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MS-4850: Daniel Jeremy Silver Papers, 1972-1993.

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Come On In, the Water's Fine, unpublished manuscript, first draft,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

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. Unnerited 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 theses.

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 - daleth - 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 ethics 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.

- Phetoric.

No, Torah.

- What was your quarrel with the mission theme?

Some took the mission theme to mean that they served God significant 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 fistic 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 rebbes 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 Kasser and Krushev 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 makeup 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.