilization possible. The value of a pluralistic society is that someone is always challenging what others assume to be obvious and which, in fact, is not obvious at all, but simply familiar. As the French say: Vive la difference; difference keeps a community from becoming a drowsy mutual admiration society.

- You'd agree that there's no virtue in differences for the sake of being different. Groups like Hare Krishna leave me cold. They seem to make a virtue of nothing more significant than being far out.

They do add a bit of color. The special and surprising message of a cult may be special, surprising and insignificant. Think of those millenarian cults whose message is to build bomb shelters because they are certain the world will end on a particular day.

- Or those Jews who think that significance rests in the marks of difference - side curls and the dietary laws.

Most traditional Jews know that these disciplines are simply signs of obedience to a covenant whose terms affect everything they do. Whether we accept the traditional description of a popular acclamation at Sinai of the whole Torah, or understand the Torah as a compilation of Divine Instruction given at various times and places over many centuries, whether the Jews were chosen by God for His own reasons, as traditional theology has it, or whether they chose to serve God, as some moderns prefer to say, the fact is that Jews do feel chosen and obligated to a sense of mission and a special role which sets them on a distinctive road. Ours is a covenant of many parts and the visible observances are neither its most nor least important element.

Sinai is Jewish shorthand for the moment of choice and being chosen, when the Covenant was proclaimed and affirmed, when Israel took to itself its "special and surprising word." At Sinai Israel did not accept God. God does not need acceptance; rather, God offered Israel a covenant, and Israel accepted its terms. I like Abraham Heschel's phrase: "God gave His word to Israel, and Israel gave its word of honor to God." Sinai symbolizes the transforming moment when the tribes ceased to be among the anonymous clans of black-tented bedouin shepherds who ranged across the Fertile Crescent and became a people of significance to themselves and to civilization.

I rejoice in this sense of significance. I wouldn't like to feel that I am part of a community of human flotsam being tossed about on a restless ocean. To use some modern jargon the Chosen People concept draws together this special sense of duty and raises a people's consciousness of its potential.

- I belong to a Reconstructionist congregation. Our prayer book no longer includes the traditional blessing: "We praise You O Lord our God Who chose us from among all peoples." Our rabbi says it smacks of national arrogance.

I'm not particularly troubled by such phrases because they say to me simply, 'be grateful that you belong to a people who sensed a special duty and set out to do it.' When my children were young and complained, "Johnny's parents let him; why can't we," my answer was always, each family has its own standards.

Persian noblemen despised physical labor as slave work. Many of the sages supported themselves as laborers and taught Israel: "Let no one say, 'I come from a well-born and distinguished family and I cannot dirty my hands with work,' Fool, your Creator, God Himself, performed work before you were born. Athenaian philosophers despised



labor as menial and an unwelcome diversion from the real business of a scholar. The rabbis earned their keep as artisans, laborers and bakers and insisted that all study of the Torah without physical labor is vanity and drags sin in its train. Jews had/have a special way of approaching life.

I've discovered through experience that a family or a community whose members feel a special obligation to their family name, what the French call noblesse oblige, often have an extraordinary impact on their times. For seven generations scholar descendants of Maimonides were appointed the religious heads of Egypt's Jewish communities. I don't mean that all Jews have been good, saintly, or necessarily conscious of any high obligation; far from it. I just finished reading a book entitled, The Rise and Fall of the American Jewish Gangster. Nor do I suggest that all Jews have been creative or wise. We've had our fools and our fanatics. I do mean that as a people we have internalized a sense of historic purpose and consequently felt a compelling sense of duty we would not have felt otherwise.

As a Chosen People, Jews could never let down because they would be letting God down. They sensed that the world was judging God and Torah through them. Sociologists often use a theoretical concept they call anomie. The word comes from the same root as anonymous and describes the fact that a stranger will act less circumspectly than a person who feels he might be recognized. People act differently in a mob than at a family outing. The Ku Klux Klan is a menacing presence because those who hide behind masks can commit violence without being recognized as the town banker or garage man.

Like a capable student whose capacity is recognized, more was demanded of the Jew and top grades were harder to come by. They heard



God saying: 'I didn't raise you up to be ordinary.' The prophet Amos laid it out: "You specially have I known among the peoples of the earth, therefore will I visit upon you all your iniquities." Being chosen means that Israel is subject to more, not less, rigorous standards than other peoples.

- That's pretty hard to take. When my parents spoke that way to me, I always felt imposed on.

It's demanding, absolutely. Anybody who wants to be left alone to enjoy his backyard and a beer certainly wants no part of a special destiny whose demands pull him away from the quiet and comfortable life. There's a choice we all must make between the special demands of a committed life on the one hand and the conventional responsibilities of an LCD, Least Common Denominator, life on the other. Jews were told to set high goals and to feel that those could be attained. Achievement requires a healthy ego. Jews were conditioned to the idea of the nobility of the human spirit: "All Israel are the sons of kings." Man was created "in the image of God."

- You've spoken several times of covenant. I think I know what you mean, but I'd like to be sure.

The Torah is Israel's special and surprising message, the covenant text. Covenant means contract. The covenant was a living relationship, not simply a text. It defined what God expected of Israel and listed the rewards of loyalty: the holy land, rain in its season, progeny, security for the nation and the penalties for disobedience: exile, drought, the barren womb and defeat. Here, it says, is the command you can fulfill. Here is the way that permits spiritual and moral growth. Here is the way which will please God and bring redemption. The covenant reassured Jews that they lived in an orderly not a capricious world.

The idea of covenant (berit) seems to have been taken over from a form of feudal relationship common in the ancient Middle East. When a king conquered another city-state, a covenant treaty was written which set out the terms of the new master-vassal relationship. This document announced the victor's power, stipulated the duties and taxes he would expect of his new vassal, promised his protection so long as these stipulations were faithfully abided and stipulated various punishments which would occur should either party renege. The victor set the terms, but the covenant was not in effect until the vassal accepted them.

According to the Torah, God's first covenant with Israel was announced to Abraham; it was a simple document of fealty, promise, and protection. The rite of circumcision, the taking of a drop of blood from every male infant was accepted as an act of enrollment in this covenant relationship. The later Sinai covenant contained all the rules. Till this day the public reading of the Torah in the synagogue is a symbolic reaffirmation of the acceptance of the berit.

Covenant thinking colors all Jewish thought. It is Israel's charter, and it is also Israel's promise of salvation. Israel performs. God protects. "If you are willing and obedient, you shall enjoy the good things of the earth." Judaism conceives of the covenant as regulated by a God who is long-suffering and patient and who understands that it is not easy for humans to meet its terms. Election brings with it the danger of dismissal. God would abrogate the covenant relationship if Israel were to contemptuously turn its back on these obligations. "If you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword." Israel remains a Chosen People only as long as it remains a choosing people.

- But why Israel?

At first no one asked why. A child does not ask why he is born into a particular family. Later it was suggested that Israel had been chosen precisely because she was the least distinguished of nations: if God could take the least likely, Deuteronomy says, and raise them on high, what could He not accomplish?

- All of this sounds as if God cared about nobody but Israel.

The Jewish tradition says that God is the God of all man, that we are all descendants of common procreations, that Heaven is open to any and all who deserve it, that God's instructions are to be shared, and that His promise at the End of Days is for all peoples. There was a covenant for Israel and one for all mankind; indeed, the covenant with Noah, which is the universal covenant, preceded Israel's. Its rules were general, the prohibition of idolatry, blasphemy, murder, adultery, robbery and cannibalism and the mandate to establish courts of justice. The sense of duty and the promise of reward which are part of the Torah covenant are no less real here.

- Why then are Jews accused of being clannish?

I suspect for no better reason than that our accusers are unable to understand why we should want to continue as Jews. Substitute "close ties" for "clannish" and you raise up one of Judaism's most attractive features. Close families support each other in time of crisis. I find it only natural that I must do all I can for Jews in the Soviet Union or Latin America. I was puzzled when Christians turned a cold shoulder to the suffering of fellow Christians in Lebanon and the Sudan. In a cruel world, I don't want to feel bereft and alone.

- Jewish history hasn't been a bed of roses. In the Army I learned never to volunteer. Wouldn't it have been better for us to stay undistinguished?

No religious vision is worthwhile if it doesn't challenge us

to stretch our moral reach. No one likes to be discomfitted, but I find that one of Judaism's strengths is that the Torah never allows me to feel I've done all I can and should. The covenant is not simply a list of do's and don'ts but a call to a range of duties which cannot be stipulated and can never be fully met. The tradition calls these lifneh v'lifnim meshurat ha-din, above and beyond what is specified. The extra time spent with someone who is frightened or disturbed, volunteering for some service when no one else will step forward, blowing the whistle on those who take advantage of office, testing a vaccine on yourself when there is no other way to prove its efficacy.

Even the smell of a sermon tends to encourage the discussion to take another direction.

- I can appreciate the functional value of a sense of election, it's the rules that bother me. I want to be free, not controlled by rules. I don't want my creativity stifled or my spirit broken.

Freedom is the original virtue. God signs Himself: "I am the Lord, your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." The Torah requires that on the sabbatical year Hebrew slaves were to be freed: A slave who preferred shabby security to the challenge of freedom had his ear lobe pierced as a sign that his hearing must be defective since he somehow hadn't heard God proclaim the law of manumission. The Hebrews had been slaves and memory of the brutality they had endured was kept fresh; each Passover the Seder service has us all say: "Last year we were slaves, this year may all be free." Knowing what it means to be beaten and degraded, the tradition makes much of the obligation to help restore others to their freedom and to treat others with dignity.

- Why then all the law? Most of the Torah is law.

Law secures freedom. The ex-slaves were a confused rabble until they accepted the covenant. Without signals and stop signs, we could not drive easily, swiftly or safely.

- Law is coercive.

There are rules and rules. A Fascist state has rules. So does a free society. And they're not the same. I remember hearing a discussion on the First Amendment where the point was made that, since a system of free expression is designed to encourage a measure of conflict within a society, it needs what the speaker called "the legitimizing and harmonizing influence of the legal process to keep it in successful balance."

- But the American Constitution is a social contract which was discussed and debated in a Constitutional Convention before it was adopted. The Torah was simply announced. There were no votes and no amendments.

True. Constitutional democracy was not yet an idea whose time had come. But remember, Sinai is not a symbol for all law, any law, but for God's law. It is implicit that God's law is equitable and just, and neither arbitrary nor capricious. One of the Torah law's functions was to prohibit any ruler from proclaiming his own version of a constitution or his right to rule without restrictions. According to Deuteronomy, a king was required to write a Sefer Torah by his own hand and have it read to him frequently as a reminder that power was his only as long as his acts conformed to its strictures. When a king exceeded his authority and violated Torah law, God sent a prophet who publically condemned him as Nathan condemned Solomon over Uriah and Bathsheba and Elijah condemned Ahab and Jezebel over Nabutz. Torah law prohibited an elite priestly class from arrogating to itself the right to interpret the rules. Sensitivity to the oppressed is imprinted

in most of its regulations. We must not deny justice to the powerless, favor in court the well-placed or mock those of strange dress or manner. Open the legal sections of Torah; you will find yourself reading rules requiring prompt payment for property damage, just weights and just measures and due process in court procedure.

- The Torah also includes rules I don't agree with. For instance, I don't believe in capital punishment.

Neither did many rabbis. Torah is the written text, and what the generations found the text to mean. Israel's judges so circumscribed capital cases with such involved due process qualifications that it became almost impossible to condemn a criminal to death.

There is a rule in Deuteronomy that, once the tribes enter the Promised Land, cities of refuge are to be designated where someone who has committed an unpremeditated murder could flee and escape revenge. Some historians doubt that such cities actually were established; but the idea suggests a central element in the Torah's concern for justice. In those days, when a man was murdered, kinsmen organized a posse and sought revenge. There was a certain primitive justice in all this, but its execution was crude. Not all murders are alike: some are premeditated, some are accidental, while others are committed under mitigating circumstances. Given the fact that there was no such entity as an organized police force or a federal judiciary in ancient Israel, probably the only way available to distinguish degrees of culpability was to create sanctuaries to which a man could flee until some court or sheik took over from the posse. Whether such cities actually existed is not as important as the fact that rule existed. It focused legal thought on due process, change of venue, and a fair trial, worthy concerns indeed, and ones which were fully

and thoughtfully developed in rabbinic thought.

- I picked a bad example for my purposes. Let me try another. I don't believe that a husband should have the right to initiate a divorce and not the wife.

Neither do I. But I would add that the Torah permits the dissolution of unhealthy relationships, some traditions do not, and that it did not require either partner to make ugly public accusations against each other.

- You're evading the issue. There are rules of personal status which you don't agree with.

True, but in most cases I can see their virtue in a particular environment. Women simply had no standing in law in the Ancient World and the text conforms to the reality of its time. Unfortunately respect for earlier generations has precluded orthodoxy from finding ways to bring this rule into line with modern thought though. Over the ages rabbinic courts exerted all kinds of pressure to force husbands who were holding their wives to an impossible relationship to proceed with the necessary divorce.

When it comes to commentary, there are both strict and loose constructionists.

- I've looked at the Torah and found some things I agreed with and many I did not. I'm not interested in burning witches.

We no longer burn witches; indeed, historians doubt if Israel ever did burn a witch. There is no record of a Salem-type trial. The witch's rule is part of the Torah's attack on magic, necromancy, whispering charms over wounds, and like superstitions, an attack which was unique for its age and can still be a useful warning to our Age of Aquarius.

- I once picked up a Talmud and skimmed a page or two. It



seemed to deal with the minutia of ritual and with a whole lot of non-religious matters as torts and contracts. How can you make such high-blown claims for such pedestrian stuff?

I spoke of the living tradition not the printed texts. To read a translation of either Torah or Talmud is to read material that is alternately archaic and relevant, stirring and boring. I skim over all those 'begats' at the beginning of Genesis and the elaborate discussion of the precise time to recite the Shema which fills the opening chapter of the Talmud and tells me more than I care to know on the subject. Both anthologies are ancient documents full of rules we have outgrown or find unacceptable, and which the tradition has long since reshaped, as well as those wonderful themes, which we continue to apply with much benefit. It is this reading and the interpretation of the Torah which was and is the central act of devotion in the synagogue; and the reading and interpretation of Talmud which was and is the central act of devotion in the yeshivah. Torah and Talmud are books and they are also beginnings.

- I tried to read the Talmud; I found I couldn't. There was no style and the language was so epigrammatic and gnomic that I couldn't follow the arguments.

The Talmud is a law code and academic notes of scholastic discussion of various points. It is meant to be studied not read. If you would spend a few years on it, learning its structure and methodology, you'd find many fine things.

- For instance?

Reports on torture as a means of criminal investigation are rare in Jewish records and police brutality is almost unheard of. The reason is simple. Under Talmudic law voluntary self-incrimination



is not accepted as evidence. Why torture a prisoner if your case was not advanced by his confession?

For instance.

The Torah tradition does not accept the idea that you can be not quite honest in commerce or politics, because it's a jungle out there or because it's all right to take advantage of those you don't know. "In all your ways acknowledge Him."

- What have laws of damage or rules about self-incrimination to do with religion?

Have you forgotten our "cluster of ideas. ." definition? Religion is not what we do in a shrine, at least Judaism is not; but how we consecrate the whole of our life.

Jews were encouraged to sanctify every moment of their lives. The structure of his community, the way he conducted business, the way food was prepared and eaten, the relationship of husband and wife, all were divinely mandated and spiritually significant. There was a blessing for every occasion, and this multiplication of pious expressions was not looked on as a way to gain merit but as a constant reminder that a standard of holiness should be involved in all that we do. Marriage was not simply a sexual alliance or an arrangement of property, but kiddushim, a sanctification of two lives. Farming was not sowing and harvesting but careful stewardship of God's creation. Business was not making out but the honorable management of production and distribution conducted according to Torah standards, 'just weights, just measures.'

It is important to see Torah and Talmud texts as significant beginnings rather than the sum of Jewish development. Jewish practice is constantly emerging.

- You talk about the text as a beginning not a conclusion. I know Jews who say nothing has changed. Judaism is obedient to a stated, long known law and I never know how to answer them.

The Torah mandates a shrine-based sacrificial cult. Few of us would want to take part in such ceremonies. Certainly, Maimonides didn't. In his famous philosophies work, The Guide to the Perplexed, he carefully explained that God had authorized sacrifices because this form of worship was customary throughout the ancient Near East and: "Man by his nature is not capable of abandoning suddenly all to which he was accustomed." A beginning not a conclusion.

Leviticus is full of shrine regulations, but Amos and Isaiah insisted that religion dealt with more than the shrine: "Who has asked this of you to trample my courts? Bring no man vain oblations. . . ." The Torah commands holiday observance, but it is essential Judaism that our responsibilities to others take precedence over our responsibilities to any liturgy or ceremony. On the Day of Atonement we must first make our peace with those whom we have wronged before we can confidently ask God for forgiveness. "The Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath." Medieval lore included the story of a famous rabbi who, during a plague year, deliberately ate food in the synagogue on Yom Kippur to encourage his congregation to follow suit and keep up their strength.

Originally, there were many Israelite shrines, some of which, like the sanctuary at Arad, have been excavated in recent years. Then all worship was centered in the shrine King Solomon built in Jerusalem. That's the form of worship the Torah prescribes, but as Jewish life spread across the Middle East Jews established meeting houses in all their settlements where they conducted public business and recited the songs and liturgy of the central shrine. With the destruction of the

Temple, these meeting places were transformed into synagogue-sanctuaries and a new religious institution emerged. Neither meeting house nor synagogue is ever mentioned in Scripture; yet, the need was there and the tradition was reshaped to accommodate the necessary new forms. The Temple had been hierarchal, but in the synagogue anyone could lead worship. The Temple's architecture was said to represent the proportions of the cosmos; the synagogue was simply a room. The Temple had to be in Jerusalem on Mt. Zion; synagogues could be any place. The Temple's worship centered on sacrifices; in the synagogue Torah reading and the psalms were central to the worship and so the Jew was constantly reminded of his tradition's central teachings.

Incidentally, speaking of transforming ideas, the Torah was the first Scripture to be treated as an open book rather than as the monopoly of priests, and the synagogue was the first democratic sanctuary where anyone might teach or preach, where nobody did your religion for you.

The bell rang. There was a nature walk that afternoon and we'd have only a few minutes together before dinner, so I took a final minute. There is a sense in which being born a Jew, or a Christian or a Buddhist, forever colors our lives. Ultimately, the best reason to "become" a Jew is that you have the chance to and that there is a good bit of evidence as to the value of such an identity. Since we cannot shed our soul, we would be foolish not to examine the possibilities of our native tradition before seeking to exchange it for another.

I left them with a thought from my father's writing: "Were all arts, philosophies, and religions cast into one mold, mankind would be the pourer for it. Unwillingness to recognize differences is no evidence of broadmindedness. To ignore these differences is to overlook

the deep cleavages which existed in the past and to assume a similarity of doctrine and outlook which does not exist in the present. . . Indifference to one's own faith is no proof of tolerance. Loyalty to one's own is part of a larger loyalty to faith generally."

## Chapter 4

### WHY KEEP AT IT?

It had been a lovely day in the woods. We had an hour until dinner. It was a relaxed time.

- My neighborhood was heavily Jewish and I was in high school before I realized that the world wasn't Jewish. I still remember my surprise when it began to penetrate my thick skull that there are only a few million Jews among the four billion people on earth. In the laboratory there's such a thing as a critical mass. A chemical can be in such minute quantities that it can no longer catalyze a reaction. Aren't we Jews at or below that point? And, if we can't be significant to civilization, why keep at it?

I worry about numbers. We haven't always been a tiny minority. Before the bloody and futile revolts against Rome in the first and second centuries - you know about Masada - Jews probably made up ten percent of the population of Rome's Middle Eastern provinces. In medieval Europe we constituted perhaps two percent of the population, but a much higher proportion of the cities where the future was about to unfold. It's in recent generations that we have fallen far behind the population explosion. At the turn of the century we were twelve million in an estimated world population of one and a half billion. Today we are twelve or thirteen million in a population of four and a half billion. Analysts offer several reasons for the recent down turn, the most obvious and tragic of which is the Holocaust. But there's also the fact that Zero Population Growth appeals precisely to middle-class city people like us.

- What are we doing about it?

One of our better theologians, Emil Fackenheim, has written a

good deal about what he has called a new commandment: Do not allow Hitler a posthumous victory. The Nazis meant to annihilate the Jewish people and almost succeeded. Our response must be to preserve and enliven our people and that response, according to Fackenheim, mandates 1) support of the State of Israel and 2) children.

- I don't know any one committed to a career rather than children who will change their plans just to spite Hitler.

There was silence for a while. We had come to one of those commitment issues which are too personal, really, to be talked about. Finally, someone asked why so few Jews realize how few of us there are.

Probably because Jews are in the news so much. We are members of an upwardly mobile, extremely visible, achievement-oriented group, and almost every day one or another Jewish artist, musician, entrepreneur, physician, professor or one of our not quite kosher characters makes the papers. At least once a week the seven o'clock evening news includes a segment on the Arab-Israel conflict. Since we're concentrated in key urban areas and take advantage of the political process, candidates for major office seek Jews out, speak to Jewish issues and their campaigning is described.

Then, too, we're on the look out. We seem to need to prove over and over to ourselves that Jews are involved in a major way in the actions and passions of our times. There's even a popular genre of Jewish writing which lists Jews who have been well-known writers, painters, musicians, physicians, businessmen, performers and sports figures. It's our way of convincing ourselves that quality not quantity counts.

I can't resist adding that these lists are both lengthy and impressive.

- I've heard that as a group Jews advanced from impoverished immigrant to the American middle class faster than other minorities. Is this true? If so, why?

Anti-semitism has its advantages. Old-line businesses didn't hire Jews and the mainline banks or corporations were not interested in giving us a key to the executive suite, so the children of the immigrants gambled their efforts and brains in high-risk activities, and when the world changed there we were.

We can also thank good old Torah conditioning. Study was an act of devotion: "and you shall teach them (the commandments) to your children." By the second century of this era a compulsory education policy had been developed, at least for males, which was maintained over the subsequent centuries. In medieval Europe literacy was almost universal among Jews at a time when to prove he was a priest a Christian had only to show he could read. "We are the only European people," says Hannah Arent, "who have survived from antiquity pretty much intact. That means we kept our identity, and it means we are the only people who have never known analphabeticism. We were always literate because you cannot be a Jew without being literate. The women were less literate than the men but even they were much more literate than their counterparts elsewhere. Not only the elite knew how to read but every Jew had to read - the whole people, in all its classes and on all levels of giftedness and intelligence." The immigrant family may not have understood what C.C.N.Y. taught, but it was a respect school, and the young were pushed to register. Register they did and, when the knowledge explosion came, many possessed the skills a highly technical society desperately required.

- I'm not fully satisfied with your explanation of our exaggerated sense of numbers. I agree Jews are highly visible and that

we're programmed to look for Jews, but doesn't it also have something to do with popular myths about the Jew? A fellow on a night talk show in our town identifies anyone with a European-sounding name as a Jew. He claims he admires Jews but I've always suspected his motives. He can't seem to get off the subject.

The Jew looms large in the unconscious of the Western world. Christians hear a lot about Jews, in church and out. Almost all the actors in the New Testament were Jews: Jesus, the High Priest, Judas Iscariot, the Pharisees; and these images of friends, enemies and God play many roles in Christian thought. The Jew was the once chosen people whose ancestors were patriarchs. No matter how few we were, we had played a critical role in sacred history and our conversion continued to be seen as a pre-requisite to the Christ's Second Coming.

The Jew was the straw man set up by the New Testament to make its polemical points. Jews are frequently described as "blind fools" and "lying hypocrites" and their influence is seen as subversive, continuing and dangerous. No matter how few we were, we were the "enemy", and as such dangerous to the faith and the faithful; as with most things we fear Christian imaginations exaggerated the danger.

- All that's medieval and behind us.

Not really. Myths are remarkably long lived and prejudice can reshape itself in insidious ways; those who believed that education would eliminate prejudice were false prophets. It's a professor of engineering at Northwestern University who's been circulating the lie that the Holocaust is a Jewish lie. Some felt that anti-semitism grew out of Christian teaching arguing that the advance of secularism would inevitably dry up prejudice at its source. They, too, were wrong. Some Christians can be Christian and anti-semitism is securely lodged in the secular ideologies of our time. The left simply transposed



the myths of the Jew as irredeemable petit bourgeois and cosmopolitan for the myth of the Jew as the eternal pariah and wanderer.

The modern world has not been an easy place for the Jew. When Czar Alexander II was assassinated in 1880, the Russian government set out to eliminate the Jewish community. Jews were not among the assassins, but they were guilty of being carriers of the "virus" of democratic change. Many still see Jews as the masterminds of a powerful conspiracy against whatever institutions they hold sacred: the Church; white supremacy; the working class; the Third World; Western values. Whenever privilege was challenged by groups demanding their rightful opportunity, the champions of privilege looked for and found a Jewish conspiracy. Whenever nationalism emerged the Jew was branded as a cosmopolitan, "fundamentally incapable of understanding the German soul;" the words are by a German academic, Heinrich Paulus. Whenever Marxism raised the banner of revolution against entrenched institutional power, the Jew was branded as a bourgeois creature whose ingrained commercial instinct inevitably turns him into an economic parasite. Modernity has not abandoned the myth of the Jew as the perennial outsider, the alien in the midst, the poisoner of the wells, the ever-available scapegoat. It was in the most academically advanced state in Europe that Jews were branded like cattle and herded like cattle to slaughter houses. The unconscious labeling goes on.

- Anti-semitism isn't a good reason for us to stay Jewish. It was the same young man who had spoken at our opening session of his need for a positive reason to identify with Judaism.

Agreed, but these myths do suggest the uniqueness and the power of the Torah's special and surprising message. Prejudice thrives and survives on fear. If we seek the ultimate source of these fears, they are to be found in the religion we affirm and witness to. We remind the world of ideas and values it would rather forget, by insisting

that the Bible be read as it is and not after it has been reshaped into a different document by the addition of a New Testament or any foreign interpretations.

- Explain yourself.

Paul had made it easy for the privileged when he prescribed a high wall of separation between religion and government: "Render unto Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and to God the things that belong to God." The Torah's message is quite other. There was no realm where Caesar's word was the final word. When kings failed to abide by the Torah, a prophet was sent to condemn them.

During the Middle Ages the imperial church tried literally to lock up the Hebrew Bible lest Christians read and "misunderstand" but the Jew kept these texts alive and when, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Christians finally read the Old Testament, they discovered ideas of community, justice, and righteousness in tune with their age's democratic expectations. Social revolutionaries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries often cited the Torah's command "to proclaim freedom throughout the land" and the prophetic vision of an earthly Jerusalem, the city on the , established in justice and prosperity, and on this basis challenged the medieval church's supernaturalism, its emphasis on asceticism and denial and on deferred gratifications and on patient acceptance of the trials of poverty and peasantry. Since it is human nature to blame or reward the messenger for the news he brings, those who defended the old order blamed the Jew for the Bible's unsettling and unwanted ideas and set out to quarantine or eliminate him lest he spread further the democratic infection.

The Jew was rarely seen as he was and almost always as more than he was. This is true equally of the occasional flattering interpretations of our role in history. Unmerited flattery is in its

own way a kind of prejudice. The French essayist, Jacques Maritan, described Judaism as "an activating leaven injected into the mass" whose role is to teach the world "to be discontented and restless as long as the world has not God." In his view, the Jew represents in a statist world the challenge of individual dissent from the tyranny of consensus, freedom of conscience, from the tyranny of ideology, and a commitment to patient reform rather than utopian revolution.

- Has the Jew been a progressive force in modern history?

Jews were heavily involved in all stages of European Liberalism and Socialism. One of my ancestors was among the many who were on the losing side, the liberal side, of the revolution of 1848 and who came to America to escape prison and build here the world of his dreams. In the same year, 1891, ~~that~~ Pope Leo XIII issued an encyclical saying that "the main tenet of Socialism, the community of goods, must be utterly rejected. . . as contrary to the natural right of mankind. The recurrent experience of persecution had made the Jew intensely sensitive to injustice. Many of your grandparents and great-grandparents were boat people who know what it was to be stateless and forced to flee their homes.

An American rabbi, himself a social reformer, observing the political contours of Jewish life, described "socialism as unquestionably the product of the Jewish spirit."

In the early days of the Civil Rights Movement more than half of the white young men and women who went to Mississippi to work with the blacks were Jews and proportionally more rabbis joined in the early southern demonstrations than any other clerical group. Those who sense in Judaism powerful teachings about righteousness and justice have sensed correctly and we have been powerfully and immediately affected by those themes.

Moreover, as a political outcast the Jew naturally identified his political interest with the rebels, revolutionaries, and reformers who sought a larger justice. The powerless are spared the corruptions of power and easily empathize with all who share their marginality.

- Weren't the Maritans of the world thinking less to individuals like LaSalles and Rosa Luxemburg and more of the symbolic role of the Jew in western liberal consciousness.

I suppose so, but it didn't hurt to have living Jews around to prove that these ideas weren't dead.

- Speaking of seeing the Jew as more than he is, my parents find Jews and Jewish influence where none exists. I often hear them discuss the Jewish vote and "Jewish power."

I often wish that there was significant Jewish power. When European Jews were the boat people of the 1930's nothing American Jews did or said led our government to substantially enlarge its restrictive quotas on immigration. Would our government sell sophisticated weapons to the Rejectionist Front States, Jordan, Iraq and Syria, if Jewish power were all many Jews and non-Jews believe it to be?

- Where did this 'power' concept come from?

On the part of others from the kind of conspiracy theories people seem to delight in - unseen conspiracies and those utterly false claims about Jewish control of the media. On our part from the false assumption that, if a Jew has office, he'll use it to secure Jewish ends. Jews rarely ask is a Kissinger or a Linowitz good or bad for the causes they hold dear. It's somehow enough to know that one of ours made it.

There's also a bit of theological conditioning at work here. We've already talked about the Biblical doctrine of election, the belief that God chose Israel for a purpose. Deep down in the unconscious

of many Jews is the idea that what we do, in some mysterious way, serves God's purposes and, therefore, merit and receive His support.

- You've lost me.

Unroll a Torah scroll to the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy to the familiar line which is Judaism's profession of faith - "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God. The Lord is One;" and you'll see, even if you cannot read Hebrew, that the last letters of the first and last words are written double-sized. These letters, ayin - daled - form the Hebrew noun ayd which means witness. The ancient scribal tradition exalts the idea that when we recite the Shema we witness to our faith in God and the Torah.

- That's myth talk.

Much of what we do is governed by myth. A philosopher of the last generation, Hermann Cohen, put the witness idea this way: Jews offer God their presence in the world, a presence which proclaims God's sovereignty and casts suspicion on all merely human, political, and ideological certainties.

- 'Witness' and 'mission' sound like church rather than synagogue words.

The mission theme was first articulated during the Babylonian Exile by a prophet, Deutero-Isaiah, who heard God say that a time would soon be at hand when the exiles would return to Judea and, having acknowledged God's power and authority, would live there as a compelling example to the rest of the world, "a light unto the nations." He spoke of a Judea reborn, organized according to Torah law, providing an illuminating and compelling example - witness - to the world: "For out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem."

- I like that, the power of example rather than a Caesar or

Sheik propagating his faith at the point of a sword.

Rabbinic law stipulated that even slaves could not be forcibly converted. Jews have not felt hard pressed about conversion since the goal was not a universal synagogue to which all must submit, but a just and peaceful society which will encourage all to say: "In this day, the Lord is One and His name is One."

When the Temple was destroyed, Deutero-Isaiah's model nation image was put into mothballs to await the coming of the Messiah; but its emphasis on Israel's universal mission continued to color Jewish thought. Jews never lived only for the sake of Jews. The mission theme was reshaped during the long centuries of dispersion and political impotence, which Jews call simply galut. To take impotence and dispersion into account in the idea that Jewish prayer was essential to the world's deliverance. An accident, so the myth held, took place at Creation and part of God's being became trapped in the cosmos, caught up in material shells. Only the prayers of Israel, particularly the prayers of the holy and learned, can break open those shells, release the imprisoned light, allow God's being to become whole, and so regain the power which will allow Him to establish the Messianic era.

- That's incredible.

All myths are incredible to those who don't believe them; but recognize this theme as a defiant affirmation of the community's determination to remain significant. We are what we accept ourselves as being. Jews have always said we are not another small and impotent people, flotsam tossed about by the cruel seas, but a people whose activities were essential to history. A sense of mission not only draws a group together but draws unexpected talent out of the group.

In any case this particular formulation of Israel's mission

has lost ground to the activism of recent centuries. Today many declare the duty of the Jew, as heir of the prophets, is to serve energetically the cause of social and economic justice.

They make this argument. The genius of the Jewish people was/is a religious genius. Israel was the first people in history to sense the inadequacy of paganism and to transform shrine religion into ethical monotheism, the first to perceive the oneness of God and to conceive of religious duty as governing life outside as well as inside a sanctuary. Since the world has not yet fully accepted these elemental truths, Jews continue to have the obligation to teach them by reason, example and action: "You are My witnesses, says the Lord."

Medieval man had been conditioned to await patiently the blessings of the World to Come. The original idea had been based on the power of national example. The new theme was focused on the individual Jew as reformer and fashioner of the brave new world. The mission idea became a call to an active citizenship. The Jew of Frankfurt or London proved his loyalty to Judaism as he worked to reshape his community's political and economic structures. To cite various analogies which were favored at the time, the Jew was to be the leaven in the dough, the enzyme in the organism, the catalyst which would precipitate humane social change, one of God's shock troops in the struggle for social justice.

- That's rhetoric.

We've already noted the large number of Jews who were committed to reform and social change.

- Were they conscious of acting as Jews?

Some were. Some weren't. Amos meant a great deal to many and almost all were conditioned by the humane and welfare oriented ethos of Jewish life.



- Didn't they recognize that a few individuals, a minority consisting of outsiders, couldn't transform the world?

We are what we accept ourselves as being. Jews were accustomed to think of themselves as consequential and were so conceived by non-Jews. The conventional wisdom had it that civilization, then defined as the culture of the West, grew from two sources: the religion of Israel and the philosophy of Greece. Primacy in learning was given to Aristotle, primacy in moral passion was ascribed to Amos. Jews had given to the world the concept of the one God, the Ten Commandments, and the concept of humanity: "Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us all?" Jews had provided the prophets whose uncompromising sermons on justice were often cited by contemporary reformers. Jews played a leading role in shaping modern culture, Mahler, Freud, Einstein; and in the reform of the old order, Lassalle, Marx, Brandeis. So many Jews were among the pioneers of nuclear physics that, until they recognized its importance, the Nazis mocked it as Judenphysik. I've often taken some delight in the thought that one of the reasons the Allies won the Second World War was because Nazi purges necessitated the finding of Aryan replacements for the dismissed Jewish scientists critically delayed the German missile and atomic projects.

Many of those important minds were Jews in name only. Marx hated his ancestry. I remember being shocked by the bitterness of his pamphlet, A World Without Jews.

Nothing in Marx's writings shows that this man, whose soul was outraged at the institutions which created urban poverty, ever saw or cared about the Jewish poor who shared his squalor and poverty in London. Why Marx was prejudiced against his ancestors I leave to biographers, with the suggestion that the world's tendency to dismiss unwanted ideas as Jewish, and so beneath notice, creates all kinds of



complex frustrations in Jews who want to be heard. But I'd also suggest, since the imprint of our environment is indelible, that Marx's intellectual and social concerns, and the bookish way he went about creating his revolution, in some measure refract the cultural Jewish world his family renounced but could not shake out of their system.

-I'm still bothered by the rhetoric. Is it really so clear that there would be no one to light the way if Jews weren't around? It may be true that twenty-five centuries ago only Jews insisted on human worth and human equality. Today, thank God, many concerned groups encourage their followers to reach beyond self-serving political philosophies and social prejudices. Look at Mother Theresa in the slums of India and the volunteers of the Peace Corps and Vista. And nobody did more for justice than Martin Luther King. Many of the most interesting experiments in social democracy have been undertaken in the Scandinavian countries. I wouldn't like to see a world without Jews, we add something to the scene, but surely a world without Jews wouldn't be damned.

There's a paragraph in the liturgy which my prayer book translates, "Grant us peace, Thy most precious gift, O Eternal Source of Peace, and let Israel be the messenger of peace unto the peoples of the earth." Is any of its thrust lost if the messenger of peace is changed to a messenger? There's plenty of work for all. And it bears repeating that Jews did and do play a disproportionate role in many European and American liberal and revolutionary programs, did play a major role in creating the social work profession, did take a leading role in the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam campaigns, do raise legendary sums for human need and do vote, and often vote against their immediate pocketbook interests.

- O.K. I accept the idea we talked about earlier, that the

Biblical and Talmudic spirit possessed transforming capacities and inspired a long-lived and vital tradition, but today these ideas are common property. Christians claim the Bible belongs also to them. The Koran includes Biblical themes. The common law protects the individual as much as Talmudic law. Isn't the work of a separate Jewish community over and done?

Israel's work won't be done until the Messiah comes. Torah civilization has never ceased creating new and stimulating forms, nor have other traditions ceased borrowing our ideas. The mosque and most Protestant Churches flattered the synagogue by patterning themselves on its open and democratic structure. Rabbinic Judaism required universal literacy and created in the second century the West's first community-wide educational structure - the ancestor of our mandatory educational system. During the Middle Ages Jewish communities became miniature welfare states, complete with institutions which provided funds to bury the indigent dead, ransom captives, provide dowries for poor girls and daily support for poor families, and many a nineteenth-century reformer blueprinted his welfare state after the institutional patterns he saw in the ghetto. In my city, Cleveland, as in many American cities, the concept of a Community Chest was developed by civic leaders who were impressed by the way local Jews organized to take care of their own. Just as many of the Protestant leaders of the Enlightenment consulted Hebrew teachers to better understand the Bible, so many modern social reformers draw on the language and images of the prophets and on the remarkable experiments in community organization represented by the Kibbutzim and Moshavot. To this day the Kibbutzim represent the only communitarian experiments by free peoples which have proved to have staying power and many of their forms have proved seminal.

- But what's Jewish about carrying a placard or promoting the idea of public welfare? I don't have to be a Jew to be a social activist.

I once wrote a rather long essay which I called "A Lover's Quarrel with the Mission of Israel." I believe that Israel has a providential and activist role to play in God's plans; but I am disturbed by the carelessness with which many have identified pet causes with Israel's mission. Part of Israel's mission is to promote justice, but a revolution which kills and imprisons thousands of innocents is not the Torah way of achieving justice. In the Torah justice and mercy are paired and the means as well as the ends have to be just.

Words like justice and freedom are not a satisfactory basis for a moral code. Words require context. Brezhnev's justice and mine are quite different principles. His justice must serve the interest of party and state; my concept of justice is one which derives from the traditional perception of God, that "the Judge of all the earth cannot act unjustly," and so commanded us not to oppress one's neighbor, not to insult the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, not to hold the wage of a laborer beyond its due time, not to be partial to the poor or defer to the powerful, not to deceive another or lie to one another, to correct oppression, defend the orphans, plead for the widow.

- Rhetoric.

No, Torah.

- What was your quarrel with the mission theme?

Some took the mission theme to mean that they served God significantly only as they worked to eradicate racism or to eliminate poverty. The customs and the traditions of the religious life, home observance, synagogue worship, and traditional learning, all that

gives beauty and warmth to Jewish life and all that suggests the Jewish definition of terms like justice, righteousness and freedom came to be seen as inconsequential.

- Are you saying that customs and ceremonies are more important than social commitment?

There is no inherent conflict between social activism and the religious life. I often think of the philosopher, Abraham Joshua Heschel, who was a pious Jew, really a mystic, and one of the leading spirits in the Civic Rights Movement in the 1960's. In the Torah, ceremonial and ethical commands are intermingled, "love your neighbor as yourself" and "remember the Sabbath Day" and the same balance can and must be maintained in our lives.

Actually, only the reforming pieties can provide an environment in which the Jew can grow, not only in knowledge but in understanding, not only in independence of spirit but in social responsibility, not only in awareness but in holiness. Our sages often said: "Sanctify yourself before you try to sanctify others." Commitment, yes; but thoughtful, judicious commitment. You will not find Jewish literature glorifying the Don Quixote's of the world who set out to overthrow evil with a broken lance, a garrulous friend, and a sway-backed horse.

- Let's get back to the original question. Why should Jews keep at it?

The value of Jewish survival can be discussed in at least two ways. One seeks to discover the role of the Jew in history. Here I say only that I do not know what God has in mind. Our sages used to say, "The miracle is not always recognized by the one who is its agent," which I take to mean that our existence as a people has importance, but that God is not about to tell us precisely in what way.

The other, which permits serious analysis, explores the consequences for Jews of being shaped by the Jewish tradition. I hold that Israel's primary responsibility has been and is to cultivate dignity and justice within Israel. Those who cannot take themselves in hand are not equipped to be the saviors of the world.

The value of Jewish survival is best established in terms of the growth, sensitivity, and maturity which a Torah-related experience makes available to those who take this road. There is, or can be, a formative tension between traditional ideas, familiar institutions, and the "I", and the new "I" that emerges from this Jewish involvement can be more sensitive and mature than the old "I". How do I know? I've felt the change in myself and I've seen it in others.

The story was often told of a young rabbi who set out confidently to save the world. Repeated disappointments taught him that the task was beyond his capacity, so he reduced his expectations. He would kindle the fires of faith in his congregation. Despite his best efforts many remained unresponsive. Again, he lowered his sights. He would raise his family in piety, but children have minds of their own, and his were no exception. At the end of a long and industrious life the rabbi realized that the one accomplishment he could guarantee was the cultivation of his own soul. The hope that our efforts are consequential encourages us, but there is no way to prove that this is so. We do what we feel we must do and pray with the psalmist: "Establish, O Lord, the work of our hands."

- But why follow the Jewish road? There are others.

The Jew would try because God, Himself, surveyed and described this road. The Torah tradition refracts inspired values: a way of life which insists and emphasizes that the soul of each child is precious and that our purpose is to serve God, not the machine, the

party or the state. Our classic texts are biographical and humane rather than scientific and technical. Our class achievements are a sensitive home, a truth-seeking school, and a synagogue searching for God. Our religion is a sanctified way of life, a culture which sets as its goal the disciplined adult, fully informed, spiritually independent, socially compassionate, and morally bound, and the disciplined community, socially compassionate, structurally just and institutionally democratic.

Keep in mind that the world has not been particularly successful in developing environments in which children can grow up into balanced, wholesome and sensitive adults. The education of the whole man is regularly neglected for the education of the technician, the soldier, the faithful comrade, the patriot. The home tends to be reduced to an economic unit, and many parents off-handedly relegate to others many of the responsibilities of training and guidance. Much in our environment encourages us to compete, to mistake possession for happiness, to accept the inevitability of war and to pass by an injured person lest we be sued.

Given my druthers, I'll take up the Jewish experience.

- Rabbi, you're eloquent, but are you accurate? I've been to Israel. Some of the most pious have a terrible reputation. They obey every minor religious rule, but not the major ethical ones. If they're an example of Judaism's power to transform the human spirit, I want none of it.

I read recently an article by the former chief rabbi of South Africa, an orthodox scholar of unquestioned observance, about the ultra pietists who have made a fetish of ritual and are so distant from the real world that they do not feel bound by the normal duties of decent citizens. He is, if anything, more dismayed than you are by their

mindless emphasis on ritual and blindness to the quality of those outside their world. Don't judge Judaism by those who throw stones at passing cars on the Sabbath, and remember that they're a minority of a minority, that we're survivors, and that the Holocaust and the Arab wars have taken an emotional toll.

- Whom should I judge Judaism by?

It could give you quite a list of the great and the good, but I'd rather you judge our tradition by the Lamed Vavniks.

- Who?

Lamed Vav is the Hebrew number thirty-six.

According to folklore, in each generation there are thirty-six saintly, anonymous people raising families, encouraging the anxious, and lightening the burden of others. They, so the tradition has it, are the reason God continues to support and encourage life on Earth. It is not accidental that the Jewish model is not a greater-than-life hero but those whom other cultures would dismiss as 'ordinary people'.

The dinner bell sounded, so I quickly answered our question, 'Why keep at it?' in a traditional Jewish way, with a question: 'Why not?' Since you must in any case open your soul to some religious vision, why not take up the Jewish option which has enhanced so many lives and stimulated a group of ordinary people to embark on an extraordinary career.

## Chapter 5

### THE TREE AND THE RIVER

We had a good night's sleep and breakfast. It was time to let out the questions which had festered overnight.

- I'm confused. I hear talk about Jewish identity, Jewish values, a Jewish way of life, and conflicting images come into my mind: a kid playing baseball with a yarmulke on his head; aliyahs in a congregation where almost nobody wears a yarmulke; a petition signed by a number of rabbis supporting a woman's right to have an abortion on demand; and a rabbi giving the keynote speech at a Right-to-Life convention. At my Bar Mitzvah, my grandfather told me, "Always be a good Jew." Now I'm not clear what he meant. Are there different ways to be a good Jew?

Yes.

- Then what did my grandfather mean?

Your grandfather probably hoped you would be proud of your heritage, practice Judaism in the way he knew, and be active in Jewish activities.

In the old world some Jews were pious, others indifferent; some learned and others simple; some fervent and some skeptical; but most everyone took it for granted that there was a definable Jewish way of life. The rabbinic understanding of the Torah tradition had provided community standards for centuries, and those raised within it had no difficulty defining themselves or their religion. They lived it every day, and if they had a question about Jewish practice they could look up the answer in one of the manuals like Joseph Karo's Shulhan Aruch (17 c.). Today traditional observance still engages many, but others who are non-traditional in their observance would unaffectedly describe themselves as "good Jews,"



America is a pluralistic society and so is the Jewish community. The Jewish community exhibits a variety of standards. Orthodox and Conservative congregations celebrate most major holidays for two days; Reform observes only one day. Some Jews keep kosher but rarely attend worship. Others attend services regularly but make no attempt to keep the dietary laws. There are still those who write manuals of Jewish practice; and many who in all good conscience pay little attention to these manuals.

When Karo prepared his code, the political and cultural circumstances of Jewish life were everywhere medieval, so, although there were saintly Jews and indifferent ones, learned men and illiterates, Jewish life everywhere responded to essentially similar cultural and economic conditions and the Torah tradition had everywhere essentially the same shape. No longer. Karo's Jews had only their Jewish religion. Almost all Jews today are religious eclectics.

- Are you saying we're not simply Jews?

Each year I discuss with my Confirmation class the concept of religion. Once they understand religion functionally, as we've talked about it, I ask them a question which would have been meaningless in a ghetto community: list the religions which inform their lives. By then they realize that America's civil religion has had a major impact on their value systems and that their controlling sense of purpose is derived at least as much from the social sciences and liberal arts as from Torah and Talmud. The shtetl's culture was consistent and parochial, we go to public school and religious school.

- So?

A generation's understanding of Torah grows out of the intellectual currents which course within it. I respect those who believe

in and continue to abide by the norms of what historians call the rabbinic tradition, but neither my students nor I look at the Torah tradition in what is generally called a traditional way. The rabbinic tradition claims that God intruded in history at a particular time and allowed Moses to mediate His word. That deposit of tradition, the Torah, they believe to be God's complete and final set of directions for mankind, the only set of Divine Instructions we have. I find this static idea inadequate to our time and the reality of my life and, in fact, inadequate as a description of the religious history of the Jewish people. There were prophets after Moses. The Talmudic sages were creative scholars and some of them were also mystics who "saw" answers or "heard" a bat kol, a voice, tell them how to decide particular problems. The Torah tradition has always been and still is an evolving religious civilization, an outgrowth of the founding insights and of an unceasing exploration and redefinition of them. Today, either we read out all non-orthodox approaches as misguided and heretical or we accept the fact that our community is no longer of a single mind and that there are significant reasons why various groups have reshaped and are reshaping their understanding of the Torah tradition.

Incidentally, I used the term Torah tradition deliberately. The familiar label, Judaism, suggests a fixed set of ideas and practices constant over time. Somehow Torah tradition manages to suggest the process of ongoing commentary on the original themes.

I am a rabbi. I am committed to the Torah tradition and I agree with many traditional rabbinic positions on God, practice, and values; yet, when I read the various modern texts which purport to describe Judaism, I often find myself vigorously shaking my head. I would balance some ideas differently and they present as Torah other ideas that I don't accept. Is this heresy? Not at all. I'm not a

maverick. When I was ordained I was not required to affirm a particular catechism nor have I at any time been told to submit my writings to a superior's censorship. The promise that I was asked to make on that beastly hot June day was that I would confront Torah with love and respect, with the respect of one who was at home within its spirit and the love of one who felt close to the whole Torah family.

- I'm not sure my grandfather wouldn't have called your argument heretical. He'd have called you an Epikoros.

At least he's be giving me credit for thinking. Ludwig Lewisohn often told the story of a young student in a Polish yeshivah who was captivated by the rationalist philosophies which had begun to be noticed even in Europe's yeshivot. One day he heard that a famous free-thinker, Epikoros, was in town and he asked to meet him in the hope of becoming his student. A time was arranged and, when the young man presented himself, this interview took place: "How well do you know the Bible?" "Fairly well." "And the Talmud?" "A few pages." "Have you read Maimonides and Halevi?" "Not yet." "Young man, go back to the yeshivah and study. You don't know enough to be an Epikoros."

Some years ago I was asked to write the article on "Heresy and Heretics" for the Encyclopedia Judaica. Some heretics are cynics, but most are believers whose position does not commend itself to the majority, so I wrote: "The heretic may be bitter or cynical or defiant, but he is not an apostate and often believes that he represents true Judaism." The edited proof contained this revised language: "The heretic may be distinguished from the apostate in that, although he holds beliefs which are contrary to accepted doctrines, he does not renounce his religion entirely." My editor was not willing to face

the possibility that the rabbinic formulation of Judaism was not an absolute standard against which all professions of Torah must be measured.

- Are you saying anything that anyone wrote to label as Jewish is Jewish?

Emphatically not. But my thought requires a bit of patient explanation.

In Karo's day writers often used the image of a tree as a metaphor to describe the development of Jewish life. The seedling had been planted at Sinai; over the centuries the trunk had thickened as each generation added its understandings of the Torah's revelation, of the basic affirmations of God's existence and oneness. Each age the tree's branches lengthened and thickened as commentary added detail to such tenets as free will, providence, reward and punishment and the Messianic promise. Each spring the tree came into leaf and shed its leaves each fall as communities developed customs appropriate to their circumstances and then, under new circumstances, changed or abandoned them. Customs changed but not the basic teachings.

The image is an attractive one for those who draw encouragement from the idea of eternal verities. A tree retains its original shape. But I question this metaphor's usefulness as a description of what actually occurred. Imagine Moses resurrected among us and on a visit to the most traditional synagogue in the area. Ask yourself what his reaction would be to what he would see and hear of the religion he helped to found. Synagogues developed a thousand years after Moses' death. The first rabbi was ordained more than thirteen hundred years after Moses anointed Aaron as High Priest. If I took Moses to the Ark and opened the scroll which bears his name, he could not read it. The Torah script, though antique, uses an alphabet which

was developed several centuries after his death. Nor would he recognize the scroll itself since the Torah did not achieve its present form until after the Babylonian Exile.

The Torah in the Ark suggests continuity over time and is so successful at it that Jews consistently underestimate the extent of the changes which have taken place.

Polygamy was an accepted form of family structure in Biblical times; monogamy is required today. The Temple was served by hereditary priests; in the synagogue priests had and have no significant authority. The priests encouraged, and most Biblical Jews enjoyed, worship full of pageantry and centered on sacrifices, but Biblical prophets like Hosea and Isaiah condemned such ritual as misplaced duty: "Who has asked of you to trample my courts?" The Pharisees affirmed the resurrection of the body and the Sadducees denied, and correctly so, that this teaching was to be found in the Torah. In the Middle Ages there were rabbis who found all kinds of esoteric and kabbalistic ideas in the Torah text and others who denied that these ideas were there at all. In the eighteenth century the Hassidic movement shaped itself around the charisma of miracle-working saints, a practice which was sharply denounced by mainline leaders who considered these wonder-working rebbes as charlatans and at times excommunicated their followers.

Biblical law permits slavery but limited bondage to six years. Rabbinic teachers made it clear that owning slaves was morally unacceptable. Cities and trade had expanded. A free labor economy was now an attainable goal and the Torah law was read, correctly I believe, not as an authorization but as a protest against all forms of bondage, and the permission implicit in the old law was quietly discarded.

Slavery is no longer a political problem, but women's rights are. Traditional Judaism separated men and women in the synagogue, forbade a woman to appear as a witness in civil cases, and sanctified sex differentiated roles -- a woman of valor is one who looks well to the ways of her household, I'm quoting the book of Proverbs, rather than to a career - but the Torah also emphasizes human dignity and contains biographies of women who were liberated for their age: Miriam; Ataliah, a reigning queen; the prophetess Huldah. Some historians argue that the rather rigid pattern of separation by sex encouraged by rabbinic teaching, symbolized by the women's balcony in an orthodox synagogue, represents an understanding of Torah regressively affected by the harem mentality of the oriental world. Certainly there is no rule in the Torah that a woman must be treated as an inferior or limited to housewifely roles; indeed, by a different exegesis, the equality of persons could have been derived from one element of the creation story: "Male and female created He them."

~ Why didn't the rabbis who shaped the Talmud recognize that they had changed the shape of Torah?

Since religion's major function is to consecrate values, the drive to declare certain principles and practices fixed for all times is a powerful one. The myth of the Ten Commandments being chiseled onto stone tablets is a highly visual metaphor of this function. A religion isn't compelling or commanding when it's always saying, 'perhaps' or "we'll have to see" or "you must make up your own mind."

The rabbis hid change by insisting that the new material had always been there. They did so in two ways. On the one hand they said that there had been two parts to the original revelation. The written Torah was one part. The other was Torah which had not been

reduced to writing but had been passed on from Moses through the authorized teachers of each generation and that it was on the basis of this Torah she be'al Peh, oral Torah, that rabbinic Judaism had taken the shape it had. What was new was, in fact, old. It had simply not been published.

They also subsumed changes into a process of commentary which they argued simply drew out the Torah's implications without altering Judaism's unchanging structure. Their decisions were simply elaborations of what was either explicit or implicit in the text.

An example: the Torah nowhere mentions that a minyan, ten adult males, is required for public worship. Critical scholarship would probably trace the minyan to the customary number required for a quorum in West Asia using ten fingers so even illiterates could tally a quorum. The sages insisted that God had specifically decreed the minyan, and they found a Torah text to prove the point: "how long shall I bear this evil congregation?" In this text God denounces the spies who had warned the tribes not to attack Canaan despite God's command to do so. There were ten such spies, from which it followed that God meant that a congregation should consist of at least ten.

- Why weren't women counted?

The Bible names the spies and they were all men. There were no Mata Haris among them. The real reason, of course, is that women were not allowed to be part of the judicial process.

Such commentary allowed what you 'knew' to be Torah without any sense that you were tampering with Torah. But, in fact, radical changes took place; so, in my thinking, I have replaced the tree model with the river model. I look on the Torah tradition as, indeed, I look on all the major religious traditions, as a mighty river, say the Mississippi. The Mississippi begins as a small stream feeding

a clear-water Minnesota lake and flows several thousand miles to the Gulf of Mexico. The Torah begins in an event, the Exodus, and in a revelation at Sinai, whose substance we cannot fully recover, and flows down three thousand years to our day. I doubt that many of the molecules of water which emerge at the river's source actually reach the Gulf. Some are lifted off by evaporation. Farmers pipe water for irrigation. Cities draw water to support their population. Other waters mix into the stream -- Rain falls and tributaries mingle with the original stream. Much of what existed in Moses' day is no longer, but the mighty stream flows on.

The Mississippi is a single river but as it flows it changes its aspect. Sometimes it runs calmly for miles, at other times it races through white water rapids. In Jewish life there have been quiet and uneventful centuries and times of dramatic change. I can locate the Mississippi on the map and I can bathe in its waters but I cannot deny its changeful nature. The Mississippi flows in a single direction, drawn on by the fall of the land and the spin of the earth, by God's hand. The Jewish experience flows into history, drawn on by changing times, the changing needs of Jewish life, and God's creative purpose. The present emerges out of the past, but is not identical with it.

The Torah's text continues to provide the calendar and many of the idioms of Jewish life. Specific holidays and the Sabbath are mandated by the Torah, but we celebrate them differently than the ancient Israelites did and we interpret Torah language to other purposes. The past has force. The God of mercy and justice whom Israel affirmed at Sinai is still the focus of our worship and seen as the source of our values. The current flows in one direction, but it is a Torah which speaks to our needs and which deals with our interests.



Modern interpretations are not the first to mark a radical break with understandings which had been accepted for centuries. The second-century sage, Akiba, insisted that not only every sentence and phrase had meaning, but every letter, and even the white space around the letters. A midrash of the time describes Moses' hearing of Akiba's fame, visiting one of his lectures, and being utterly puzzled by interpretations of Torah which were completely foreign to him. We've already remarked on the fact that the Torah stipulates capital punishment for a variety of crimes but rabbinic law discouraged it. The rabbis did not stop teaching the old law; but they refined the concept of due process so as to sharply limit a person's exposure to the death penalty; and they were so successful in their organization of the judicial process that it came to be said that a rabbinic court which carried out a death sentence in a century was a murderous court.

Just as the American Constitution is subject to various kinds of interpretations, some strict, some loose - and many Supreme Court decisions hang by a constitutional hair, each judge basing his decision as much on his understanding of the spirit of the law as on its letter - so Jewish life has been inconsistently consistent, and Torah commentaries have ranged from simple extensions of a Biblical thought to highly convoluted exegesis. Kabbalists have read into the Torah the exact date of the final judgment. Philosophers discovered the Aristotelian categories.

- Aren't you turning the Torah into Torahs?

No, I'm turning the Torah into Torah; I'm asking you to stop thinking of Torah as a single text and to consider Torah as what Israel accepts as God's Instructions. Since Ezra's time, at least, the Torah has not changed; but Ezra would feel alien in the most orthodox synagogue

in Israel.

I remember being shocked when I took my first university course in Bible and a noted scholar described the Israelite religion to us. I had thought of Biblical Judaism as much like my own. It was not. My Torah is the product of three thousand years of sensitive living and commentary, not the early first millenium text which my teacher outlined for me.

The idea that the Torah contains the revelation of the covenant to Moses is the founding and controlling myth, but this myth cannot be taken as a factual description of what actually happened. Critical scholarship has proven that the Mosaic law is indeed a mosaic and that the Torah is an edited anthology of various Israelite traditions. Stop thinking of Torah as a scroll. Think of Torah as a chain of commentary and tradition beginning in the scroll and being shaped and added to in each age, including our own.

When the sacred traditions of the Israelites were brought together into our Torah scroll, its text became a fixed point in Judaism's development. The scroll's physical presence was Judaism's symbol of the existence of God's instructions, and its text contained God's instructions on all matters. But Jews of age obeyed Torah, not the Torah. The Torah was the source of the river in which they swam, a beginning not a conclusion.

Outsiders are sometimes puzzled that Jews pay so much attention to an antique text; but the ritual is not purely formal. Torah commentary continually draws new meaning out of the text, and that's the process through which the Torah tradition has evolved. Torah comprises all that came to be considered as revealed, the written as well as the oral law, and all serious commentary on that revelation. Many use Torah to signify all Jewish learning. Our people's special and surprising word is stated and examined in Torah.

A Jewish service, unlike say a Quaker meeting, is not an expectant silence, as the worshippers await inspiration, but Talmud Torah, reading, commentary, an exploration of a multi-faceted tradition. Some religious traditions change over time as the inspired bring new words. Once the Torah was published, it was not to be amended, Judaism needed that sustaining sense of consistency; so Judaism changed through a process of progressive and inspired commentary rather than progressive revelation.

- But today's changes are radical ones. My grandfather wouldn't have tolerated a woman rabbi.

We have the need and the capacity to build dams and change the course of rivers. We have to use a river's water and power more effectively and do so because our technology allows us to. There are three times as many people on earth as there were at the turn of the century. We're in the process of changing the whole context of human life. Most people are no longer close to the land. Urban life, crowding, computer chips, longevity, instantaneous communication, the knowledge explosion have created new stimuli, new challenges and a new environment, and our Judaism must take these new problems and the attitudes they breed into consideration.

- I like things neatly wrapped up. How long are we going to live with these divisions?

For a long time, I'm afraid.

Blame Dr. Einstein. We can no longer think conceptually without taking into account the fourth dimension - time, and the element of time forces us to question all claims to immutability. Until quite recently philosophers were confident that such concepts as justice, freedom, and duty could be ~~could be~~ truly and finally defined; and, once refined, such formulations could be applied to all situations.

Today the dimension of time, the perspective of the observer, must always be considered and dialectical thought has replaced fixed systems. We move in a world governed by the concepts of development and dialectical process. The day when any religion can be defined with finality and full accuracy would seem to be behind us.

Unless we are prepared to cavalierly override all the norms of critical discourse and content ourselves with the argument that religion alone, among human activities, is impervious to the flow of life, the only way we can intelligently discuss Torah is to discuss it as a transforming process.

Judaism must be seen as a dynamic religion which has developed out of the original moment of meeting and out of the reflections and religious experiences of all those to whom that original meeting has remained significant. Judaism's transformation can be analogized to the human being. The image of an adult as simply a larger version of the child he was may seem commonsensical, but, in fact, it's false. The child has immunities absent in the adult and the adult has a musculature and nervous system quite different from the child's. During puberty and adolescence, fundamental physical and emotional changes take place. The red-haired, blue-eyed infant grows into the brown-haired, brown-eyed, sexually active adult. The adult and the child are developmentally one, yet organically quite different.

- What about revelation? Aren't you making Torah into a human creation rather than God's word?

When a craftsman throws a pot and then bakes it in a kiln, the clay is transformed from an idea into an object which exists independently of the potter. Some compare the Torah to such a pot. They seem to think that God dictated the Torah scroll and that it now exists apart from God. That's not my understanding. God cannot be

separated from His Word. Torah is not an object independent of God but the word of God continually emerging and dependent on Him. God and His Torah and we and God's Torah are always in a dialectic relationship.

When I'm asked if I believe in revelation, my answer is yes and my belief rests on the mysterious power of Torah to remain informative and challenging. And I'm not afraid to call that absolutely unique capacity, no other ancient text has it, divine.

- I think of religion as teaching truth. If the Torah wasn't revealed, isn't true, why bother with it?

Notice that you're back to the Torah. The question is not is the Bible true, but in what sense is it true. There was no six-day Creation. Noah's ark did not land on Mount Ararat. The Torah's description of the architecture of the Tent of Meeting does not disclose cosmic secrets. No Torah text contains in secret code the date when the Messiah will arrive. The Torah is not an all-inclusive encyclopedia. You will not find  $E = MC^2$  anywhere in its texts. What you will find is wisdom, hope, and the power to stimulate endless religious creativity.

To suggest, as I have, that the Scripture is not literally true is not to argue that its themes are false or have been deceitfully proposed. Sophisticates of a generation ago tended to dismiss talk of revelation as the invention of priests or the delusions of fanatics, but our generation has rediscovered those sources of perception and insight which are lodged in the imagination and in the unconscious rather than in the rational intellect. An artist paints with his imagination, his soul, as much as with his mind. We have learnt that those 'truths', what I've been calling the "special and surprising words", can transform a society and that they emerge from the deep well of inspiration rather

than from the limited range of logical thought. I marvel at the Torah's continuing ability to refract ideas of transforming power, ideas which entered a people's consciousness at a particular time and affected, and continue to affect, the lives of millions.

- I'm uncomfortable when you suggest that our special and surprising word may not be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. You, yourself, said that religion's main purpose is to confirm a value system. We gamble our lives on these values, and we want to feel that they're a sure bet.

Anyone who teaches an undergraduate survey course in religion knows that each year some students will go through a crisis of faith when they learn that modern research takes for granted that the Torah was not given to Moses in its present form or that the Gospel documents were written and edited long after the events they purport to describe; in brief, that the truth is not what they were taught in Sunday School.

Actually, truth is not all it's generally made out to be. The Gospel of John promises, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free," and the thought is often quoted; but, when you analyze the claim, it clearly exaggerates truth's value. I know the medical dangers involved in smoking and that I won't fall from an observation deck, but knowing isn't enough to free me from an addiction or a phobia.

Truth comes from a vocabulary of fixed terms which are now denied to us. Modern philosophy suggests that the only truths of whose accuracy we are certain are those which apply to systems which are our own creations, like mathematics. When we deal with nature and human nature, which are God's creations, we can describe process, 'how', but we can't explain purpose, 'why'. I find the Torah tradition sensitive, suggestive and wise. I ask no more.

- Doesn't it bother you that you're not sure? I like to have everything clearly laid out.

Not really. Almost every decision we make involves a judgment call and in that sense a risk. Risk adds excitement to life. In many ways not knowing the whole truth is better for us. I'm not sure I'd want to know that my obituary will be in tomorrow's paper. God must have had good reason to build denial mechanisms into our psyches.

People who believe they possess the truth inevitably ascribe the beliefs of others to congenital incapacity, invincible ignorance, or the work of Satan. When 'truth' enters a society, bitterness and division inevitably come in its train. Few religious traditions have Judaism's self-restraint to say that man's comprehension of revelation is never complete.

- How can you take this position? Doesn't your service include the prayer which begins: "True and enduring is the word which You have spoken through Your prophet. ."?

Worship seeks to set a confirmatory mood. We need to feel that Torahic ideas are rock solid before we'll act on them, but Jewish thought was ever conscious of another text in Deuteronomy which I've already quoted to you: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, says the Lord." Any formulation by us of Torah is at best tentative. I wish that some of my all too certain Jewish friends would take to heart a f     istic statement of this thought which describes Elijah's task once he has publically announced the Messiah.

The real answer is that I know enough. I know the direction of the river's flow; I have the source and the commentaries and I try to meet them openly and thoughtfully.

- How do we know if a religion's surprising message is true?

There you go again with that term. How do you know if a masterwork is true? You don't, but you can know, either by instinct or by the cultivation of aesthetic taste, that it's a major piece. The same test applies to religion. There's no way of saying: My theology is true and yours is false. A tradition's truth is attested by that society's instinctive agreement. Instinctively we knew the Torah to be a masterpiece, and we confirm our assumption by tracking its record over time.

I use words like perception, insight, heightened consciousness which are not so imperious in their implications as truth and allow me to appreciate the spirit of other religions. Museums contain many masterpieces. Perception and insight are not necessarily limited to one religion any more than Shakespeare's or Beethoven's genius exhausted the possibilities of great literature or grand music. I prize my Torah experiences and have been ennobled by them, but I wouldn't claim that other religions could not encourage high-minded and sensitive living.

- If the Torah is so full of old things and no longer believed things, why not scrap the old text and start fresh?

There is no reason to. Torah is a continuum not a conclusion. Moreover, no one can self-consciously write a scripture. However noble the thoughts such a book might contain, it would end up being an anthology of essays or proverbs, but not Torah. Books of Scripture have something divine, a special compelling power about them, the power that transforms a society. The rabbis said Torah Orah, the Torah is an unceasing source of light which has the remarkable and mysterious ability to continue to shed enlightenment.

- You have located divinity within the vital force of the tradition. The Torah says "and God spoke." There's a difference.



The investigations of Freud, Jung, Eliade and a host of others have helped us see that our fathers were wrestling with the limitations of language when they said unself-consciously: "Thus says God." They had no other way to express their certainty that they had seen what had not been known before. After a first course in Biblical criticism, I was ready to dismiss Scripture as an antiquated collection of myths and legends. Then I read Martin Buber who taught me to see Torah as the record of meetings between Israel and God during which our fathers opened themselves fully to the mystery of the divine and apprehended something of that mystery. Though they described their experiences with words, "and God spoke," 'this is the vision of. .,' what they experienced could not really be expressed.

I have come to appreciate the fact that the prophets were not babblers who, in some drugged haze, said anything that came into their minds, but sober and responsible citizens who puzzled long and hard over the conditions of their lives and discovered, sometimes to their own amazement, that the pieces had come together in an unexpected vision. Revelation is not an invention of crafty priests designed to discourage the laity from asking too many questions, but a word which describes our surprise when some unexpected and seminal insights become available to us.

- My rabbi has a few themes which he calls Biblical: the oneness of God, human dignity, social justice, and he weaves his preaching around them. If the Torah reduces itself to such general terms, it's more than somewhat vague and hardly distinctive. When you say that the Torah itself is not true but that its informing spirit is true, aren't you guilty of vitiating Judaism's special and surprising message?

I'm speaking of a far more sophisticated interpretive process

than abstracting a few high-sounding terms and declaring them to be the whole of God's word. Torah commentary implies a respect for the text itself and careful examination of all its implications. Traditionally, this approach was called midrash and midrash is based on faith in Torah as the living word.

Midrash by its very being testifies to the mysterious vitality of the text. If the Torah is God's word, every word and thought must be spiritually significant. Since each age emphasized different meanings and virtues, the search, the process of midrash, is ceaseless, active as long as there are believers.

- I'm no authority, but doesn't the midrash, there are collections of this material, aren't there, contain conflicting interpretations?

Midrash was published by a process of accumulation and little attempt was made at systematic editing. Variety of interpretation reinforces the idea that the Torah is infinitely suggestive, in that sense special, surprising, mysterious, divine. These inconsistencies simply reveal that each of us looks on Torah with his own eyes and mind; we are inconsistent, not God.

Besides, what is the virtue of consistency? The rabbis anticipated Emerson's "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds" when they wrote, 'both this statement and another of different import can be seen as the words of the living God.' Life is full of contradictions, consequently the neatness of a moral or philosophic system does not prove its truth.

- Back to square one again. If Torah is continuously in the process of becoming, how can I ever know what it teaches?

By study, thoughtful reflection and involvement in the community.

If you are asking for a brief and sufficient statement of basic Judaism, I can't give you one which will gain general agreement. When the Torah sits for its portrait each artist paints a different picture.

A little over a hundred years ago Samson Raphael Hirsch, Zacharias Frankel, and Samuel Hirsh, German Jews and fine scholars, each wrote a book defining the essence of Judaism. Samson Raphael Hirsch defended the Orthodox tradition. Zacharias Frankel advocated slow, deliberate change. Samuel Hirsh championed radical reform. Each said some interesting things about the nature of the Torah tradition, but an outsider reading these three books would have wondered if they were describing the same religion. Each saw what he was prepared to see, and none succeeded in defining any objective criteria which would enable another researcher to arrive at his conclusions.

Their contemporary and countryman, Henrich Graetz, the most famous nineteenth century historian of the Jewish people, reviewed their works in a programmatic essay, "An Introduction to History," in which he clearly demonstrated that each had read into the Torah tradition exactly what he was prepared to find there. Samuel Hirsh, the great liberal, described Judaism as open-minded, non-dogmatic, this-worldly, committed to civic reform. Samson Raphael Hirsch, whose major accomplishment was to provide a philosophic basis for a modern orthodoxy, described Judaism as an all-embracing and ennobling rule which delineated God's will and so allowed man to lead a good and responsible life. Frankel tried to balance these opposing views by suggesting the role of the community in establishing the meaning of Torah. Graetz described the three works as impressionistic studies, essentially the work of connoisseurs with good eyes but special tastes. Their descriptions were insightful, contradictory, and personal. How could it be otherwise? When you swim in the river you see only your stretch of water and the near bank.

Let me illustrate the point. Perhaps you have heard people say that Judaism is this-worldly in its orientation. Many Jews are of the impression that Christianity is concerned with Heaven and such things and Judaism is not. But the traditional liturgy blesses God as "reviver of the dead," medieval Jewish sermons breathed a good bit of hell-fire-and-damnation, and rabbinic literature routinely describes this world as 'a corridor into the World to Come.' The modern synagogue has left hell-fire behind, but not the words that praise God as reviver of the dead.

Another related example. Many like to think of the Torah tradition as appreciative of our modern emphasis on sexuality and physical conditioning. They are quick to point out that marriage was treated as Kiddushim, a sanctification; that the rabbis generally looked on physical intimacy as one of life's blessed joys, and that none of the Torah's commandments specifically require any form of asceticism or mortification. But this is not the whole story. During Biblical times there were Nazirites and the Rechabites, itinerant holy men, who did not cut their hair, drink wine, live in cities, or wear ordinary clothes. During Greco-Roman times the Essenes and the Yahad conventicle of Qumran, now famous as the Dead Sea Scrolls community, built wilderness monasteries where they practiced strict austerities. Hassidim of the eleventh and twelfth century bathed in cold rivers and endured long vigils. Maimonides echoed Paul in arguing that sex ought to be engaged in as infrequently as possible. Throughout the Middle Ages the Kabbalists encouraged fasting and mystical exercises. Some of the Hassidic rebbees and Musar leaders of Eastern Europe followed a regimen of vigils and regular fasts. Any number of medieval manuals describe a way of denial as one of the paths which leads to holiness. Asceticism was not the Torah tradition's

major theme but, clearly, it was not an inconsequential or heretical one.

If anybody says to me: this is Judaism, this is Torah-true, everything else is false, I must ask: whose Judaism are you talking about? The Judaism of Akiba? The Judaism of Moses? The Judaism of the Baal Shem Tov? The Judaism of Daniel Silver? It's precisely the developmental aspect of the living tradition, and anything alive is constantly and necessarily in flux, which limits any interpretator's ability to express the range, depth, and sensitivity, not to speak of the contradictions of the Torah experience. I love the Biblical phrase, "a fountain of living waters." It suggests the infinite depths, the ever-present but changing present, the enlivening aspect of Torah to those who will pause to look and drink and the metaphor of the river.

As a living and changing tradition, Jews needed their leaders to be scholars rather than ecclesiastics. Many traditions tend to find leaders among charismatics and it is not unusual for the barely literate to be seized by the Holy Spirit and to be accorded preaching authority. Some Talmudic rabbis and Hassidic rebbes were faith healers and charismatic figures; but, among Jews, charisma without learning was suspect. The rabbi's traditional role was to adjust Torah to community need and to develop their community's understanding of what the Torah required and taught. Their authority derived ultimately from their control of Torah, not from the zeal of their piety. Piety was assumed, but charisma without learning was suspect. Oriental Jews called their leader Hacham, wise one. When European Jews called their leader rabbi, they meant one qualified to teach Torah.

- A complaint: You talk as if change inevitably leads to progress.

I'd hardly call the rabbinic attitude towards woman an improvement over the Biblical approach. How do we know that today's changes are for the better?

We don't. Progress is the hope, but regression is a possibility. How many of us could claim that our sensual and materialist generation brings more ethical sensitivity to male-female relationships than some earlier generation? I doubt that our treatment of old age is motivated by the respect and deference which rabbinic Judaism encouraged. One of the compelling features of an old religion like ours is that, as you study it, you pick up attitudes and values which make you take a long hard look at your age's conventional values.

- Why change?

Because some of us can't honestly do otherwise? The river, Jewish life, flows on; one river, yet ever changing. There are those who float with the current, preserving the past, letting it flow through them, and those who seek to dam and control the flow of the river as it flows by, to take and use its waters in ways that the present now allows.

- Who's right?

I was tempted to quote Confucius: "Better than one who knows what is right is one who is fond of what is right; and better than one who is fond of what is right is one who delights in what is right." But I had focused on the river metaphor, so I somewhat enigmatically quoted Ecclesiastes: "All rivers run to the sea and the sea is never full." The day had warmed and it was time to take a swim in our river.

## Chapter 6

### FEEL DEEPLY - THINK BOLDLY

It had been a sunny outdoors afternoon and conversation began with a comment from an aide.

- My old sabbath school principal called me the other day and asked me to be a substitute teacher. I agreed and was surprised by the changes. We had Hebrew and History classes, they still do; but now there are sessions in Hebrew lettering and Jewish cooking. One group spent part of the morning carpentering a wooden ark.

Religious schools now emphasize Jewish experiences, Hebrew camps, Israeli dance festivals, and shul-ins, as well as course work, on the sensible grounds that the only way to appreciate the full range of what it means to be a Jew is to "jew": to dress up for Purim, to correspond with a Soviet refusnik, or to spend time on a kibbutz or moshav.

A generation ago most Jews lived in a Jewish environment, 'jewing' came naturally and the religious school simply explained the Jewish world that the child was living in and gave him the tools to take full advantage of its activities. Today's child grows up in a fragmented environment. His home is a middle-class place, an American place, a television place, as well as a Jewish place. His world is the public school and Little League as well as Sabbath School. His parents may be deeply committed but their commitment may be largely civic and the child may not recognize that board membership in a social agency is a form of 'jewing.' Unless the religious school provides Jewish experiences, he may never taste their flavor and color.

There is an old saw that faith is caught, not taught. In matters spiritual the heart rules the head.

- I know what you mean. Distant cousins came from Israel to visit. Until then I'd never seen concentration camp numbers tatooed on anyone's wrist. She still had hers. I'd read about the Holocaust, but it wasn't real to me, if you know what I mean. Now it is, and I know why Jews must survive.

- I went to a small college in a small town. There were few of us and my roommate tried to convert me. Defending myself, I discovered I really cared.

Knowledge is one thing, involvement another. I teach in the Department of Religion of a local university and, as you would expect, my courses focus on Judaism. Ministers and nuns have been among my best students. Their previous training heightened their ability to assimilate theological ideas and to put them into perspective. I hope they have gained some appreciation of the Torah tradition, but I'm sure that nothing they learned changed their basic loyalties nor did I intend it to.

I had brought a copy of The Jewish Catalogue for just this point in our conversations.

A few years ago a group of students published this volume which they described as "a do it yourself kit, designed to open options for personal Jewish creativity and contemporary utilization of the rites and rituals of Jewish life." Forgive them the jargon. What they offered and what people eagerly accepted - the book's sale was a minor publishing phenomenon - was a step-by-step guide to writing your own ketubah, baking matzah, or molding a kiddush cup. Here was a way to do Jewish things rather than to have them done for you; a way to learn to swim in our river.

I returned to the river metaphor. There are three ways to relate to a river: from a spacecraft, from the river bank or as a



swimmer from water level. From space you can look across the whole sweep of Jewish history. The outline of the river is clearly defined but you can't pick up any sense of the speed of the current or the details of the vegetation on its banks. You can describe the river's whole length, but you aren't able to touch or smell or hear.

From the bank you can see a few miles each way. Details are clearly defined, but what is around the bend is hidden. You're still an observer though the river, or part of it, is close at hand. You can sense its presence and hear its flow, but not feel the water against your skin.

The swimmer sees only a few yards in each direction but he is alive to the river. He feels the current pull him along and finds the water refreshing against his body. The Jewish Catalogue is a primer for those who want to learn to swim. It's a 'how to' book for a generation of Jews who didn't learn 'how to' in their parents' homes.

The success of The Jewish Catalogue was a fascinating phenomenon for many reasons, not the least of which was that it suggested that many wanted to learn to swim. It also suggested that we had come to the end of a long era during which the social benefits of the Torah's commandments were seen as their major selling point, rather than the fact that they were a way of "jewing". Apologetes had praised the dietary laws as an early hygienic regimen. They had described the Sabbath day as the world's first labor law. Yom Kippur's annual spiritual examination was equated with the annual physical. They argued that the mitzvot were utilitarian and that, therefore, it was a reasonable decision to be involved with Jewish practice.

- If the benefit of the commandments are purely practical, why keep them up when there are modern techniques which would achieve better results? Surely our food inspection programs are broader in

scope and more effective than the dietary laws.

- Why keep the Sabbath in a society where the five-day week is commonplace?

The apologetes had misrepresented the mitzvot. The food laws were not designed as pure food laws or drug laws, but an essential part of ancient Israel's campaign against idolatry. Jews were not to eat the animals which served as the totems of the gods of Israel's neighbors lest it seem as if they were involved in a pagan ritual. Any hygienic value was an unexpected side effect. The Sabbath was not primarily a labor law, but part of a concerted attempt to align the worshipper with God's own schedule, a mysterious but essential part of a broad gauged program of imitatio dei.

The Sabbath creates Jewish time. It also states a Jewish concern that life be more than drudgery. Part of each week should be spent savoring life rather than coping with its exigencies.

Torah laws had a two-fold function. They organized society justly and organized life Jewishly. In the Middle Ages philosophers divided the Biblical commandments between those of obvious social function - leaving the gleanings for the poor - and those social benefits could not be explained - the prohibition of wearing a garment woven of various threads; but all agreed that the benefits of a law did not exhaust its intent. A religion needs form.

- Why should I obey rules for the sake of obeying rules? I won't do what doesn't make sense.

But you do. We all do. Birthdays, memorials, courtesies, the way we set a table, the day we chose for Thanksgiving. Every person, family, and religious culture must have its own identity, form, a name, a special feel. There's a value to the national anthem before a ball game and to the conventional courtesies though there is no reason

a song of a greeting must have the form it has.

- Rituals can't solve our problems.

Agreed, but they lift our spirits, put us in touch with an encouraging history and relate us to some hope-sustaining mysteries. Martin Buber wrote that wisdom is not in logic which is a game but in meeting which is growth. As I "jew" I join in practices which stretch back over centuries, feel part of a meaningful past which gives promise of a meaningful future and meet a living and lively tradition and am enlivened by it.

- Experience has become a big thing in our country: soul, consciousness raising, the greening of America. My friends use words like spontaneity, being genuine, and 'getting in touch with themselves.' They put me down when I say: 'I have to think about it.' They call me a coward for not plunging in. Are you one of those who've lost faith in reason?

As an old water safety instructor I know how important it is to make sure you are swimming under control and in a safe area. The Torah tradition rarely glorifies impulse. The commentator, Abraham ibn Ezra wrote: "Reason is the mediating angel between God and man." Maimonides taught that God's decision, as reported in Genesis, "Let us make man in our likeness," referred to the endowment of reason. The animal reacts instinctively and responds in the way his nervous system is programmed; the human being reflects and considers.

- Why then your emphasis on the forms of the religious life?

Because of Dr. Strangelove. A mind divorced of moral discipline is a walking time bomb. The religious life can provide many of the restraining social customs and the conditioning to duty which the secular environment no longer provides.

In the eighteenth century Western man began a long love affair

with reason when Voltaire and his friends insisted that all forms of privilege and arbitrary authority were unreasonable and Newton and his friends showed how clear reasoning about the universe could help us gain mastery over nature.

Political freedom and widespread prosperity were among the immediate benefits of this marriage, and many well-educated Westerners came to believe that reason and research would solve mankind's problems and usher in a Golden Age. Reason became the focus of a new religion, the university its sanctuary and the research scientist the high priest who served at the altar. The philosopher, Fichte, spoke its credo: "I am immortal, imperishable, eternal, as soon as I form the resolution to obey the laws of reason."

But reason proved a willful god. Many of the long-term consequences of the avid worship of reason now seem to us fairly grim: population explosion, environmental pollution, the routinization of work, the depersonalization of life in urbanized mass society, the living death of protracted senility. There was a price to pay for every bit of progress. Mines leave scars in the earth. Factories belch smoke which not only dirty the sky but our lungs. Science created new forms of energy which fuel new and deadlier forms of destruction. We broke down older patterns and could not agree on new ones. We know so much that we no longer know what is right, where to go, or how to get there. The future is no longer what it used to be.

Today we think of reason, not as a god, but as the sorcerer's apprentice. Reason seems to have run amok. Hitler's professors were b men and totally corrupt. Think Tank specialists who compute how many millions will die during an initial atomic attack command fear rather than respect.

Our generation has lost faith in technology as the Messiah. Reason provided prosperity and longevity and some unexpected by-products: the population explosion, pollution, the dreariness of the assembly line, the rape of the world's energy reserves and natural resources. Jews lost faith along with everyone else; but we were more deeply hurt because reason failed us in an immediate and personal way. Reason had seemed to hold out the promise that emancipation would work, and many Jews had given themselves over uncritically to the new religion. Once the walls of the ghetto came down, our neighbors would see that we didn't have horns and accept all the evidence that showed that we bled the same way they did. Reason would bring about the demise of anti-semitism. It didn't happen that way. Reason was vanquished by passion and prejudice. For some the faith in reason was shattered by the Dreyfus trial or the Russian pogroms or when Jewish revolutionaries were denounced to the Tsar's police by their Communist comrades. Some held the dream until Kristalnacht and Stalin's purges. For others the turning point came when the British issued the White Paper of 1939 which closed Palestine's doors to Jews or when during the war the Allies convened the Evian and Bermuda Refugee Conferences, not to save Jews, but to still the protests of those who demanded that Hitler's victims be saved. For the last diehard reality set in as mosques rang with cries of jihad, holy war, Arab armies went again and again into battle against Israel and the United Nations transformed itself into a P. L. O. propaganda meeting. Speak only one name, Auschwitz, and Jews understand. A pervasive sense of alienation and of the tragic binds our experience into a single mental set. Jews no longer worship reason or scoff as they once did at religious belief and at the need for the strengthening of a congregation that sings together against the darkness.

There has been a pervasive cultural change in the way Jews think and act. I have taken to calling the earlier attitude Maimonidean and ours Ha-levian. Moses Maimonides was a towering intellect, master of all the rabbinic disciplines and a firm believer in the redemptive power of reason. Judah ha-Levi was a poet of sensitive heart and passionate feelings, a philosopher who was willing, indeed eager, to acknowledge reason's limits.

Maimonides trusted only the mind. The heart was impulsive; only the mind was constant and clear. He was proud that the Torah could be explained in acceptable philosophical terms. The mitzvot were God's will, but happily, they enhanced mental health and personal hygiene. Maimonides was an elitist who held that an able man could master life through the determined use of his intellect. The noise of the synagogue next door often distracted him and he looked on the occasional parading of the Torah around the hall as vulgar behavior appropriate for the masses but not the enlightened few. His prayer was the calm outreaching of the mind rather than the uncontrollable expression of need by a troubled heart.

Maimonides wrote prose, brilliant analyses which awe the reader with their analytic precision and logical acumen. He provided sophisticated answers to sophisticated questions, but had little time for the simple needs and confessions of ordinary folk. He defended Jewish interests at the governor's court, he was that official's personal physician; but he did so by quiet representation and not by angry remonstrance. I simply cannot imagine Maimonides in an unbuttoned shirt, sitting crosslegged at a campfire, holding hands with friends while they sing an endless series of Hebrew folk songs. The Maimonidean spirit, like the spirit of American Jews until a generation ago, was critical, wide-ranging in its interest, elitist,

dignified, uneasy with emotion, pleased that the Torah tradition was reasonable, high-minded, and wise.

Judah ha-Levi trusted his heart. He had studied philosophy long enough to know the bitterness with which philosophers disagreed, so he was not abashed when he stepped beyond the limits of logic. He looked on the mind as a useful instrument but he knew that commitment begins in the heart. His philosophy instinctively shaped itself into drama. Ha-Levi trusted people and spoke easily to all he met. The inconsistencies of talk were dearer to him than the orderliness of theory. He sang openly of his feelings and paraded around the synagogue without any self-consciousness.

Maimonides married to have children. Ha-Levi sang of love, wine, and nature and sometimes of the delights of the flesh. He rejoiced in friendship and in the bustle of life. He could be charged with occasional excess, but never with indifference. Maimonides spoke gravely and advised Jews to face their problems with patience and prudence. Ha-Levi was extravagantly committed to the mystery of Israel's chosenness and wept for the Messiah. When he could no longer wait patiently for the Messiah's arrival, he left Spain for Zion where, according to legend, he was cut down by Arab cavalry as he prayed before the gates of Jerusalem. Ha-Levi's spirit was full of feeling, passionate and compassionate, democratic, poetic, responsive to the grand redemptive themes, intensely Zionist and, above all, immersed in and concerned with the fate of Israel.

Maimonides justified Judaism by showing that its teachings corresponded to the philosophic concepts scholars then accepted as reasonable. Ha-Levi struggled to show Judaism as a distinctive reality and he judged its teachings by their impact on each living Jew rather than on their logical consistency. My point is that the

times have made Halevians of most Jews. A recent survey of Jewish attitudes stated as its major finding the measurement of a deeply felt need for community. Jews want the synagogue to be a place where the loneliness of modern life can be overcome and its anxieties mastered.

- Then it has to become a less formal place.

It already has. Young Jews have shul-ins. Parents arrange Sabbath dinners to learn the songs which they can sing with their children around their own table. The prayer book of liberal Jews who once minimized the value of ritual now refers to customs as mitzvot, sacred acts. You're here at this Institute.

I'll give you another measure of the mood shift. The popularity of Fiddler on the Roof. The shtetl was poor, full of misery and cruelty, a bleak place, not the Paradise Lost of the stage play; but its intimacy and color offer a sharp contrast to the dismal urban sprawl in which we lead our fragmented lives, so to many the shtetl seems eminently attractive and, incidentally, attractive to many non-Jews. Fiddler played to packed houses all around the world. Community is a common need.

- On the one to ten scale I'm a two or three Jew. I went to religious school and I go to services on Yom Kippur. I came here to be with friends as much as for the talk. I've found the discussion interesting but, no offense meant, it was only talk until the first night we held hands around the camp fire and Hebrew folk songs. I felt then I'd like to be a six or seven Jew.

Religious commitment is like love. If you were to make a list of requirements for an ideal mate and happen to find someone who fits the description, you wouldn't necessarily fall in love with that



paragon. Feelings cannot be forced. Love surprises us. Proverbs said it best: "The heart has reasons of which the mind is ignorant." Sometimes we're introduced to someone and we know right off that we won't work well together. We say that the chemistry was wrong. It's not a chemical problem, of course, but that our emotions follow their own logic.

- I'm a holiday freak. I like being with the family at a Seder table: the food, the songs, hiding the Afikomen. I get a kick when I rattle off "who knows thirteen" without looking at the book or taking a breath; so I can appreciate what you've been saying about the binding quality of the rites. But I don't think I'd care as much about the holidays if they were just happenings. I'm a bit cynical about religious highs. I've been to a number of camps and experienced friendship services which were full of feeling. I've heard many say, 'I'd like to be closer to Judaism;' but, when they got home, they quickly reverted to type. I find it's the ideas that bring me back. Seder night, the Haggadah always starts me thinking about spiritual as well as physical bondage and about the difference between "freedom from" and "freedom for" and I await those thoughts with some eagerness.

- I'm a two. I find the holidays modestly moving. I'd like to have a transforming experience, but I can't imagine finding God along with the Afikomen.

- I can. We had a Russian emigre family for Seder last year. I didn't understand the father's broken English, but I saw the tears in his eyes when he read, 'last year we were slaves, this year we are free.' For him the Exodus had taken place and in his voice I sensed the God Who redeems.

Judaism is a way of life, not a denatured set of ideas. Religions are born, preserved and perpetuated by communities. To abstract

the teachings from the living community always and necessarily diminishes the area and scope of the cluster of ideas, rites, hopes, institutions and myths which form that religion's pattern.

- I was taught in religious school that Judaism could be defined as ethical monotheism: the affirmation of the oneness of God and of the centrality of ethical living.

The Torah tradition is ethical, it is monotheistic, and it's much more, and that more includes Rosh Hashanah, the Sabbath, midrash and siddur, the huppah and yahrzeit, Hebrew and Yiddish, Ayn Kelohenu and the Hatikvah, hallah and matzah - all elements of a rich, varied and compelling religious civilization, all part of the fabric of the religion and related to the tradition's special and surprising message.

- Why then the labels?

The tendency to define the tradition as ethical monotheism or prophetic Judaism responded to a felt need to bring essentials back into focus. The medieval tradition had been developed by a people set apart and had become encrusted with countless customs and folkways, not to speak of any number of superstitions. Ethical monotheism suggested God not the medieval world of demons and spirits; and the primacy of moral duty in a Jew's religious life; but it cut too deeply and, not only made all custom and ceremony seem irrelevant, but deprived the mitzvot of the virtue of specificity. Actually, caring for the widow and the orphan became the general concept of justice and words like justice and righteousness are big, bold and vague. They're golden words, but, as Mycenas discovered, gold is indigestible. Everyone spoke of justice and moral confusion replaced the clear and definite regulations the Torah tradition had enshrined. Specificity had been the virtue of the case-by-case method of analysis used by the rabbis in their response as they examined a problem from all sides and tried

to apply to each aspect of the situation principles derived from the body of Torah jurisprudence. We may today disagree with their conclusions, but they had considered a situation in its complexity and our differences testify more to social and economic changes than to any weakness in their moral perception.

I'll make a confession. I often find the synagogue too saintly a place. Saint talk is nice talk, but unrealistic. Many tell me that their favorite prayer is "Grant Us Peace," but how does its petition relate to our argument with various governments over Palestinian rights? The golden words - peace, justice and righteousness - are compelling only if they are related to a specific context. I have heard Hitler speak of peace. I have heard Stalin speak of peace, and Nasser and Krushchev and Richard Nixon. When I hear a president speak of the need for peace in the Middle East I'm always afraid he means peace and unhampered access to oil and profitable markets.

- All this reminds me of a philosophy course I took last term. The teacher introduced us to existentialism. If I understood him, existentialism denies the ability of abstract reason to comprehend life. Meaning comes from involvement. You learn by living. An existentialist would say, as you've been saying: jump in the river and enjoy the swim. The goal is not to stand aloof and seek words which seem to explain but really do not explain, but to accept the immediacy of life and the importance of action.

That's certainly part of what I've been saying.

- Is jumping in the river what people mean when they talk of a leap of faith?

Some of them. Unfortunately, others use the term to glorify commitment for its own sake. They say get engaged. It's exhilarating.

I'm enough of a Jew to be frightened by any philosophy which glorifies commitment for the sake of commitment. For a car to be a safe and effective vehicle, it needs both an accelerator and brakes; and for a morally responsible life we need an open heart and a critical mind.

Religion uncoupled from reason, like love uncoupled from reason, is an invitation to disaster for others and for us. An optimistic faith can help us master some of our fears and even speed recovery from illness, but to argue, as Mary Baker Eddy did, that illness is a state of mind which can be cured by a positive mental attitude is nonsense, and worse than nonsense if we fail to have the broken bone set or to undergo the indicated surgery. Faith can work miracles except when it works misery. Not so long ago I visited a twenty-three year old in the psychiatric ward of a local hospital. While in college she had set her heart on a medical career. Only an average student, she had been rejected wherever she had applied. She had been encouraged to set other goals for herself, but she was certain she would be accepted. How could she be sure? She had attended a two-week human potential seminar where she had been assured that if you set your mind to a task nothing can block your way. She did a year of graduate biology, resubmitted her applications, was again refused, and suffered a nervous breakdown.

When you look at the broad outlines of Jewish thought you discover that it tends to reject either/or decisions in favor of a both/and attitude: both the cultivation of the mind and the cultivation of the soul. "Take hold of this thought but do not leave go of its opposite." Not total abstinence but drink in moderation and sing the Kiddush. Piety is important but family responsibilities must be discharged: "If you have a sapling in your hand and someone calls out:

'Lo, the Messiah comes, plant the sapling first and then go to meet him.'"

Withdrawal and asceticism have played a role in the Torah tradition; but Judaism did not declare living in a monastery or taking vows of celibacy to be marks of a special holiness. Most rabbis lived at home, married, had children, worked at an ordinary occupation, and were distinguished by their knowledge of Torah rather than by an arduous discipline of denial. We had ascetics who wore hair shirts and bathed in the cold rivers, and mystics who fasted and meditated, hoping for a mystic vision of God; but for the most part these did not command reverence unless they were also men of Torah - trained minds who busied themselves a good part of the day with affairs of the community. The prophetic message was judged by its contents, not by the fact that it had been brought by a holy man who spoke as if possessed. An ecstatic who babbled was a babbler, not a prophet. Some people see every decision as between black and white; they are either/or puritanical types. Others see a wide range of possibilities and consequences, many shades of gray. We're both/and people, or at least our tradition encourages us to be, both community and autonomy; both hard thinking and imaginative commitment in both mind and spirit. Materialism and greed are condemned as sins, but poverty is no proof of virtue just as wealth is no proof of greed. The Jew prayed every day, "Grant us peace," but pacifism was not an absolute principle and self-defense was permitted even on the Sabbath. Reverence for God needn't lead us to disdain human capacity. Man is neither demonic nor angelic by nature but both, and man's actions are, therefore, rarely wholly saintly or wholly devilish. There can be fools for Christ but the strangeness of the phrase, fools for Torah, speaks volumes.

- You make everything sound a bit middle-aged. What about simply being genuine and spontaneous?

Spontaneity is prized, in part because it suggests that life isn't as complex as it really is.

Spontaneity can be dangerous. Recently I watched a young aide in our Nursery School rush to help a child who had fallen on his back from a jungle gym. She picked him up to soothe him, but her impulsive act might have aggravated his injury. Wisdom has a role to play in human affairs. When the Messiah comes a little child may lead us, but until then the Torah tradition preferred to entrust authority to the experienced and the wise. Simplicity was not considered a virtue. There is an old saying among Jews that "the ignorant man cannot be a saint."

- Why not?

Because every moral decision requires some hard thinking. When the Judeans rebelled against Roman misrule they were soundly defeated and harshly punished. Hundreds of thousands were killed. Cities were plundered. Judea's population was pauperized. The few who somehow had been spared the worst were moved to give all they had to the homeless and starving. Unexpectedly, the sages suggested they put a limit on their generosity. The limit was high, but it was a limit nonetheless. There was no virtue in giving so much that you added your own family to the hapless caravan.

There may be a certain nobility in turning the other cheek to an attacker; but a child in a fit of rage or a paranoid with his blood running hot must be restrained for his own well-being as well as for the protection of others. The Torah puts it bluntly: "If a neighbor is attacked you may not stand idly by." Non-resistance is a noble theory, but it doesn't fit all occasions. No ethical theory does.

- You've touched one of my problems with Judaism. I want a vision and my rabbi gives me wisdom. I want to dream the impossible dream and he tells me to make sure I'm not embarked on mission impossible.

Your rabbi didn't tell you not to go. Abraham provides a good model. Abraham was told: Go! Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house and go to the land that I will show you. God offered him neither detailed plans nor specific directions. But God also warned Abraham: "Be a blessing," be careful that what you do will add to the sum total of happiness, a typically Jewish prescription, the vision splendid added to the cautions of a Jewish mother.

The advice that you receive in a synagogue is likely to be pragmatic as well as principled. If you told me: "I want to drop out of school and do something for the world," I would suggest that trained minds and hands can do more for the world than wild energies guided only by enthusiasm.

Conversation with your rabbi is likely to raise issues to which you had not as yet given thought. You want to get married. It's an intermarriage. The issue seems cut and dried; you're in love and labels aren't important. You've even decided to raise the children as Jews. Have you thought about what your non-Jewish partner will be giving up? Will their sense of having subordinated their conditioning to yours be a constant irritant in your marriage? What will happen to the children when they're shuttled between believing grandparents? I felt I had done my rabbinic duty when a young man who came to talk with me about his career plans said as he left, 'you're like my law professor who forced us to follow up every possibility in briefing a case.'

- That's calculation.

Calculation comes in two models, Aristotle's and Abraham's. In discussing ethics Aristotle proposed a balancing of opposites, a rather mechanical calculation of consequences. Aristotle's moderation is that of the cool and detached academic. If I followed his analysis I would try to keep my actions moderate and temperate and never take bold steps. Abraham's moderation is that of a committed Jew. It is a calculus of possibility which seeks not the smooth road to nowhere but the path which will lead to an unfolding of the spirit. The goal is growth, not balance. I often remind myself of Moses' phrase, "Press on to know God."

The Torah tradition has been called an obdurate morality of common sense. That's not the whole of it, of course. The standard is holiness, but the reality is that saints, like scholars, require years of schooling. The Torah mandates the ethical A, B, C's - just weights and honest measures, tithes for the poor, honor to one's parents - as well as guidance for more sensitive levels of conduct; to love your neighbor as yourself; not to covet; to give your enemy bread if he is hungry, water to drink if he is thirsty. First let a person manage the basic standards of conduct and then, and only then, should he begin to worry about a standard which was called "above and beyond the letter of the law."

- Why do Jews answer questions with questions:

We've experienced too much to be satisfied with simple answers. Life may look simple; but it never is. A wise man told me once: There are no answers; but wisdom is discovering the right questions.

- This guy I grew up with has a guru. He quotes his master all the time, visits him, and gives him most of what he earns. He says that for the first time he can love everybody. He's got answers and I've got questions.



His commitment is an example of that compelling need for certainty which we've been talking about. When I interviewed a student who had spent time in an ashram about the attraction of a sixteen-year old pudgy Indian guru who sits cross-legged and teaches a vague set of ideas about love, good vibrations, he told me: "I felt I counted. The guru knew me. He made me feel we had powerful truths denied everyone else. He didn't say much, but life quieted down. The group was warm and full of good feelings. He uncomplicated my life." Why did you leave? "I discovered that I was being used. I wanted to visit my parents and was told 'no'. I found I was loved only when I obeyed, and that's not love but manipulation."

We live in a complicated world which never lets us alone. Not so long ago, when you were home, the world remained outside. Now the home no longer provides the child a coherent environment. The world comes in via the television, the telephone and the radio. Outside his parents say one thing, his peers another. His teachers have their own ideas. Forced to cope with an unceasing barrage of experiences, opportunities, and advice, our emotional make-up often reacts like an overloaded electrical circuit and simply shuts off. That's when a guru or cult leader becomes a Godsend. He tells us: 'don't worry about another breakdown, I'll do your thinking for you.'

- I have a friend who was at loose ends until he joined Habad. He says it happened quite suddenly during a Sabbath Service. Now he has answers. I don't know what answers he's found, but he's confident.

Your friend sounds lucky.

- He's paid a price. He refuses to eat at home; his parents' kitchen is not sufficiently kosher. His girl has left him; she wanted companionship and not to be badgered to live exactly as he decided to live.

- Why doesn't regular Judaism provide this sense of things coming together?

It can. The holidays and Sabbath can help us structure our schedule. The richness of Torah learning can provide both general ethical guidelines and specific insights into the human condition. Torah provides me solid footing as I make my way. We have a short Vesper service every Friday at 5:30. I look forward to it. Whatever has happened all week, it brings me back to what I believe, to those I admire and to myself.

- I've always wanted someone whom I could trust.

- My rabbi listens and is a good friend.

- That's not quite what I meant. I want somebody who has answers and is confident of them.

- You want a God.

- Perhaps.

We all do. Given religion's particular sanctifying role, anyone who is part of a religious system must, at the least, give off a sense of his own faith.

- I thought the rabbi was simply a learned man.

The traditional rabbi was a learned man but he was also a holy man whose wisdom was acknowledged to go beyond understanding, knowing, the tradition's specific rules. In Talmudic times, and later among the Hassidim, it was believed a rabbi's prayers could intercede with God on behalf of Israel or keep the Angel of Death away from a sick bed. Problems were brought to the tzaddik and he gave inspired counsel; indeed, he knew his disciples' problems before they spoke them.

- What you mean is that his advice worked because his circle had faith in it; that is, it worked for the already committed or for those who were willing to suspend disbelief.

I am a sophisticated professional in a highly complex and largely secular environment who has no desire to play God, but I have performed miracles, not because I am an adept or even interested in faith healing, but simply because people come to me expecting a miracle and sometimes their faith made a 'miracle' happen. But it's not simply the title. For the power of faith to be palpable, a sense of assurance must be given off by the leader. He has to have and exude faith.

- Aren't we in a dangerous area?

A guru shares in the fallibility which is the hallmark of the human race and, like all of us, he is a product of a particular time, culture and class. He particularly must face the corruptive influences which affect anyone who has power over others. Hassidism failed, not because the rebbes were charlatans, some were, many were not; but because many of them came to enjoy power and because as advisers they reflected their environment and passed on as truth what was, in fact, only the conventional wisdom of their place.

Judaism worked hard, and with good reason, to keep Torah rather than a holy man out front.

- Why did you assume that my Habad friend was young?

Religious conversions tend to occur to people in their late teens and early twenties.

- Why?

These are the years when we are most susceptible. There are so many opportunities, so many questions, so many pressures, and so few guidelines. The child has lived at home, among peers and in a school environment, and doesn't know what to expect when he enters the adult world. There are so many decisions to make, so many things he doesn't understand. It's a time of sexual awakening and the exploration of new emotion. Our need for certainty, for a confirming system

of values, increases sharply during any dangerous and uncertain passage.

- I've a born-again friend who insists that she is a changed and better person since she has accepted Christ. I have enjoyed moments as a Jew, and I know that being Jewish has conditioned many of my attitudes; but I cannot imagine myself saying, 'everything is clear, I feel saved.' Now that I think of it, I've never heard a rabbi speak of being saved.

- What about the Habad fellow? He wouldn't use the same language, but wasn't his experience identical to 'being saved'?

'Being saved' is a specifically Christian term. We talked two days ago about binding experiences and psychologically confirming experiences are not limited to any faith. The prototypical example of such an experience involved Jacob. Jacob defrauded his brother Esau of his birthright and, understandably fearing Esau's anger, he fled the family camp site. This first night in the wilderness finds him alone, unarmed, afraid of pursuit and of attack by robbers or wild animals, and with no alternative but to camp in the open. He dreams. In his dream he sees God and hears God say to him: "Do not be afraid. I am with you." When he awakens the Bible has him say: "Surely God is in this place and I knew it not." This sense of awakening, of becoming aware of realities we had not till then perceived is the essence of a binding-conversion experience. It's a moment when our imagination takes over and, to our surprise, we see, or think we see, beneath and behind the reality which normally is present to our senses. In psychological terms the pressures caused by indecision and confusion encourage us to tap spiritual resources which till then have lain dormant. If we do so successfully there is a surge of power which makes us feel what we had not felt before, and

since we now have new powers or sensitivities we feel more alive than we had.

- Is this what is meant to be born again?

Yes.

- Why fight it?

Because of the old problem of mindless commitment. Evangelism has provided much of the impetus behind prohibition and Sunday Blue Laws. The spirit had spoken and there was no reason to doubt the value of imposing its demands on the whole community. The Jew is conditioned by a tradition which locates authority in the Torah rather than in religious experience. The Torah tradition welcomes the enlivening experience and many of our worship moments, the chant, the music, the song, the swaying, the spirit, are conducive to an awakening but authority does not flow to the 'born again'. There are things that we may not do even if an inner voice or God's voice tells us to. We may not murder property owners who stand in the way of a revolution simply because they are in the way. We may not steal another's good name even if he opposes what we consider progress. We may not slander a political opponent even though he will not vote the way we want him to.

- I'd welcome a 'born again' experience. It would put my doubts to rest. Why hasn't Judaism created rituals like the cults to help us to unlock these feelings?

The tradition has. When a Jew fasts the twenty-four hours of Yom Kippur, involves himself in the service, imagines himself standing before a Heavenly court, thinks deeply about his life and God's will, becomes aware of his sins and his power to change the direction of his life, he often senses unexpected power surging through him. I know I have.

Hassidism represents Judaism's most extended encouragement of spiritual awakening and sensitive writers like Martin Buber have helped us appreciate the humanity, the joyousness, the enthusiastic piety, the immediacy of experience, which Hassidism summoned. But there was another side to that movement. Enthusiasm for the spirit and the immediacy of experience were at times so overwhelming as to block counsels of prudence, some masters told their flock not to consult a doctor; the tzaddik's prayer and an amulet blessed by him would be the means of healing. Those who wanted to emigrate to America were advised not to go. How could you attend the rebbe's court and benefit from his charisma from so far away?

Since not every awakening experience catches the worshipper up in a spiritually helpful way, Judaism has been wary of over-emphasizing such experiences. Some come down from the mountain unchanged and some are bound to fanatical visions. The voices one hears can lead us into destructive or self-destructive acts. The Grand Inquisitor had seen the light.

- We read William James' Varieties of Religious Experience in a psychology course. It's about mystical and conversion experiences and I noticed that none of the experiences he recorded were from Jews.

James used what he knew. He knew Christian literature and was himself a product of Christianity. In opposition to papal authority the Protestant tradition located authority not in an institution but in the individual. Anyone who had sensed the Holy Spirit could preach under its authority. Given this way of approaching matters spiritual, it was almost inevitable that conversion, the experience of the Holy Spirit, should become an important element in church practice. Rituals were devised which conditioned churchgoers to anticipate the inrush of the Holy Spirit which resolves confusions and doubts and aligns that

person with the will of God.

Christianity took one road, justification by faith, the promise of a sacramental salvation, an emphasis on motivation rather than community structure and careful discipline. The Torah tradition took a less dramatic road and worked to create institutions which would encourage ethical growth and create the basis of a humane social order. Christianity emphasizes the awakening experience, Judaism the power of conditioning. Our sages were educators who knew the value of practice and habit: "Do what should be done because it's demanded of you; in time you'll do the right because you'll understand it's the right thing to do."

- What led these religions in different directions?

Judaism does not recognize a single entity, the hypostasis which Christians called Original Sin, which can be overcome as St. George slew the dragon. Original Sin was defined as thralldom to the devil, being entangled by the libido, being enslaved to lust and ambition, and it was taught that by faith in the Christ's vicarious sacrifice of himself man could break free of these shackles and save his soul from damnation. The Torah tradition recognized in our makeups each of the elements of Original Sin, but it denied that these obstacles could be completely removed by an act of faith. We can sublimate our passions but not cut them out.

- I thought I found truth and that my life had changed. I won't go into the whole story; but I had a religious high and felt that my life had fallen into place, and then it all fell apart again. I felt God let me down.

Those religions and cults which emphasize a transforming religious experience tend to promise that such an awakening will resolve all doubts and end all confusions. Often it doesn't work out that

way. Our objective situation doesn't change and tension begins to undermine our new convictions.

- My moods change with the minute. Does a binding experience ever have lasting impact?

It can. Abraham obeyed God and never turned back. When we experience the mystery which lies within a religious message we sometimes break out onto new grounds. There's a time when you know, without saying it, that you're a Jew and that being Jewish is important to you. The Torah tradition seems cold and objective to an outsider, but warm and comfortable to an intimate. The Torah tradition recognizes that faith can help us handle the obstacles we face as we try to climb as high as we can on the ladder of moral sensitivity: our appetites, passions, ambitions, greed, envy, but also that faith has limits. I have a deep faith in God but I have not resolved all the contradictions of my nature nor have I any hope ever to do so.

It was time for the camp's baseball game. Someone asked to borrow The Jewish Catalogue. Another said: I know why Jews want to build, carpenter and bake. There are too many questions.

And a good bit of wisdom.